

IFI book launch
7 october 2008, Brussels

Speaking Points for Commissioner Danuta Hübner

Mister Rooney (Denis), M McCreary (Alf), Ladies and Gentlemen,

Alf McCreary has done what we never have time for. He just stopped for a while and looked back at what Europe had been doing for and with the people of Northern Ireland over the last twenty years. I want to thank you for this Alf and congratulate the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) for this initiative.

Earlier this morning, in the framework of the Open Days event, a workshop took place regarding the EU support towards the peace process in Northern Ireland. At this workshop, the creation of a peace network was announced with the objective of passing on the experience of Northern Ireland in peace building and reconciliation to other areas facing similar problems. I'm sure the IFI will contribute fully to this network and this is why I find the publication of this book very timely.

Today the political situation in Northern Ireland is of course peaceful but back in 1986, 22 years ago, when the Fund was created, the prospect of peace in Northern Ireland looked very elusive indeed. As this book helps us understand, the creation of the International Fund for Ireland was a bold decision by forward thinking people who had courage, vision and determination.

Such a person was the then President of the European Commission, Mr. Jacques Delors, who was instrumental in order for the then European Communities to become donors to the IFI in 1989. To date we have committed €304 million to the Fund and clearly, the EU is an important donor to the IFI, illustrated by the fact that our contribution represented 61% of all annual contributions to the Fund in 2007.

But this is not just about the money. Today we have come a long way politically and as a result, in May 2007, devolution was restored in Northern Ireland as former enemies managed to put their differences behind them and become partners in building their common future together.

This success is down to the people of Northern Ireland. But the work of the IFI and of the EU supported PEACE programme had important roles to play in bringing about change towards a peaceful society. The best proof of this are the thousands of IFI and PEACE sponsored projects on the ground which make such an immense contribution to reconciliation.

Indeed, the IFI has contributed to the creation of thousands of jobs, transforming areas scarred by the troubles into models of urban regeneration, enabling young people from both communities to share the same schools.

I see this book as a tribute to all the people who contributed to the creation of the Fund and subsequently supported its work. But this book also serves as a reminder of the difficulties of the past while at the same time it documents a wealth of experiences that has accumulated over the years of IFI support.

The Commission has always maintained that the experiences of the IFI, as well as those of the PEACE programme should be recorded with a view to sharing them with other regions facing similar problems. The book clearly contributes to this goal.

Indeed, I always found the IFI projects promoting peace and reconciliation in a realistic but also innovative and effective way. Moreover, I have always been impressed by the commitment and passion of the people implementing projects on the ground. I was very satisfied to find out that the book captures this aspect of the IFI work.

Through my interaction with the IFI and PEACE programme I have become convinced that projects which challenge the perceptions and attitudes of young people as well as projects which support women are crucial. I am convinced that both young people and women play an instrumental role in bringing change in conflict situations but also in maintaining peace and reconciliation. I am very pleased that this clearly comes out in the book.

To conclude, this book could be considered recommended reading for anyone who wants to learn about how peace and reconciliation can be achieved in a difficult context and the Commission is proud to be associated with the work and achievements of the IFI.

Thank you