

# Good Friday generation believe it is time to move on

**Claire Simpson**  
in Belfast

Young adults in Northern Ireland look towards a life free from traditional divides and taboos

The old taboos keeping people apart in Belfast don't mean much to Cori Conlon (22) when she's carrying out her community work.

An Irish-language campaigner from the predominantly nationalist Ballymurphy area of west Belfast, her involvement in arts and activism means she often finds herself in places that strike older generations as wrong.

"I spend a lot of time in [predominantly Protestant] east Belfast and my parents are horrified," she says. "It's such a difference in the generations because they think it's dangerous but I see no harm in it."

Ahead of the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Belfast Agreement next month, young people told Belfast-based website The Detail that they were often tired of the same old conversations about sectarianism and the Troubles.

Conlon was born in 2000, two years after the agreement was signed. A member of the Youth Action NI charity, which aims to give young people from across the North a voice, she was able to meet children from a Protestant background from a young age after she got involved in the charity's Rainbow Factory, a school of performing arts in Belfast.

"Working for a cross-community organisation, I have a lot of friends from across the community," she says.

Despite data from the Northern Ireland Executive Office

showing a drop in the number of schools taking part in shared education projects tackling the sectarian divide from 76 per cent in 2013 to 63 per cent in 2018, young people often find that such division is something imposed on them by their elders.

Conlon says a Rainbow Factory production last year, Somewhere Only We Know, partly explored "how the young people felt they were being passed an identity from their parents and from their grandparents that they didn't feel was part of them".

"We could be sitting and having a discussion and then it feels it's the older people [who] go 'but remember sectarianism, don't forget about sectarianism', she says. "We're not trying to forget it, but we're trying to acknowledge things [that] are more important."

Conlon was among the speakers at the Peace Summit in Derry last week, hosted by the John and Pat Hume Foundation and Community Dialogue, which highlighted the need for better peace and reconciliation processes.

Another speaker, Jamie McAdoo (26), from Dungannon, Co Tyrone, was just two when the peace agreement was signed.

"Of course I grew up here and heard an awful lot about it [the Troubles], but the Good Friday agreement I don't connect with it at all," he says.

McAdoo, who is employed by Youth Action NI, says young people are suffering from the "inherited trauma" of the past.

"We've grown up with a lot of social problems in certain areas and a lot of that is coming from growing up in the backgrounds where you can't go into that community, you can't talk to them, you can't be friends with them, you have to go to this school," he says. "And there'll be parents who have come through with PTSD through the Troubles... then that always has a knock-on effect on how they raised their kids, you

know, there's problems in the household as well."

The activists say they are often frustrated when their interests and preferences are blocked due to the traditional divide, something which happens often with education.

## 'Hindsight'

A Unesco report published in 2021 found that about 93 per cent of children in Northern Ireland still attend schools that are largely segregated by religion.

McAdoo says he wanted to attend an integrated school but was sent to Drumglass High School, a state secondary school whose pupils were predominantly Protestant or unionist.

"I think when I went to the [integrated] school it seemed the most appealing to me," he says. "But my family straight away didn't want me to do that. In hindsight, they thought it would've been better."

Conlon notes that this knee-jerk reaction is beginning to fade, however.

"I know someone [from the unionist community] who is going to go to St Louise's [Comprehensive College in west Belfast] because it specialises in dance and drama, not because it's a Catholic school," she says.

The anniversary of the agreement comes as the institutions it established still fail to function, and questions of identity

still dominate the political stage amid unionist objections to aspects of the post-Brexit settlement and Sinn Féin looking ascendant in both jurisdictions.

But Conlon says although her community in Ballymurphy is politically engaged, many young people feel "their vote doesn't count, that the politicians don't care about what they have to say".

"People are so fed up with our politicians, with the parties, with the same conversation over and over again and getting nowhere," she says.

"Young people are more concerned about the cost-of-living crisis, about maybe getting a house... about better opportunities and LGBTQ+ rights."

McAdoo says young people "see so much pain that the conflict and the divide caused, and they want to move away from that."

"They probably look at their older generation and think they never made enough of an attempt to move away from it," he says.

McAdoo adds that the young people he speaks to want a greater emphasis on "climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights".

"And I think when they hear the same things being drummed on and on and on about - the Northern protocol, Brexit, and religious issues - they just don't really want to know," he says.



■ Cori Conlon, from the Ballymurphy area of west Belfast, and Jamie McAdoo, from Dungannon, Co Tyrone, were among the speakers at the Peace Summit in Derry last week