



A Lesson From Ireland: Negotiating the Peace | April 8, 2022 | LTIS Episode 8

TS: I'm Tim Storey, the CEO of the National Conference of State Legislatures. This is our podcast "Legislatures: The Inside Story." Today we are going to learn what it means to work with political adversaries under extraordinary tough circumstances. Work that ended one of the world's most enduring conflicts of the last century between unionists and Irish Republicans in Northern Ireland. In many ways, the English and Irish have been fighting for centuries. A conflict that evolved in a constant hostility mostly in the North of Ireland that too often involved horrible acts of terrorism. The seemingly never-ending violence came to be known as the Troubles. That all ended when my guest then Irish prime minister, known as the *Taoiseach*, Bertie Ahern signed the historic Good Friday Agreement with then British Prime Minister Tony Blair on April 10, 1998, 24 years ago. There were brought together people who literally had been at arms against each other and got them to agree on a peace plan that holds nearly 25 years later.

We are also joined by the current president of the Senate of Ireland, Mark Daly, the founder of the Irish American Legislators Caucus and a dear friend of NCSL. It's my terrific honor to have them as guests today. *Taoiseach* Ahern and Senator Daly, thank you so much for being here.

BA: Thank you very much and delighted to join you and I'm delighted to link up with state legislators are so important to the whole political system.

MD: I appreciate that. Thanks for having me on. It's a great privilege and an honor to be doing the podcast. And I've met some of your state legislators at the NCSL summit in Florida and we met some of them when they came to visit Ireland. We hope to see more of them coming over in the near future.

TS: We are going to drop this podcast on April the 10th, which is a monumental day in Irish history. It was the day that the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and *Taoiseach* Ahern, you know, you've had a 40, more than four-decade career in public service. But you know, obviously this was perhaps the political achievement. Start us off with you are looking back now almost 25 years. What's your thoughts on it and put it in perspective you know 25 years after the agreement that ended certainly decades of hostilities if not centuries of hostilities? What are your thoughts?

BA: Yeah, it was the big event of my career. I've been engaged and involved in lots of things and lots of negotiations and all kind of political activities and you know internationally and domestically, but that was the biggest. And because from the time I was young and certainly from the time I was leaving high school, the trouble started. The trouble started in '68. Of course, that was the age-old anniversary of the troubles. And in more current times, that was the start of it. And you know, it had gone on nonstop, you know, all the way from '68 and every year it just seemed to get worse. Sometimes it was peaks and valleys of bloodshed. You know, overall, it was a terrible 30 years so and to be involved in bringing an end to that, negotiating that with Tony Blair and with the parties involved in Northern Ireland. I suppose there were two phases of it. The 10th of April was the finalization of the negotiations, which had gone on for since the previous September. So, it was practically nonstop negotiations, as any peace process is. It's very torturous.

The decision we had made at the time, we had kind of an ambitious go. We reckon we had one go at it and because of other demands and pressures and Tony Blair and I, he was busy because, you know, the U.K. is a big country, but we said we would give it one shot and we had worked in opposition together in saying that if we did get into government, we would have one big effort at doing this. So, we knew we really couldn't continue to give it the time commitment we did. Those negotiations from September right through the winter of '97 and '98 gave us an opportunity. And we decided to go for a comprehensive agreement to try to deal with all of the issues. And without boring your audience, I suppose the simple version of that was that it was a relationship within Northern Ireland where most of the trouble was. Then there was the relationship between the parties in Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic of Ireland.

And then the third one was the relationship between the government of Ireland and the Republic and the British Government. All three were broken and had been broken for generations. Really the negotiations were three separate negotiations. The first ones were the parties within the North. We were peripheral to that, but you know they have to get together. We obviously worked closely with them.

Then the second one was the important one to us as Republicans, as Irish Republicans, to make sure that we got a new relationship with the parties in the North and their selves. And the third one was to try to deal with the very bad relationship we had with the British government over the time. So, you know, it was around those three areas. And then we included all of the issues. The prisoners, because there were thousands of prisoners in jail, and the decommissioning of arms, because there was a huge amount of arms. And ending with the quality of agenda and the criminal justice, the new justice system. So, as well as reforming the police--those people who were opposed to violence on the Nationalist side and the Republican side were not very enamored with the old police force--so we had to reform the police force. So, it was a very comprehensive agreement.

(TM): 06:24

TS: And I think it has a place in sort of the pantheon of negotiated settlements because of the, you know, like you said, centuries of tension and hostilities. Stakes were incredibly high. People were dying. Passions were deep. There's religious elements to it so you know people have great, strong passions about it. So, have you reflected on it because I'm thinking about legislators having to negotiate? That's their life. Usually, the stakes aren't at that kind of level. ... When you look back at it, was there any kind of magic to it? Was it just grinding it out? I mean I'm interested by the fact you said we just committed to staying in the room and working and working and working. I think that's what I kind of heard you say. What was the key? The core of getting it done at the end of the day now with 25 years to reflect on it?

BA: In any type of negotiations, particularly peace processes and now 25 years on, I've been involved in many of them in different countries. But there were a few things. The first thing is that the parties involved in negotiations must believe that the status quo is not acceptable. If people believe that the status quo is fine and that going on killing people is fine, then there is not much room for negotiation. So, I think that's the first one. The second one is to try, you know, to get an understanding what are the items that are the causes of conflict or what are the underlying reasons for the conflict. And then to try and get the parties to start to understand each other. That's the heart of it, because often people in negotiations they come in very hard with their own sense of position and their viewpoints. And they are not really serious about trying to find solutions. So,

it's trying to convince people, you know, that moving a bit here, a bit there and trying to find a small compromise will help your argument with your own people.

And there is always that sense of people feeling, and that, you know, they can't move, that they would be betraying their own people if they move a bit. So, I think there is trying to get a bit of trust. Like if everyone stands to their own position, we will never get anywhere so it's to try and get enough trust and confidence that people are prepared to give a bit, move a bit. And that can be only done by trying to improve the relationships. Trying to you know to get the circumstances of the talks, right. Of course, it's never perfect, as we all know. I mean there are ups and downs. You get good days, and you get terrible days. George Mitchell [who served as chairman of the peace talks], the great George Mitchell, who you kindly gave us. You know George Mitchell used to say you know we had 800 bad days to have one good day. I think you have to be prepared to do that. And, of course, people lose their heads, and they lose their temper, and they say things maybe they would regret. So, I think it's for us guys who are willing to talk is to try and you know keep the sense of what the big picture is here and to take the blows and take the hits and you know keep going.

So, I think that is the magic, I suppose, is to try to keep that, you know, sense of understanding that this is difficult for everybody and that if all give a bit and take a bit. Because at the end of negotiations, if there is a loser, if someone loses badly than it doesn't work. So, you almost have to get to a stage that everybody is a winner. So, that the compromises balance each other as best you can. ... And I think looking back on it, we managed to do that, with great difficulty may I add, but we managed to have a sense where 25 years on more or less what we negotiated is still the way it is. You know people haven't changed that much. Put a tweak in here and there.

TS: I do want to ask about something specific you said there. This notion of everybody has to accept that the status quo cannot continue. It's untenable. Now there is a strain of politics in the states, as well as I'm sure in Ireland and in Europe, that compromise is somehow failure. That if you compromise--and I'd like Mark to talk about this as well. You know, how when somehow there's people who are just like we will never compromise, but that's the only way to move forward because the status quo is untenable.

BA: We had you know the great Dr. Ian Paisley, who, you know, was one of the formidable politicians and religious leaders in Northern Ireland. And but not only him, but back from the 1920's you had Carson and all the religious leaders, and they always had this no surrender. It is that position is any negotiations. If people go in believing they must win, and the others must lose. I think you have to create the conditions particularly in peace thing, in peace work. Listen, people have been killed every day. Innocent people

have been killed. An enormous amount of damage has been done. At one stage-- Northern Ireland is a relatively small place--but at one stage it was about 60,000 people on the security budget, you know, to try and keep peace. So, you know, if you want to, you have to convince people, well listen. There must be another way because if you believe the way to keep going is to spend these hundreds of millions and billions on security and people are still being killed, people are still being blown up, property has been damaged, the economy is wrecked. No tourists. No ambassador. So, it's to create that sense that, listen, there is another way. And then, you know, when you see Northern Ireland today like this will be 24 years on, huge amount of tourism. ... Fantastic investment from the United States and Canada and elsewhere. You know, so these things that we try to explain at the time where people maybe didn't really believe it would happen have happened. I think that's the sense of where you have to try to create the picture and hope that people will buy into that picture.

Now listen, it is easier said than done, as we all know, but there is that, you know, building confidence. Mark is a younger guy than I and he's watched it. He's watched the old people have to change in the North, so maybe Mark you can give a good perspective of that.

(TM): 13:24

MD: *Taoiseach* Bertie, what you've listened to there is a master class in negotiation and what Bertie also was involved in is making sure that the United States was involved through Senator George Mitchell and successive U.S. administrations and successive U.S. presidents, who have all been supportive on a bipartisan basis on Capitol Hill with Congressman Richard Neal and Senator King and others who have been involved.

I think you know peace is a process. It is not a destination. The events of 24 years ago were only the beginning of a journey. It was allowing the *Taoiseach's* journey to get to the point where there was peace negotiated. But also, the peace process--and it's called a process because it's still ongoing--and the support of the United States has been very important over the last 24 years. When things became difficult and things got stuck, the U.S. as an honest broker, was able to come in and say we are friends with Ireland. We are friends with the United Kingdom. And we would like them both to you know work these out which they have done.

Ireland is different now because things like the "Game of Thrones" was filmed in the North. I think that was only imaginable 24 years ago. But bringing all the parties together and you talked about the issue of compromise. What was able to happen with Bertie's leadership and the leadership of others and prime minister from the United Kingdom, Tony Blair, was that it wasn't the case of if you win, I lose. And if I win, you

lose. It was accommodating people's desires and needs, but also recognizing that in any negotiation, there has to be an element of compromise. But you also come away with what you want as well. So, I think that was one of the great parents about the Good Friday Agreement, but it is important that we recognize that we need ongoing support in terms of making sure that the peace is maintained because it's very fragile and it can never be taken for granted.

TS: I have been fortunate to work with parliaments all over the world and get to know you know politicians, elected officials, public officials, public servants. And I'm always curious because I feel like there is something that they have in common which is why did you get into this business. You were elected to the Senate in '07, is that right? One of the youngest members elected to the Senate. Why did you decide to get into that? Why did you decide to run for office?

MD: I suppose like everybody gets involved in public life and public service because they want to make a difference, and everybody can make a difference. And if everybody works together to make that small bit of a difference, then you can truly change the way your country or your community goes forward. And nobody better than Bertie Ahern, *Taoiseach*, is the embodiment of, you know, using public office and public service as a way of changing the outcomes of, you know, not only Northern Ireland, but the whole island of Ireland. And people are alive today because of his work in the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process and working with others. And people, who at one stage--Bertie talked about this and the negotiations--they wouldn't even sit in the same room. Like literally it was a show of diplomacy that you had the Democratic Union party wouldn't sit in the same room as Sinn Fein and they literally had to go from one party to the other. And there were these things that I only learned about a few years ago called Angel Documents where these ideas that were--that didn't have any origin. They weren't allocated to any particular group or party, or any government and they were just put on the table, and they were said, like, what do you think of these ideas because they knew that if one party thought it came from the other side, they would reject it and vice versa. So, there was lot of, you know, very imaginative thinking in the negotiations and you know hopefully in the years ahead, we will see more progress in relation to the issues in Northern Ireland.

TS: Bertie, I want to ask you the same thing. Can you go back into the way back machine to the 1960s, I guess, when you were, like, I'm going to run for office. I want to be part of this, and did you ever think that your legacy would be as substantial as it was when you were just this kid and what made you run?

BA: Yeah, I think probably most people get involved, as Mark said, they want to make a difference, but you probably start off wanting to make a difference in your own local

community. I think you see things in your own local community around sports and youth facilities and maybe some better amenities for everybody. Playgrounds for kids. They were the kind of small but very important things that attracted me to political life. And then, I think we were, we are Irish Republicans, and we come from that you know an Irish Republican tradition of being nationalists and being very wedded to the country and to how our country should be shaped. So, I think they were that--I think Mark and I come from different ends of the country--but I think most of our people all over the country would be of a nationalist persuasion and the Northern issue, the unification of the island, the relationship with Britain were all the issues that kind of united us as young people men and women joining. So many of our people went to the United States. We all grew up having relations in the United States and I think it has been truly important to us as a small island and, of course, we think we are the most important place in the world like every country does. But, you know, we are a small place. We are a small dot on the map. We are stuck between Europe and out into the Atlantic and I think it's when we talk special relationship, we have with the United States today and every day has been so important also. I was lucky enough to work and have a very close relationship with both Bill Clinton and George Bush. Both of them were truly good friends. Both of them were massively supportive to us. You know we never got into a distinction of Republicans or Democrats. ... We still do to this day appreciate their interest and the concern and the work. You know it's our ambition that that continues. I mean there is not a state in America where we don't want support and interest in the Irish cause. We've a lot of work still to do you know to build that relationship and it's the connection with the United States that has helped us so much.

(TM): 20:30

TS: One last thing on the Good Friday Agreement because we can't ignore the fact that this is this anniversary and coming up on a quarter century of that. I was struck by how legislative negotiators are often dealing with someone on their side. You might go in with Tony Blair and get along swimmingly with him, or not, and find that it was sometimes harder to negotiate back with your own team than it was to negotiate with the British?

BA: In negotiations and my experience is whether it's with farmer's trade unions or political parties, you have to be watching all of that, all of the angles. I think it's a bit like when you are, as I was for a long time, as leader of my party, but you have to lead your party, but you have to lead the government and you have to be watching everything. If you only do one bit of it, the other bit suffers. So, I think it's hugely important.

What we did is just as a matter of historical record. As we went through the negotiations, particularly the last three months, and I sat down with my key people and

with our party of elected officials and we explained to them where we were, where we thought we moved, where we could move. And so, when we had to change our constitution, which was a big thing for us that to remove that jurisdiction that we claimed over Northern Ireland, it could only be done by carrying the party with me. And if I had to jump that up on the last day and said, well, I'm going to agree this tomorrow then that would have been war.

So, I think the thing to do is to carry people with you. To sit down with them. I used to do it Sundays, Sunday mornings when you would like to have a rest after a long week. Go back to your own people with the key people and answer their questions. And invariably they come up with very good questions. You know, questions which you must address and your day you must go back into the negotiations among them and continue this. So, if I can say so looking back on a long career in this, I see a lot of politicians, they make the mistake of dealing with one aspect or maybe two aspects, but you have to do it across the totality of relationships. And if you don't and the one you ignore will bite you eventually. But we didn't have any of our elected members who left us because of the agreement. You know, that is something I think not just me, but all of our colleagues and negotiators are very proud of.

TS: My memory is, you know, it was put to the vote of the people right and the people somewhat overwhelmingly passed the agreement, you know, endorsed the Agreement.

MD: Yeah, in our jurisdiction, in the Republic of Ireland, 95% of the people said yes.

TS: Well, that is remarkable and will stand as one of the remarkable achievements of the 20th century. And forgive me. I've got to tell one quick story. You were talking about the relationships between the Americans and the Irish and so about 20 years ago, my sister and I, we sent my mom and dad--my mom had never been out of the country, my dad was in the service. We sent them to Ireland, you know, because we have strong--I'm Irish and we have strong ties to Ireland. And my mom comes back, and she is showing us her pictures. Back then, you know, they were actual pieces of paper when you looked at pictures. And she shows us, you know, a castle and the ocean and all this stuff. And then there is just this picture of a pile of rocks next to a stream. And I'm like, mom why did you take a picture of a pile of rocks next to a stream. "That Oliver Cromwell. I can't stand him. I hate him." And I'm like, mom that was 500 years ago. It's ah, but she was so Irish in the moment ... apparently he had destroyed this pile of rocks bridge over this stream at some point or at least that's the legacy and so I just love that story. I think there are many Americans who will always be Irish and relate to Ireland in a special way.

MD: Cromwell is a rather fond figure in London and in Ireland we have a slightly different view.

TS: Yes. I understand. And my mom was all onboard with that. It took her like one day to appreciate what side she was going with on that. Hey, let me ask you Mark. Thinking of Irish and American ties, I know you claim that an ancestor or you are a descendant of a guy named John Sullivan who was speaker of the New Hampshire House of Representatives, something that is near and dear to our hearts. Legislators have been on this continent for 400 years. New Hampshire General Court is what it was called as one of the oldest legislatures in the U.S. and so you had a speaker of the House in New Hampshire among your family Mark. So, you actually have some strong ties. Also fought in the Revolutionary War for American independence.

MD: Yeah, that is more important like because he was with General Sullivan at the crossing of the Delaware when the American War of Independence was in the balance. And I want to thank you Tim and the NCSL for helping with the establishment of the American Irish State Legislators Caucus because we started a year ago and there were four states that had Irish caucuses and we now have leadership in all 50 states. And what we found out was that while there are 1-in-10 U.S. citizens who have Irish heritage, actually 1-in-5 state legislators have Irish heritage and, as you know, 1-in-2 U.S. presidents have Irish heritage. And what you know I think it's gone from strength to strength. We are looking forward to welcoming you here in July and next year we are hoping that we will have a lot of the state legislators from the various caucuses over here for the Notre Dame versus Navy game. As Bertie said about diplomacy and that's why this relationship with the United States is so important to Ireland.

Diplomacy is a contact sport like politics is a contact sport. And it's about relationships and it's about people so that when you can lift up the phone and say we need your help, they know who you are. They know that they can trust you. Bertie Ahern, I don't know he might allow me to tell this story. You can edit it out. You might have to edit it out. But in the negotiations with the Union side, who would not be very trusting of the Irish government, one of their negotiators was elderly and would start falling asleep during the afternoon session after the dinner you know and after the lunch. And it was Bertie would call for a break knowing that his opponent was, you know, just elderly and therefore negotiations would take a bit of time and that he was getting, he was just of his age. And he would be the one looking for the break and say hey you know would it be alright if we just took a break. And they appreciated it. They knew it was for the other guy. But they appreciated it. And those small gestures mean a lot. And that's why you know when we talk about the relation between Ireland and the United States, that's why we are so grateful for the NCSL in helping with the establishment of the American Irish State Legislators Conference, which is open to everybody. It's not just people who are of Irish heritage, but people who are supporters of Ireland, public representatives here so that we look forward to welcoming them over for St. Patrick's Day here and

obviously our members going over there for St. Patrick's Day, but also for the 4th of July because the 4th of July--obviously the 2026 is the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence and seven people of Irish heritage signed the American Declaration of Independence and 40% of George Washington's army had Irish heritage. And when the war was lost, Lord Mt. Joy in the British Parliament said we have lost America to the Irish. And so, that our relationship goes back a long, long, long way and we look forward to extending and continuing and growing that relationship into the future.

TS: We sure are grateful as well and I will say I love that story because you know what, I want this podcast to be as like takeaways, take homes and this notion of never underestimating the small gestures. I think that's something that every legislator should have on their mind, that little things matter when you can reach out to the other side and just do things to help them. Pay attention to the little things. That's a great story and, yeah, Mark, we sure do appreciate you. *Taoiseach* Ahern anything else you would give advice or of course as we wrap up?

BA: The one thing I would to say that we were in a country, we're a small country because of not just the famine, but you know economic circumstances right up until the 1950's, that people immigrated mainly to the United States. What we would now like to see from the United States perspective, with their help, you know it's now why most of the big, you know, American multi-national companies and information communications technologies, medical supplies, pharmaceuticals are now in Ireland. And now are exporting all over the world. Practically I think most of the top 10 drugs used in the world are manufactured in Ireland, an American investment. We never underestimate the true friendship we have and, you know, I think what we need to do more than anything else, and I say this because not just on the flattery side or to be nice about it, what we need is for the next generation, the generations coming behind us, that that connection with America remains. Maybe not because of the success of our economy with your help, our people don't have to go abroad. So, we have to build that relationship and it's deeply appreciated, you know, in this country, the help and the assistance. But I'd like to keep it. It's not about money. It's not about power of companies. What it's about the relationship and the friendship that has been so important to Ireland for hundreds of years and that we continue to build that. And we build it in every part of America. It's not just Boston where we were traditionally from. But that we build it everywhere.

TS: Well yeah. You can sort of count on NCSL because I think you touched on it that this continuing the relationship through the next generation and the next generation and we have a really strong foundation for that so I'm very optimistic about that. So honored

Senator Mark Daly, president of the Senate, and *Taoiseach* Ahern, genuinely grateful for your time. Thank you.

MD: Thank you Tim. Thank you very much.

BA: Thank you Tim.

TS: My guests today were former Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern who signed a historic Good Friday Agreement with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998 and Senate President Mark Daly of the Irish Senate. If you are interested in joining the Irish American State Legislatures Caucus that Senator Daly mentioned during the podcast, you can find out more on our website. Type in NCSL Inside Storey and that's S-T-O-R-E-Y. This is "Legislatures: The Inside Story" from the National Conference of State Legislatures and I am Tim Storey. Thank you

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