

## An Evening Reflecting on Northern Ireland's Peace Journey: A Call for Social Justice and Inclusion

As the attendees gathered at the reception, the atmosphere was one of commemoration and forward-looking contemplation. The "Causeway of Peace" display, showcasing creative works by students from local schools, set the tone for the evening, demonstrating that the legacy of the ceasefires continues to inspire younger generations. These students' insights served as a hopeful reminder that peace is an ongoing project, nurtured by education and community engagement.

The panel discussion, moderated by the experienced broadcaster Jude Mitchell, sparked deep conversations about the factors that led to the ceasefires, the role of paramilitary groups and the persistent influence of sectarianism. The panellists were: Martin Snoddon from the Forgiveness Project, Detective Chief Superintendent Emma Neil, Stephen Hughes from St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre and Councillor Seanna Walsh. Each brought unique perspectives to the table, offering both historical context and forward-looking solutions.

One of the key themes that emerged was the necessity of accommodating Northern Ireland's increasingly diverse population. Thirty years ago, the demographic landscape was starkly different, with the primary focus on the Catholic and Protestant divide. Today, however, Northern Ireland is home to a growing number of ethnic minorities, whose experiences and challenges are shaping the region in new ways. The discussions reinforced the idea that a just and peaceful society must be inclusive of all its people, regardless of background, ethnicity, or religion.

Sectarian politics, though still a significant force, must evolve to reflect the realities of modern Northern Ireland. The evening emphasized that peace cannot solely be about the absence of violence; it must also be about creating spaces for dialogue, reconciliation, and inclusion. As Northern Ireland navigates its post-ceasefire years, there is a growing awareness that the lessons of the past must be heeded to build a fairer, more just future.

A poignant moment came as Debbie Watters from Northern Ireland Alternatives summed up the evening, reminding everyone of the moral imperative to be coherent to Christian beliefs and principles of justice, compassion, and equality. She called for a renewed commitment to these values, urging society to learn from the pain of the past while striving to create a future built on respect for human dignity and social equity.

In conclusion, this event was not only a celebration of the progress made over the past three decades but also a solemn reminder of the work still to be done. As Northern Ireland continues its journey towards lasting peace, this evening's reflections underscored the need for unity, social justice, and an inclusive approach to peacebuilding. The road ahead may still have its challenges, but events like this shine a light on the path toward a more peaceful, just, and cohesive society for all.