Professor Christine Bell

reflection questions & episode transcript

In a typical year, Corrymeela's meeting rooms — and dining and welcome areas — are filled with people discussing matters of politics, history and religion that have separated them. During this time of Covid, we are providing you with a transcript of each podcast episode, along with some discussion questions, to aid your consideration of the themes which emerge. You may wish to discuss these questions with friends, family, a group you establish on zoom, or use them for your own writing and consideration.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness within the group. It might help to choose one of the Very Short Story Questions . As with any group process, if you are talking about this episode with others, make sure to check that people feel safe enough, that the time is right for them, and make it easy for anyone who wishes to keep their considerations to themselves, or for anyone who doesn't wish to join such a conversation.

1. Christine Bell highlights that peace processes involves an average of 39 agreements. What are the main aspects of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement that are important for you, and why? What else, in your option, is needed?

2. When it comes to Truth Commissions, Christine Bell prefers talk of *contending* with the past rather than *dealing* with it. *Contending* with the past isn't a one-time-event, she says, but rather asks what it means to 'do something useful at this time, in helping us to contend with the past?' Given that, what do you think, in 2021, needs to be contended with in *your* country's past?

3. Christine Bell speaks about the use of technology in some peace engagements. In the last year, many of us have used zoom and other video platforms. Have you found companionship or trust or connection deepening via technology? In what way? What about learning? Have you found zoom to be a place of knowledge-sharing? What are the possibilities of technology, even among limitations?

4. Addressing Brexit, Christine Bell says that there's a need to go 'underneath' in order to understand different experiences of living in the UK, and whether needs are being met. Going 'underneath' constitutes important and respectful conversations. Where do you see such conversations — whether on a local or regional or national level — happening today? What would you want to bring to the conversation?

You can find out more about Christine Bell's work at the Edinburgh Law School here, or follow her on Twitter at @christinebelled

The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with Christine Bell. Transcript

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama. In the first year of Brexit, and a century after the partition of Ireland, I'm in conversation with special guests, exploring contemporary Irishness and Britishness through the lenses of history, politics, art and theology.

This week I am delighted that my guest is Christine Bell, Professor of Constitutional Law and Assistant Principal at Edinburgh University. Those roles barely scrape the surface of her many achievements, and in our conversation we cover Brexit, peace treaties, human rights and the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement:

"Well, for me, it achieved a formal end to the violence. I think it's easy to dismiss that, but it's a huge thing"…

"Brexit, the way it's designed, it's going to be micro-negotiation, after micro-negotiation, all of the time. We will be still doing Brexit for the next ten years, at least".

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Hello, and welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and with me today is Professor Christine Bell. Here's a selection of some of her CV: she's a professor of constitutional law at Edinburgh University, and a co-director of the Global Justice Academy, and a member of the British Academy. She is a founder member of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (which was established under the terms of the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement) and in 1999, she was a member of the European Commission's Committee of Experts on Fundamental Rights. Her education has taken in Cambridge and Harvard and Queen's University and Ulster University. Christine Bell, welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Professor Christine Bell:
Thank you very much. Very happy to be here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
It's very good of you to give us your time. Where are you talking to us from, Christine?

Professor Christine Bell:
I'm in my office in Edinburgh, which is in the old college, which is the oldest part of the university, and I look out over the Edinburgh skyline as I speak.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
That's a great suffering! Is there anything you would want to add to the list - the partial list - of the accomplishments and professional qualifications and associations that I mentioned?

Professor Christine Bell:
No! That's fine.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It's clear hearing you speak that you're originally from Northern Ireland. Could you tell us a little bit about your background?

Professor Christine Bell:

Yes, I was born and grew up in Belfast. I'm of an age that my life, sort of in my early years coincided with the start of The Troubles. I went away to university for three years, came back, trained as a barrister and then went away to the States for a couple of years. And then I worked in Queen's and University of Ulster for nearly 20 years collectively. I'm a person of faith, and I would have attended Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, and then Second Derry. And I was very active in peace work as a teenager. And then as I moved to being a lawyer, and also wanted more structural changes, I became very active in human rights work, and in trying to sort of understand how human rights could be part of framing a solution to the conflict, as we were all moving into the peace process.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Would you say that it was growing up during The Troubles that inspired you - both in terms of a person of faith and in terms of somebody with interest in law, and legal change, and human rights change - would you say that it was The Troubles that sparked that necessity and urge for you to follow those roots?

Professor Christine Bell:

Yes, I mean, it really clearly was. I suppose I grew up understanding what we were living in as completely normal and not really knowing that it was strange and that everyone didn't have this. So it was as a teenager, which for me... I suppose I remember some points. I remember actually the first real atrocity that really sank home (and it was partly because I got up early and the radio was on) was actually the La Mon bomb, and I remember hearing about these awful scenes and thinking: what is this, what's happening? And then I sort of became a teenager and the hunger strikes were on and that was a very politicised time when, unlike other times, people were sort of talking about what was going on and what their positions were. For me, it was a slow realisation that life wasn't normal.

And in fact, I remember stunningly at about eighteen talking to my mum and mum saying: "Oh, I still think of Northern Ireland as not having The Troubles and it as a temporary thing". And I remember looking at her in astonishment and thinking: 'oh, I don't really see any before. I don't know anything different'. So I think for me, I became motivated to say... and in fact, it was almost that cognitive dissonance of going: why is nobody talking about this or doing anything about it? Because I would say that you know, my friendships and my life circles, this- it wasn't really a big point of discussion. We just lived our lives. I mean, that, of course, is a privileged existence. Having said that, there's lots of ways in which The Troubles and fear and threat encroached on our lives but again, we tended to minimise and dismiss them, partly because we weren't just as much [at] risk as some other people.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Was it the same for you in communities of faith, that The Troubles seemed to exist outside of that, or were you part of a community of faith that was quite engaged in discussion?

Professor Christine Bell:

Well, it's interesting you mention that. My grandfather had been the minister of Fitzroy, and he took a heart attack in the mid-to-late '70s and had to retire unexpectedly, and that led to Ken Newell, who's quite well-known, coming. And actually, one of the first things I remember about The Troubles was... I used to go to church; I used to spend all day Sunday going to churches of various sorts. And I would go on Sunday evening- as a special treat on a Sunday evening, I would go with my mum to the evening service from the age of about ten, even though I didn't understand any of it. And Ken came (and I must have been somewhere between eight and ten) and he told a story where he jokingly said: if you're stopped at a roadblock and asked about being Protestant or Catholic, you'll guess who the roadblock is, and answer that. And it was the first time I'd heard people mention Protestant and Catholic, and I asked my mum - I knew I was Presbyterian, but I didn't know which that was - and I had to ask her: 'what am I, Protestant or Catholic? like, I know I'm Presbyterian'. And she laughed, and she said nobody in the world would believe a child from Northern Ireland had to ask that. But actually, I did and it's because my identity was really Presbyterian. And I didn't actually know these other terms, really.

But actually, there was consternation in the church, and I look back now and realise that consternation was because he was talking about the sectarian issue. But you know what people were actually talking about; they were saying: 'it's very wrong, that the minister suggested that you should lie at a roadblock'. So I remember actually, me hearing all the discussion and the chat, because people were judging the new minister as well, you know; and for me obviously, they were judging against the person that had been there before who was my grandfather, who did have his own relationship to politics and the situation, but it would have been a very different ministry and position from Ken's. So actually Fitzroy was one of the communities of faith where these things were talked about and where Ken Newell's ministry was very much about addressing and being an active- trying to be actively engaged as a person of faith and a congregation of faith in what was going on around us.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I know that you're an expert in all manners of peace negotiations and agreements all round the world. And then obviously, there's the one for here called, alternatively, the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. On a global level as you look at the variety of peace agreements that you're familiar with, what is the distinctiveness really, of the Good Friday Agreement?

Professor Christine Bell:

Well, first of all, [it] may be interesting to people to know how many peace processes there've been from 1990. So we have this massive database where we've collected peace agreements, and we've actually tried to count peace processes, which is a complicated thing when you get into it. So there's been about 150 peace processes, and to give you an idea of that, there's about 200 countries in the world. So it's actually- many places have had peace processes and peace agreements. If we count peace agreements as not just being the main agreement, but all the little agreements it takes you to get there, and then all the agreements it takes you to implement... So we know this very well from Northern Ireland. So we have the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, whose name is actually 'The Agreement Reached in the Multi−Party Negotiations (10th April 1998)', which is a bit of a mouthful; that's the proper name if you're going to cite it in a law journal! So there's agreements, many agreements to implement peace agreements after. So the St Andrews Agreement is as significant in some senses in what it did as the Belfast Agreement, although people don't know it so well. There's 1800 agreements when we count agreements on that broad suggestion. So what that tells you is - and I

think we've produced a statistic that says - on average, it takes 36 agreements. Now this is a silly statistic, because of course, all processes are different. But I think what it has really taught me is that trying to exit from conflict takes many years. And the central agreement is often only one moment and one slice. So it takes a lot of time and agreement to get to that agreement. And it takes a lot of time and agreement to get beyond that agreement.

The other interesting thing is, in some senses, not how different our agreement is, but how similar. So quite often actually, people write to me, and they particularly write to me about Bosnia, and they say: 'you've put the Bosnian peace agreement in your database and it's not a peace agreement at all; it was a sort of agreement to disagree'. And I always want to write back and say: they're all like that! They're all, they are all like that. So people don't so much solve their problems, as try to carry their problems into a more peaceful way of continuing to resolve them. And that's I think very much maybe been a hard lesson for people in Northern Ireland (including me) that it wasn't a solution, but the solution has to be worked on almost every day and every year since then. So we still talk about being in the peace process, even though we're 20 years beyond The Agreement.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
That's fascinating. Would you say that there are particular ways where trying to take something from one peace agreement and apply it elsewhere can be troubling, even though I hear you saying that lots of them have very deep similarities in terms of how much of compromise documents they are?

Professor Christine Bell:
Yeah, so one of the things we can actually do with our data that's proving fascinating is we have all these new artificial intelligence ways of looking at comparing texts. So you can actually see where phrases have gone. And for example, the phrase 'parity of esteem' was picked up in the Philippines process, and we kind of can find out some of the reasons why that happened. So things are borrowed across, but they're never borrowed in a simplistic way. They're more translated across so people will use ideas and rework them to their own context and that's in fact what we did. So for example, there's a big discussion around: well, everybody wrote a truth commission into the peace agreement, say in somewhere like Nepal, but are the conditions there whereby a realistic discussion can be had around how to deal with the past? and these sorts of things. And in fact, I think dealing with the past is probably one of the most difficult issues in any conflict. Because there's so much suffering there, and because there's so much compromise in peace agreements.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
When the Commission on the Past wrote their report, you know, for Northern Ireland, they were recommending a legacy commission, and people will be familiar with 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'- that language that was used in South Africa and some other places. What would you want to add to the public discussion about commissions; I know that Joe Biden had said that he would be interested in considering a truth commission regarding enslavement in the United States? What do you - when you hear commissions being discussed in public - what do you want to contribute to that in terms of what the imagination of what they can achieve could be?

Professor Christine Bell:
I think, I would sort of say maybe two or three things; firstly that the commission won't be a panacea. There was language that actually emerged in the Haass discussions that didn't come to anything in Northern Ireland that I really like, which was not 'dealing with the past' or 'transitional justice', or legacy, but 'contending with the past'. And I

think once you use that phrase, you realise that we always contend with the past. And we always have to contend with the past. And we just contend with it in different ways and using different vehicles at different times. So then the question doesn't become: is a truth commission a good thing or a bad thing, but it becomes: can it do something useful at this time, in helping us to contend with the past? And hopefully, I do now see processes as more incremental, and think that maybe we could approach them better if we understood that some things are possible in one moment that aren't possible in the next minute, and maybe what we do is sort of try to always put something in place that helps us better able to resolve our differences in the future. So if we're going to contend with the past in this moment through a truth commission, or some sort of commission like that, it won't settle all issues around the past for all time and all people, and new generations will even have new questions and issues. But how can we use it to leave us in a better place to deal with these issues constructively in the future? To me, that should drive design and the decision-making, rather than this focus on: this commission now is somehow going to put an end to dealing with the past.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And in light of that then as you think of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement - I'll forget the proper term that you spoke about it as! - I know that the kind of broad brushstrokes is that Catholic or nationalist communities might call it the Good Friday Agreement and Protestant or unionist communities might call it the Belfast Agreement. But in light of that agreement, what would you see that that achieved for the moment that it was written in? And what would you consider are some of the new questions emerging now?

Professor Christine Bell:
Well, for me, it achieved a formal end to the violence. I know forms of violence continue, but it's certainly a really different level, scale and nature than it was when I grew up. I think it's easy to dismiss that, but it's a huge thing. And actually, very few peace processes have achieved it quite as well. And for me, personally, I would say to, you know, hold on to that every day- it's a really valuable thing. And, of course, there's so many things it hasn't achieved, but that itself vindicates much of what was done in that time.

Secondly, I think the human rights element was important, and it was new to what had been tried before. When I worked in human rights, we used to sort of say, aside from the constitutional question [an] important issue is: is everybody treated fairly? I still feel that a human rights framework - and the one that was included, if some of it had been better completed and implemented, and it still could be - it would provide a framework within which people's, you know, fears of discrimination and domination which are still there, could continue to be addressed and of course, new communities will have new fears at different times. And I still feel that fundamentally justice and fairness is - and trying to deliver it and trying to deliver forms of social justice - is the main way that societies are peaceful.

It's interesting: there's a huge global peace index, and it counts levels of economic- it was actually set up by economists because connections between social justice, fairness and economic wellbeing are so closely related to whether societies are peaceful in terms of violence or not. So I think those were really the achievements of it. It did set up a framework of government that was complicated. But that government, I think, at periods has worked better than we had hoped and at periods worse. And I think it also set in train a set of processes that have been really difficult to complete, but were the right process to set up; it did address the right building blocks for peace. So on the whole, I would give it a pretty good rating. But, you know, we all continue to mark it. On the whole as a global peace effort, I would say it has been as good or better than most, but we have had a lot of things in place that other countries don't have. We had existing

institutions, we had a framework in which laws were largely - you know - accepted and respected. Lots of societies just don't have that kind of infrastructure that we have.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I know that in your writing about peace, and in your writing about public discussions about places of conflict, that you advocate both the use of tech, but also highlight that the use of tech can never replace the possibility of face to face encounters and the capacity for people around the negotiation table to be in the same room as each other. Where would you see that? Why are these two things such strong emphases for you?

Professor Christine Bell:
You know, I am in ways a researcher; say our data: that's about providing better comparative information to people to make use of, to try to fashion their own exits from conflict. So the power of computing, the power of how we are able to gather and do that data; all of it's moving on almost month to month. How we can link- for example, you asked me: was the Belfast Agreement successful or not? Well, a really key indicator of success - even though it's a very negative form of peace, and it's just one measure - is reduction of deaths and conflict. But actually, there's really good data out there on reduction of deaths and conflict. So we can now, across those 150 processes, crunch and connect our data with data on deaths and conflict and understand which agreements were implemented well, and then we can look into that. I think for me, tech provides a level of capacity that we can't have through manual work, and it adds on to that. And I do believe that, while we can't- while processes are very much controlled by politics, good information can support them; quick access to creative ideas, to understanding how people have done things in other contexts can really inform people. And it's surprising to me still, having sort of lived and breathed peace processes now for so many years in my research, many people who are entering these processes - and if you think about, say, armed actors - they have had no connection with comparative data, with understanding, and they approach their process as if it's the only process in the world, the first process in the world, and they don't know what a process can do and what it can't.

I work a lot with women's groups. And they're often being asked for input. And they say: 'well, what can we ask for of this process?' Or, 'we want to see sexual violence against women changed- is that something the process can deliver?' Comparative knowledge is really useful to that. So I really believe in tech as an enabler. It also has been very key- and it was interesting, we bought Zoom about a year before the pandemic, and of course, everyone's using it now. But we did a lot of work with people in Yemen. And for example, many of the people with creative and good ideas for that conflict, who are really activist about trying to resolve it, are displaced from the country and scattered to the four winds in different countries. So things like being able to meet virtually and talk is really vital. And also being able to keep connection with people in the country is really vital and can only really be done through tech solutions. So there's a lot of logistic issues around safety, around diasporas being displaced, where even though it doesn't grab the whole of the community- because of course there's resource implications as to who has access to tech, and cultural implications; women, for example, have much less access to mobile phones and often a mobile phone in a family will be controlled and held by the man.

Limitations... Well actually the jury's really out on whether trust can be built across tech platforms; so you can transact your business, and you can get information. But trust is really fundamentally at some deep level about relationships. And when you're in these processes- and in fact sometimes it can be hard as a researcher to even write them up. Because the real story of why something happened is: well there was baggage between these two actors, there was this

and this and it wasn't just about the conflict; it was complicated by all sorts of things and personal things that had happened between them. Can we- and I think we're seeing this in our own relationships as we're trying to do social things over Zoom: it's not the same. It's not the same. Can we actually build trust over technology?

We can build some, but can we- you know, at the end stage of Brexit negotiations they talked about: 'Boris Johnson's going to look Ursula von der Leyen in the eye; they're going to go stare eyeball to eyeball and that's somehow going to make the difference'. Well, what if they can't stare each other eyeball to eyeball; it's eyeball to eyeball across Zoom? Is that gonna work the same way? So we do still feel that trust is something that's very... interpersonal relationship. And it's about looking the person in the eye, it's about shaking their hand, it's about making a gesture towards them that might be… it's about how you sit around the table. These things all matter in negotiations.

Corrymeela is Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation. Working with thousands of people a year, Corrymeela supports groups to deepen inclusion, peace and belonging. These remotely recorded podcasts come from our kitchen table to yours, because we can't be together in the same room talking about these important topics in this important year.

So, if you want to take the conversation further, we've got some discussion and reflection questions for you, and a full transcription too. You can find those on our website: corrymeela.org/podcast or linked through our shownotes.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is Professor Christine Bell, who is Professor of Constitutional Law at Edinburgh University, among many other accolades and accreditations.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Christine, I'd like to talk to you about Brexit; you gave us a nice transition into that just by mentioning Boris Johnson and Ursula von der Leyen just there. We've seen the Belfast Agreement very much back to the fore as a result of Brexit and fears that leaving the EU could undermine peace terms. Do you think that the Good Friday Agreement is going to get important attention in this Brexit era now?

Christine Bell:
Well, it's had a lot of attention. And I think maybe if we're positive about it, Irish government, UK Government and EU really took - whatever we believe about their good faith or argue politically - they all took support for The Agreement as their starting point and as a common point. Will it get attention now? Well yes, I mean, the Brexit deal that has been agreed is a really complicated one; it's what happens if you negotiate over positions and try to square them through lots of niggly little rules. So it's a very imperfect deal, and of course the Protocol creates an extra layer of complications. So I feel we're probably now into a very tricky period of about five years of figuring out those regulations and seeing: do they come under pressure to change and how? and I think it's actually quite unpredictable what happens both for the UK as a whole and for Northern Ireland. How does that affect The Agreement? Well, we have to decide, at some point also, there is a need to- it's very tricky 'cause nobody wants to roll back from The Agreement by undermining it. But at some point, we also probably have to cross new Rubicons into new understandings of how we self-govern; who we

want ourselves to be; how that translates into institutionalisation. And I have had a sort of deep instinct for some time that those conversations aren't maybe being framed that way and it might be useful if there was an attempt to say: how would we reimagine the future now?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I saw a Tweet that you put out to Edwin Poots of the DUP where you said: 'so what were DUP thinking of when a) you supported Brexit and b) voted down every other available proposition for a Brexit without an Irish Sea border, in a context where your votes would have made the difference?' During the period of time when the DUP were the kingmakers in the Westminster parliament, there was much more attention given to the DUP than in previous years, it seemed to me. What was your critique, and what were you inviting Edwin Poots and maybe his party to think about?

Professor Christine Bell:

Well to me, from day one, there were three things that different groups of people wanted. People wanted no border between the North and the South. They wanted no border between the North and mainland UK. And the UK Government very strongly and very clearly (right from May through to Johnson) said they didn't want to be in the Single Market and Customs Union. Now, actually, those three things logically can therefore not all be achieved. And this was the basic logic of The Agreement. This is not a matter of anyone's political view, it's not a matter of their preferences; those three things cannot be achieved, because once you have rules in UK on trade, diverging from rules in the EU, somebody has to monitor those rules. So if that was going to be the position, then there was either going to be a border in the Irish Sea or a border, the land border between the North and the South, or both. Theresa May, essentially, pulled back from the position of the no customs union, although she didn't call it that, it was going to be a form of de facto customs union. That then meant that you could not have a border- you didn't have to have the border up the Irish Sea, or along the land border. So it seemed to me if you wanted a harder- if you wanted Brexit to be implemented (as I would understand the DUP to have wanted) then you had to decide really, whether you were going to put your eggs in the 'no customs union/single market' basket, or the 'no borders anywhere' basket. And actually, they decided to put their eggs into the 'no single market or customs union'.

I can't really see that that was a decision that was in the interests of people in Northern Ireland, but that's my political position. But it's also just a factual appraisal: it seems to me it would have been better for people in Northern Ireland had neither of the sea or the land border existed. But that would have required using your leverage to try to push for the whole of the UK to stay in the Single Market and Customs Union. And that would have been a softer Brexit... in many ways it made Brexit more illogical, which I think was the resistance to it from people that supported Brexit. But it would have given us what Norway have, and if you talk to people in Norway, although they see themselves as rule takers, they like the bit of sovereignty that they have from being independent, and yet they value the interconnection. So I think it would have been a fair delivery of Brexit. I think what was not really sensible was to say that you would keep on trying to achieve all three of those things, when they clearly weren't logically available. So to me, there was a bit of - probably from many parties, I wouldn't just say target the DUP here - there was a bit of what we like to call magical thinking that things could be achieved simultaneously, which it was very clear couldn't actually be achieved simultaneously.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Where do you see signs of connection when it comes to questions to do with Brexit and British-Irish relationships? And UK-EU relationships? Where do you see signs of connection or trust possible?

Professor Christine Bell:

D'you know I think it's really interesting that nobody actually is really thinking or talking about that. There's a little bit around the periphery and part of it of course [is that] we might be except we're still in the middle of the pandemic, and it's so difficult and it's creating its own trust issues in lots of really complicated ways. But to me what I feel I've seen in Brexit, much more sort of being situated here in Scotland - and a lot of my work means that until the pandemic, I was in London, at least one day a week, around Whitehall - is that it almost created pro and anti Brexit as almost like an ethnic identity where it tied up with lots of views. So whether you were a Remainer or a Brexiteer - and it was almost like there was a binary choice and of course, lots of people don't know what they think, or have ambivalent feelings about these things - [it] almost became like an identity politics like we had seen and understood in Northern Ireland. And what I would observe about that is that these things are very fast to create, and to become quite rigid. And they're really, really hard to undo. I mean, remember that 39 peace agreements to get out of conflict and how many years that takes.

So to me, the UK- I really think what would have been ideal to have happened after Brexit was - [because] it was clear that there was no proposition for what Brexit had been - before triggering Article 50, if there had been some vision to say: we're now going to have some sorts of public hearings about what people want about this. And to consult and understand what the vision is, and to bring the country into one place; that then might have then held the politicians into some mandate. But it was clear that there was sort of incoherent thinking around it. And there was no mechanism and commitment to actually engage people, and people who voted for Brexit out of absolute need and desperation - and we had seen this in the Scottish referendum too - communities and constituencies that had never voted before, that disrupted what pollsters thought because they got out of their seat to vote, 'cause they felt so strongly about how they were being treated. Well, you know, that's a set of needs that need to be addressed and it's unclear that Brexit addresses them.

To me… there's still a need in the UK to go underneath. Not in a silly way about saying: why did people vote? but to go underneath and say, you know how, fundamentally, is the country to be pulled together? What are the different experiences of living in the country? And whether your needs are able to be achieved, you know; whether your life chances can be achieved in this country because it's a very divided country in lots of ways. So I think that needs to happen. So I don't see where that- I mean, you asked me a positive thing and I think it's very striking how much that's not really part of the public conversation in the UK. Whereas it probably still is a little bit in Northern Ireland, 'cause we still see reconciliation as a thing that always has to actively happen. But I think it's really needed in the UK as a whole now and I don't really see where it's happening and how it's happening.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

When it comes to questions to do with what's called the United Kingdom, I always find it interesting that kind of over the last few hundred years, the United Kingdom has changed, you know, every hundred years or so; a hundred years ago it was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, you know. And then it became the United Kingdom of

Great Britain and Northern Ireland. So this thing called the United Kingdom has changed. Do you think we're on the cusp of another change?

Professor Christine Bell:

Well, yes, I definitely do; there's an unravelling of the constitutional fabric of certainties as to how devolution was working and held together. And that's been felt just as strongly in Wales and Scotland as it is in Northern Ireland, but it happened in slightly different ways in all three regions. So certainly there's going to be a change, because there will have to be an addressing of that. What that change is is less certain- I don't think it's inevitable that the UK breaks up or loses any one of those parts. But neither do I think that just pushing on, and assuming that it automatically stabilises- I don't think that's the situation either. So I think the UK as a whole will - whether it wants to or not - become increasingly embroiled in a constitutional conversation about the different parts of it; how it hangs together, what is it that justifies the United Kingdom as [the] United Kingdom? Is that justification being borne out in what people are delivered in practice? I mean, this [is] a really live question in Scotland at the minute; it seems to be a live question in Wales. And of course, it has its own dimensions in Northern Ireland. So I think the country has to actually explicitly address that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What would you think a timeframe for another possible independence vote in Scotland might look like, whatever the outcome of it might be, what would you say the time frame might be?

Professor Christine Bell:

Very hard to know. I think there's so many 'ifs' and 'buts'. If there's a win in the next elections, there will be a strong pressure. The polls, for the first time in the history of the UK, are showing a quite clear majority for Scottish independence for some time now. There's a brilliant- one of my favourite judgments in the world is actually a Canadian Supreme Court judgement in the case of Quebec. And it was a very, very smart judgement. They were asked, you know: can Quebec secede or not? And they said: well, actually if one section of Canada doesn't consent, and democratically shows that it doesn't consent, there is a requirement of a central state to have the conversation. And I think that's got to be right really, doesn't it? If there's a strong view that the country is not working, there has to be a conversation or else a chance of people to express that wish. So I think Scotland- this issue will continue to be dominant for the next couple of years, and I think it's likely that there is a referendum; just when and how that would come about, I'm not sure. I see so many- as a lawyer I can just see all the complications. I don't think any of them are easy to come about.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what about Ireland? Do you see that Brexit has sped up a conversation about, you know, a border poll- basically a referendum in both jurisdictions about the possibility of a unifying or a new or a shared Ireland? Or do you think that that is continuing to be a long way in the future? What are the different things that you bring to that conversation?

Professor Christine Bell:

I think it has certainly completely changed the conversation. Maybe that's another cop-out answer. It has - you know - up until now, we've said, it has sped it up. I suppose my worry is that, in a sense, the practical fallout of the Brexit arrangements and the Protocol mean it's probably going to be complicated in ways that we haven't anticipated. And I

suppose the other big factor is austerity. We seem to be in for a mind-boggling crisis financially across- really across Western Europe. So again, that's never really that good for trust, for reaching good solutions, for reaching win-win solutions on all sides. And in many ways, we can see Brexit and things as fallout from the last round of austerity that we did. It's never been good for Northern Ireland, austerity. It's always been easier to sort things when people have been doing well.

I think there's a need for people who care about these things and are active to really - in the middle of being exhausted from everything - dig deep into their resources and say... I suppose people in Northern Ireland in particular, are really creative politically and creativeness wise, and you're a good example, Pádraig, and a good example of those things coming together. But that deep political imagination, that's really about who do we want to be and how can we become it? There's going to be a need to find some place and way to have that conversation and not just be buffeted through from one crisis to the next, because I just think we are in a situation now where - I mean, it maybe sounds pessimistic - but I don't see Brexit or COVID as really having an endpoint, and I think this is a very hard thing for us to get our heads round.

So Brexit, the way it's designed (again, without going into it technically), it's going to be micro-negotiation, after micro-negotiation, all of the time. We will be still doing Brexit for the next ten years, at least. And actually, with the way variants are heading and the vaccination, my slightly   depressing take is that one way or another, we will be managing COVID and its legacy for the next period. And I think that makes things like referendums, constitutional status, and the train we're in; I think it's just a really different space than we've ever been in before in Northern Ireland or wherever. I would really like to see that global leaders say, [at] the point at which every country's in massive debt to each other- can we not just redecide what money and debt is, and how to do the whole economy a different way? You know, there can be a liberating part to crisis, of saying: maybe we can reshape how we do these things. In Northern Ireland, if everything's working badly, is there a completely new way of coming together and thinking about it? I mean, I don't know what it is, and whether there is or not. But I think, I think [in] the world we're in, to be quite frank, all bets are off. And that's dangerous, but it's also a positive opportunity.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Kind of as a final reflection, and maybe a question in here too- I'm intrigued with how you are so deep in the scholarship about global peace deals and all the different aspects of that, and the legal and constitutional matters within that. But you regularly emphasise human relationship and imagination as being vital to those things; human relationship and imagination can sometimes be seen like the soft side of such important negotiations about war, and important negotiations about trade and sovereignty, but you elevate the place of these aspects of capacity for human relationship and imagination so much. Is that new for you? Or has that always been something that's been clear to you?

Professor Christine Bell:

Well I would say I flip-flopped right, so whenever I was like a teenager, I was like d'you know, everyone should love each other, and if we make relationships it'll sort everything. And then I just lost faith with that, because actually, for me going out of my comfortable middle class life across town to different schools (and actually even going two miles down the road where I crossed an invisible border from south to west Belfast) what I could see was people had really different experiences of life and institutions, and that this completely coloured and made reasonable a lot of our different assumptions. So it seemed to me that actually, we didn't need to just address relationships, but we needed to

come to some agreement, and some better ... we needed to - you know - change. So I saw police as very protective in my life. And I felt very worried about people I knew who were policemen; people on the other side saw them as the enemy. It was clear that we needed to address policing. And it wasn't just about becoming best friends behind the scenes- [that] wasn't going to sort that. So as a lawyer, I probably looked more at institutions of fairness. Of course, I always believed it was about both, even in all phases of my life.

Now, I maybe have a better, well, maybe it's not better, I just have maybe a different understanding of how they come together. And it's interesting actually talking to you about this, Pádraig, because when I talk about imagination and relationships, and political imagination, I think the story we tell ourselves about who we are, and whether we can find a collective way to tell a collective story, even about our differences, is really, really important. And I think the sort of ideas we have about what are possible shape actions, so I think stories shape action, and the stories we tell ourselves - about how we're treated; about how we treat others - really, really matter. And, you know, we've seen that, we've seen that recently say, unfolding in the debacle around the States whereby, actually countries, and whether they tip from democracy into authoritarianism; it sometimes can come down to a really thin line of not: do you have the institutions, do the institutions hold? but: do key people at key moments do the right thing or not? Do they have the sensibility that does the right thing? And time and again, I would have watched in Northern Ireland where atrocities unfolded. And actually because somebody - maybe unexpected to say what they did - said something peaceful at a key moment, that it changed things in a positive way. And similarly, we can all think of situations where somebody said something very inflammatory, and it just span things in a different way. But that comes from people's sense of who it is they are; what it is they want to build and be.

So I kind of think that for me, the relationships and the structures come together, quite fundamentally, around: how do we want to relate to each other? How do we capture that in the institutions around us, and what sort of common commitments to just basic boring things like decency, valuing human life, valuing the rights of other people- how do those things become institutionalised, both in the institutions but also in our ways that we deal with each other in a very interrelationship way? I suppose my feeling was that when I got to - you know - when I did all the cross-community stuff, and saw other people, people actually mostly don't have a terrible problem relating to each other. If you take them out of their context, and get them talking about things other than politics; I never saw a big problem there. The problem is when we go back into all these institutions and structures- they make things more complicated than that. So there's got to be some way to bring those together. And I think that is about finding a narrative and narratives of change and renewal and political bottom common denominators.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Professor Christine Bell, thank you very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Professor Christine Bell:
Thank you.

Our guest this week on The Corrymeela Podcast was Professor Christine Bell of Edinburgh University. Don't forget to listen right to the end when Christine reveals how Cambridge opened her eyes to many things, including the art of being brilliant at debates.

Thanks for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama and I'll be back with another episode next week.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Could you tell us about a time when you felt foreign?

Christine Bell:
Oh yes, actually you know the most stunning one was when I went to Cambridge. So, I went, as you know, coming from a deeply deeply religious community and family; having a sense of British identity. And suddenly I went to sort of the heart of the British establishment and found out that they all thought I was... Irish. I went with - you know - a sense that I had lived a very privileged life as middle class. And then I met people that really had money. And they treated me as poor, and I remember sort of explaining to them no, we're quite fine, you know, and then I would go to their houses and realised we were actually! …compared to them we were poor, because actually, I didn't really know or see anyone, and there weren't that many people with that sort of wealth in Northern Ireland. There was a different class of old money. And I didn't see it until about third year when I started more visiting people in the holidays in their home and, you know, thinking, whoa! 'cause we were all kicking around in jeans and stuff.

But anyway, so I think for me, actually, I got active in the Students' Union, and whenever I would speak - this is just one example - but they always sort of chose people's weak point, and you had to speak through fifteen minutes of people shouting stuff at you. And I didn't have a really obvious weak spot. So the thing that they would always shout for me was "Translate! Translate!" because of my accent. And I mean, I laughed at it- so I would have to do ten minutes of very posh English men - actually boys - shouting: "Translate! Translate! Translate!" And that was literally the first ten minutes of any speech I made. You know, I kind of laughed a bit about it- didn't sort of feel too aggrieved; I felt actually, this is good, because they're not shouting, 'plonker, plonker plonker!' which they shouted for another guy…. Like they were really shouting at me: 'foreigner, foreigner, foreigner'.

And I sometimes think of that 'translate translate translate' and think my whole life there was translating, and also, I never realised how much The Troubles affected me until I was living outside of them. And, realised, whoa, it's not normal. And the biggest time in ways I felt foreign was actually, there would be these heated heated disputes in the Students' Union where I would feel, oh really people shouldn't be fighting this way- and I think that's right. But also, I remember one day thinking: but nobody's going to get killed at the end of it. These people aren't going to go out and kill each other even though they disagree every bit as violently as in the Students' Union at politics in Queen's, and

then actually sort of being a bit flabbergasted about that. I still actually felt the violent disagreement wasn't great. And there was a better way to do things. But it also made me see that you can have really, really, really full-on political disagreement, and it doesn't have to lead to violence and death. And actually, maybe that shouldn't have been a huge surprise to me, but it was. So that was the time I felt most foreign; I felt like I was in a totally different culture. People knew nothing of my background; I couldn't read other people's backgrounds, couldn't tell. And actually, they couldn't place me half as well. Like, in Northern Ireland, people could place me almost down to my street, by my accent and how middle class it was or wasn't. But in England, they all would have assumed I was working class 'cause I had a regional accent!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

The next time I hear you speak in public, Christine, I'm going to start shouting out 'translate!' in my best English accent.

Transcription: FanFán Ltd