

2009 SUMMER SCHOOL
“WHAT THE SOUTH NEEDS TO HEAR;
WHAT THE NORTH NEEDS TO SAY”

It was a real sign that we are back in the swing of things: after a lapse in 2008, the Glencree Summer School was once again a major event in the calendar.

So many of our participants told us that they had sorely missed the School last year, and were delighted to be back at last. Their support for Glencree was really heartening. Politicians, prisoners groups, victims groups, women’s groups and many more from North and South filled us full to bursting in one of our biggest attendances for years. It was a real pleasure to welcome old friends back to Wicklow, and to greet many new friends too.

But it wasn’t just fun and friendship. There was a really serious engagement among panellists and participants around some of the most pressing issues in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in some cases statements were made that would have been unthinkable ten years ago, and impossible even five years ago in front of the audience gathered at Glencree on 29-30 August. It was timely to remember, amid all the remaining challenges and problems, just how much progress has been made in Northern Ireland since the Agreement.

Our panellists brought us right up to date on the current state of play in the North on a range of subjects – transitional justice and victims issues; the changing role of women in communities; the transformation process for prisoners and ex-combatants; and the topics facing politicians in the coming year. They left us with a rich agenda for our future peacebuilding work, and encouraged us to get back to work to assist the peace process.

Politically, of course, the big issue is policing and justice. But this is also the year when broader justice issues regarding past violence and victims’ needs are rightly to the fore, and we were left in no doubt about the strength of feeling and the crucial importance of addressing this area. We gathered much food for thought about our work with victims groups, past and future. Former paramilitary representatives from opposite sides engaged in truly forthright and constructive dialogue, and demonstrated how far they each have travelled in transforming their organisations, and how they have begun to make common cause on behalf of their communities. And a wonderful final panel of women inspired us all with the importance – and the effectiveness – of working steadily on the ground to build partnerships, friendships and peaceful relations.

Nuala O’Loan did the impossible by drawing all our various topics and conversations together in an inspired after-dinner speech. And Tommy Sands rounded the evening off beautifully by putting a smile on every face.

Our profound thanks to all our panellists and participants for helping us re-establish Glencree’s relevance in the peacebuilding landscape in Northern Ireland.

Panellists and presenters: Declan O’Loan (SDLP), John McCallister (UUP), Peadar Toibin (Sinn Fein), Peter Weir (DUP), Reatha Hassan (SAVER-NAVER), Mark Thompson (Relatives for Justice), Avila Kilmurray (Community Foundation NI), Frankie Gallagher (CharterNI), Pat Sheehan (Coiste), Clíodhna Geraghty (South Armagh rural Women’s Network), Mary Kelly (Ardoyne) Irene Williamson (Cregagh Community Centre), Tommy Sands, Nuala O’Loan (DFA).

David Bloomfield
CEO Glencree