

UPF UK's Keith Best Addresses Peace Road 2024, Kilmainham, Dublin, Ireland

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Colm O'Cionnaith: UPF Ireland Secretary General

Peace Road Ireland was organised by Colm O'Cionnaith, the Ireland Universal Peace Federation Secretary General, on September 22nd, 2024. Keith Best, the Chair of the Universal Peace Federation UK Board of Trustees, attended representing the UK. He gave the following speech in Dublin, Kilmainham, after an Interfaith Walk from the National War Memorial Gardens to the Kilmainham Gaol. Colm explained that Peace Road 24 was highlighting the significance of the historic Kilmainham Gaol, where the Irish Republic was "born" in many ways and celebrates 75 years of official existence this year.



Speech of Hon. Keith Best TD MA:

Four weeks ago I was in Sangatte, northern France, where UPF celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Channel Tunnel. I mention this because it is an example of communication of which we need so much more in physical, spiritual and societal form in order to overcome misunderstanding in the world and build the dream of one that is at ease with itself as one human family. Although during the Referendum debate in the UK eight years ago much emphasis was on that small strip of water as being a decisive barrier between the UK and our European partners in the EU it was often forgotten that the UK does have a land border with the European Union and I am on it today. That debate led to the worst political decision in my lifetime and that border has, indeed, been a fundamental stumbling block and should have remained as seamless as when Britain was part of the EU.

We are here to celebrate the past 75 years of the Republic but that cannot be separated from its violent beginnings and its past history which has been bloody and troubled. We were all moved by the visit this morning to Kilmainham Gaol and the tragic violent loss of life. You only have to travel around the Emerald Isle, as I have had the privilege to do, and see the number of fortified houses to realise that warfare has been an integral part of this turbulence over centuries.

I commend two books and agree with the commentaries on them which I quote: Paul Bew's 2009 book *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity* and *The Revelation of Ireland 1995-2020* a contemporary account by Diarmaid Ferriter who tries to make historical sense of post-1990s Ireland - and what lies in the darkest corners of its archives. Bew's iconoclastic history - spanning the Act of Union which came into effect in 1801 to the comedown after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 - portrays a nation tragically and perhaps intractably divided by sectarianism.

This book is an innovative interpretation of the history of Anglo - Irish relations from 1789 right to the present day. The French Revolution had an electrifying impact on Irish society, with the 1790s seeing the birth of modern Irish republicanism and Orangeism. This decade also saw the political integration between Ireland and the British elite, such as with Pitt and Castlereagh. The Irish, who were strongly influenced by Edmund Burke's freedom philosophies, argued that Britain's strategic interests were best served by a policy of Catholic emancipation. Britain's failure to achieve this objective - dramatised by the horrifying and tragic Irish famine of 1846 - 50 - set the context for the emergence of a popular mass nationalism. Eventually, the Fenian, Parnell, and Sinn Fein movements expelled the British from most of the island. This book reassesses all the key leaders of Irish nationalism, alongside key British political leaders - from Tone, Parnell and de Valera, to Haughey, Peel and Blair. It evaluates the changing ideological passions of the modern Irish question, while examining the changing economical and social worlds in London, Dublin and Belfast, all in one coherent analysis.

The history of a people, however, can also be seen through the perspective of the generations of a family and in my few remarks I want to concentrate on one. Three generations all called Erskine Childers whom I label the patriot, the President and the international philanthropist.

When I was Chair of the World Federalist Movement/Institute for Global Policy I was privileged to know Erskine Childers, the distinguished UN civil servant, when he was at UNDP and the author of several authoritative works such as, with Sir Brian Urquhart, "Toward a More Effective United Nations, Reorganization of the United Nations" and subsequently becoming Secretary General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations in March 1996 but served for only five months as sadly he died on 25 August 1996 during the organisation's fiftieth anniversary congress. His father, of course, was the President of Ireland who also died in office in 1974 and his grandfather (author of *The Riddle of the Sands*) was executed by the Irish Free State in November 1922. His grandfather Erskine Childers served as a volunteer in the army expeditionary force in the Second Boer War in South Africa, but his experiences there began a gradual process of disillusionment with British imperialism. He had a fascinating transformation and died bravely in front of the firing squad for the cause in which he believed.

In that one family there is almost a history of the development of the Irish people in modern times. Only five months before his death, when a member of the Dail Eirann, he spoke of how "by a process of moral and intellectual conviction I came away from Unionism into Nationalism and finally into Republicanism. That is a simple story." In 1920 he had published *Military Rule in Ireland* - a strong attack on British army operations in Ireland and at the 1921 elections he was elected unopposed to the Second Dáil as Sinn Féin member for the Kildare - Wicklow constituency and published the pamphlet "Is Ireland a Danger to England?" The strategic question was examined, rebutting British prime minister Lloyd George's claim that an independent Ireland risked Britain's security. You will know all this but, for me, it encapsulates the emotion of the Republic.

In these days of critical examination of the wrongs perpetrated in the past by nations on others in the UK we are concentrated on the legacy of slavery and Britain's role in it - it is in danger of becoming iconoclastic as there are few institutions, historic houses and statues to statesmen in public places that have not been contaminated by benefiting from the evil of slavery. This preoccupation, however, should not prevent us from identifying and acknowledging the actions and mistakes and consequent hurt that has been caused by British activity over the centuries in Ireland.

In this dark history of over the last hundred years Irish patriots have murdered and shot other Irish patriots. The island of Ireland has known the destructive legacy of civil war with families divided and neighbours at war with neighbours which leaves a lasting wound that many find hard to heal. Yet as we celebrate the Republic at 75 we can look forward with optimism. Ireland has made its way in both Europe and the world. As yesterday was the UN International Day of Peace it is appropriate to point out that Ireland has been a contributor to United Nations peacekeeping since 1958, when a group of 50 officers were sent to Lebanon as observers. Its largest current deployment is with the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and our thoughts and prayers are with them as matters there escalate. Irish Defence Forces have troops in the Golan Heights, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Mali

and the Democratic Republic of Congo. They operate a UN peacekeeping school that offers courses to partners and allies. The school helps prepare personnel for overseas service. Ireland also plays a pivotal part in many multi-lateral international organisations. Today, President Higgins addresses the UN Summit of the Future.

The world is in a dark place with a major war in Europe with little chance of foreseeable resolution, the tinder-box of Israel/Palestine where an already elusive peace settlement seems to be even farther away, uncertainty about the future in the USA and China, people feeling threatened by forces beyond their control affecting their livelihoods, antipathy towards migrants and all fanned by the flames of combustible misinformation and ranting by demagogues. All this alongside the next great industrial revolution of Artificial Intelligence which merits an entirely separate study and massive environmental change.

We are the Universal Peace Federation and we have work to do in helping reconciliation where we find conflict, in identifying what unites rather than what divides, by encouraging dialogue and co-operation in the same vein as practised by Father Moon in order to realise one human family under God. We all have a part to play and Ireland especially with its history on which to draw. We can recreate that spirit of internationalism that featured so strongly in the sixties and seventies: the world's future depends on it. Today, for example, the Global People's Assembly is taking place and the internet and digital communications enable us to mix more easily together.

So I remain optimistic for the world and for Ireland. According to the European Commission Ireland's economy is expected to rebound and grow by 1.2% in 2024 and 3.6% in 2025 supported by an improvement in global trade, falling inflation and a strong labour market. Headline inflation is set to continue easing to 1.9% in 2024 and 1.8% in 2025. The budget surplus is projected to decrease marginally in 2024 and 2025. Ireland's fourth place ranking in the 2024 World Competitiveness Rankings represents two consecutive years where it has been placed in the top five economies globally.

Ireland has adopted liberal values in ways that few thought might be possible only a few decades ago. It has much to teach the world. That history of turbulence to which I referred has bred in the Irish people a nostalgia for the past but also a sense of survival and carving a way through difficulty. You have seen disturbances only recently with riots here in Dublin in November last year. No doubt, there will be great challenges ahead but while recalling the tragedies of the past in song and stories, for which the Irish have a particular capacity, it is the dogged determination and perseverance of the people here that can overcome this past, learn its lessons and ensure that the future is bright for a young and dynamic nation.

Keith Best
22nd September 2024
Dublin, Kilmainham.