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Brian Fox with Dermot Gallagher

Dermot Gallagher, Leitrim native and former Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, or former Ambassador of Ireland to the United States speaks to Brian Fox a participant on the Washington Internship programme (WIP).

Before they travel to DC, we ask WIP's Class to sit down with a leader they are inspired by to talk about their journey. Brian Fox of the WIP Class of 2013 interviewed Dermot Gallagher.

Dermot Gallagher has had a distinguished diplomatic career in the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) of Ireland, actively contributing to the Northern Ireland peace process over a thirty year period and furthering Ireland's relationship with the United States. Mr Gallagher served as the Ambassador of Ireland to the United States between 1991 and 1997, where he successfully involved US President Clinton in the Northern Irish peace process. Following this appointment, Mr Gallagher became Secretary General of the DFA and was actively involved in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement negotiations. As a UCD graduate and currently the Chairperson of UCD's Governing Authority, Mr Gallagher speaks of an inspirational history course which led him to make diplomatic history of his own. As he reflects on his own career, he offers advice and discusses prospects for the future.

Brian Fox: What were you doing when you were my age?

Dermot Gallagher: I was studying in University College Dublin and particularly enjoying – indeed fascinated by – a course in Diplomatic History being given by the late Professor Desmond Williams. Desmond was Professor of Modern History at UCD and had a huge international reputation. Through his course, he gave me a real sense of the capacity of diplomacy, if used wisely, strategically and to its fullest potential, to prevent, defuse or indeed resolve conflicts. Shortly after beginning this course, I had firmly decided on a career in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

BF: How did you get to where you are today?

DG: Once I decided on a career in Foreign Affairs, I applied for the Third Secretary competition and, following a series of written tests and oral

interviews, was lucky enough to be selected and appointed Third Secretary at Headquarters in Dublin in 1969. I was initially appointed to the Political Division which, as well as European, United Nations and International Affairs, was also responsible for Northern Ireland issues.

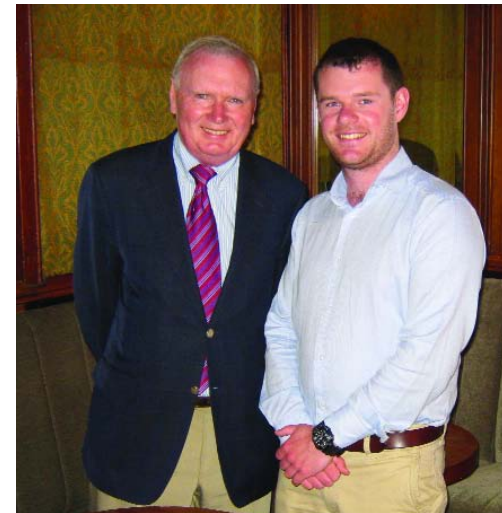
Much of my initial period in the Political Division was focused on European issues given that Ireland's application to join the Common Market was being vigorously pursued at that time by the Government, and in particular by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Early the following year however, with the deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland, I was one of two officials appointed to a newly-established and separate Northern Ireland Section. This Section was, of course, to grow very considerably in subsequent years.

These two initial posts effectively anticipated much of my future career in Foreign Affairs which was very largely taken up with European and Northern Ireland matters and, in particular from 1987 onwards, with the advancement of the Northern Ireland Peace Process, including of course the historic Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

BF: Who was the most influential person in your life and why?

DG: I have no doubt that any positive attributes I have are due to the enormously positive influence of my parents. They not alone made substantial sacrifices to ensure all their four sons had a University education – as did so many Irish parents of all generations, past and present – but they constantly advised and encouraged us to seek careers that would be both personally and professionally fulfilling, as distinct from being just financially rewarding. As indicated earlier also, Professor Desmond Williams, and his course in Diplomatic History, was a huge influence on my choice of career.

Throughout my career, my wife, Maeve, has been a constant source of support and advice. During my years as Ambassador in Washington (1991-1997), she was a superb networker (unpaid!), making invaluable contacts with the wives of senior Cabinet and Congressional Members. These wives, crucially I must add, were often the guardians of, and therefore the key to, access to leading political leaders in Washington, undoubtedly the most ruthlessly competitive political city in the world.



■ **Brian Fox with Dermot Gallagher**

BF: If there was one thing that you could change about the Irish political system, what would it be and why?

DG: One frequent criticism in the past of the Irish political system has been what is called the undue influence of the “permanent Government”, by which is meant career public servants.

I personally believe this is well wide of the mark. In a long career, I have never known a Minister, for instance, who had significant and solidly based initiative and who didn't receive whole hearted support from his or her public servants in delivering fully on it. Likewise, if a public servant proposed a similarly significant initiative, I always found a Minister open to taking it forward and delivering on it.

I'd like to give an example of each of the above from my own career. The first concerns the restoration of the Ballinamore-Ballyconnell Canal, or the Shannon-Erne Waterway as it is more formally known. This was an idea that was dear to two former Taoisigh, Dr Garret FitzGerald and Mr Charles Haughey. I think the economic situation at the time didn't allow Dr FitzGerald to take the project beyond a certain point. Later, Mr Haughey appointed me to chair a Restoration Committee for the Canal, and we raised 30 million punts for it and delivered it on time and within budget. The project not alone united that waterways of the island but had a hugely positive impact on tourism and the economy generally in the Leitrim – my own native County – Fermanagh and Cavan region.

At a later period, and following fully justified complaints to me from Northern friends about the sad condition of the site of the historic Battle of

the Boyne in County Meath, I prepared a proposal for Government that the site should be sensitively and fully restored. The Government then appointed me to chair a Committee to deliver on the restoration. To ensure that the Unionist community would be entirely satisfied with the restoration of what was after all hallowed ground for them, I asked two leading unionists to be members – effectively the key members – of our small Committee. The restoration, which cost some €15 million, has been an enormous success and has, in my view, significantly enhanced reconciliation between North and South on the island. I was especially touched that very many Unionists have both publically and privately conveyed the warmest appreciation for Dublin's initiative and delivery of the project.

BF: *What advice would you give to a young university graduate from Ireland?*

DG: My advice to any young graduate would be not to rush into a career but, having first sought out the widest input and advice from persons he or she trusts and admires, to follow their best but informed instincts. And if for some reason or another they are unhappy or unfulfilled in a career, they should not for a moment hesitate to quickly change direction and go down a new career path, whether at home or overseas.

BF: *This summer I will be interning in the Irish Embassy in Washington, DC. Given your time as Irish Ambassador to the US, how important is the Irish Embassy in furthering Irish interests in America?*

DG: As the official, the immediate and the direct source of contact between the Irish Government and the most substantial political and economic power in the world, our Washington Embassy has a crucial and an all-important role to play in the relationship between Ireland and the United States. I simply cannot emphasize this enough.

In my six years as Ambassador in Washington, from 1991 to 1997, my particular focus, as directed by the Government was, firstly, on seeking to involve the US, and in particular President Clinton, actively and centrally in the Northern Ireland peace process; secondly, in working to legalise the status of very many young citizens in the US; and thirdly, in helping to facilitate and support the work of the IDA on inward investment, including and in particular

lobbying to counter any legislation which would inhibit or discourage investment. This latter role crucially involved me in 1993 in intensive and successful discussions with the respective Chairs of the Finance Committees in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, and ultimately with President Clinton, to have elements of the draft legislation which was then before the Congress, and which would have very severely damaged Ireland's inward investment strategy, deleted from the Congressional text. As you can imagine, this was a hugely topical and worrying issue at the time, as reflected, for instance, in it being the lead story in the Irish Times in the 26 June, 1993.

BF: *Do you think the US still has an important role to play in the Northern Irish peace process?*

DG: The peace process is by now quite well established and embedded but, given where we have come from and the challenges that are still there, we must at all costs avoid any sense of complacency. In ensuring that the momentum for peace is maintained and strengthened, the US has a crucial role to play, both through the President and his team staying in active contact with the political leadership in the North, and ensuring that they have access to the White House and the State Department, and also in delivering an economic peace dividend. Every time, for instance, a US company announces it is establishing a subsidiary in Northern Ireland, it gives an important boost and encouragement to the peace process.

BF: *How do you see the transatlantic relationship between the US and EU developing over the next few years?*

DG: There is already a very close relationship between the EU and US not just politically but, extremely importantly, in the trade and economic areas. I would see this being strengthened progressively over the coming years, in particular through the further substantial liberalisation of our trading arrangements. This process has, of course, been significantly facilitated by the closer integration of the EU in recent times.

BF: *You had a distinguished diplomatic career, holding various high-ranking offices in both Ireland and abroad. What were the high-lights of your career and why?*

DG: My active involvement in the Good Friday

Agreement negotiations, given its delivery of definitive peace in Northern Ireland, has to be, unquestionably, the high point of my career. The fact that I was also able, while Ambassador in the United States, to play an active part in the direct involvement in the peace process of President Clinton, the most senior personnel on his White House team and key Members of Congress is something I am exceptionally proud of. I am likewise proud and appreciative of the important role played by leading members of the Irish-American community, in liaison with the Embassy, in this crucial – as the great journalist Conor O'Clery termed it – "Greening of the White House".

We were a very small Embassy in Washington terms – I think the British Embassy there, by comparison, was the size of our whole Department of Foreign Affairs – but right across the political spectrum from the White House to Capitol Hill, we were consistently seen both as punching way above our weight and as being one of a small handful of Embassies who had privileged political access and wielded real influence.

BF: *Given your involvement in the negotiation and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, what do you see as the key challenges facing Northern Ireland fifteen years on?*

DG: Northern Ireland has to continue to move forward on its current path of reconciliation and partnership, and has to ensure that the partnership and solidarity that is there to a significant degree at the political level is extended into all parts of the North.

George Mitchel, towards the end of his book on the peace process, sets out a particularly insightful vision of the kind of future that he believes would transform Northern Ireland. There, he spoke of bringing his son, Andrew, to the Northern Assembly at some stage in the future and hearing politicians on the Assembly floor discuss the ordinary issues of daily life such as education, health care, etc. George then goes on, critically, to envisage his son hearing no talk of war "for war will have been long over", nor of peace "peace by then will be taken for granted". On that day, George believes a new Northern Ireland, at peace with itself, would have been delivered and he, and indeed his extraordinary work for peace, would have been "fulfilled". I passionately share these sentiments of Senator Mitchell and his vision for the future of Northern Ireland.

This article first appeared on the WIP website