Collaboration with Nelson Mandela: McCormack Grad School's “Finest Moment”

A message from Dean Ira A. Jackson

As we remember a great and generous visionary in Nelson Mandela, and as we rededicate ourselves to his mission and rekindle his passion and values in all our work, we salute our colleague Padraig O'Malley for lighting the way.

You may have seen Padraig O'Malley's op-ed in yesterday's Boston Globe, titled "Madiba' helped bring peace to Northern Ireland." It is the remarkable and moving story of how our Moakley Chair in Peace and Reconciliation Padraig O'Malley engaged Nelson Mandela to play an instrumental and indispensable role in bringing together the warring parties from Northern Ireland and laying the groundwork for the Good Friday Agreement.

I've included a fuller version of the piece below which provides greater context and detail.

Padraig concludes by saying this was the McCormack Graduate School's “finest moment.”

The courageous, credible and important work that Padraig has done and continues to do is an inspiration to all of us at the McCormack Graduate School and UMass Boston. I know that it is mirrored in small and large ways every day in the work locally and globally of others at McCormack of whom I am equally proud.

Mandela is a leader for the ages. The Good Friday Agreement is a model for the future. Linking the two and carrying on the legacy of both the man and the treaty is hard and noble work.

Professor O’Malley Reflects on Collaboration with Nelson Mandela

In the coming days, there will be an outpouring of loss and thousands of tributes from every corner of the globe in memory of a man who touched all our lives in one way or another.

I was among the few fortunate who had the opportunity to work with "Madiba," as he was known affectionately to all South Africans, on a project associated with Northern Ireland. The University of Massachusetts Boston - more specifically its McCormack Graduate School - and Mandela collaborated to help the 16 leading negotiators from the major parties in Northern Ireland who were trying to trash out a peace agreement but had gotten bogged in recriminations and the usual blame-game finger pointing for the impasse. These negotiators included Peter Robinson, now Northern Ireland's first minister and Martin McGuiness, the deputy first minister.

Having worked in Northern Ireland for decades and having had the privilege to track the negotiations in South Africa as they were occurring, which led to the historic 1994 agreement
abolishing apartheid in all its ugly forms and giving the voting franchise to millions of Black South Africans, I was convinced that the Northern Ireland negotiators could learn a lot from their South African counterparts.

In early 1997, after a flood of back and forths, Mandela dispatched Cyril Ramaphosa, the ANC’s chief negotiator, and Roelf Meyer, chief negotiator for the ruling “whites” National Party, and to Belfast to access the situation. On receiving their report Mandela agreed that he would co-host a conference with the McCormack Graduate School bringing together the 16 leaders I have mentioned with the key negotiators from all the parties in South Africa who had been integral to reaching South Africa’s peace agreement. Mandela, however, had one stipulation: each of the Northern Irish attendees had to write to him and personally ask for his assistance. Getting these letters was left to yours truly. Not too easy! Mandela then agreed to convene a conference with McCormack Graduate School in Arniston, a remote secured military base a few hundred miles west of Cape Town.

That conference took place in July 1997 – four days of intense discussions among the Northern Irish themselves and between both and their South Africans counterparts.

Mandela spent the better part of a day with us.

When he arrived, it fell to me to tell Mandela that Peter Robinson’s delegation would not sit in the same room with Sinn Fein to hear him speak, so, he would have to have two conversations, not one. Mandela smiled, and laughingly said. “A little bit of apartheid!”

As it turned out, the arrangements were serendipitous. Mandela told the IRA/Sinn Fein delegation in his best school admonishing tones that unless the IRA declared a ceasefire, Sinn Fein would never find a place at the negotiating table. In his conversation with Peter Robinson’s delegation, he was as equally blunt.

Robinson’s party had two demands: the IRA had to declare a ceasefire and decommission (destroy) its armory of weapons. “Wrong approach,” Mandela told them; if they really wanted Sinn Fein at the negotiating table, they should decouple the issues: ask for a ceasefire now and make the decommissioning of arms a matter that would be addressed during formal negotiations.

And that is just the way the process in Northern Ireland unfolded, leading to the Good Friday Agreement a year later. When the agreement was announced, all the major players parties in Northern Ireland went out of their way to pay special tribute to Mandela for the role South Africans had played at a critical point.

At the McCormack Graduate School, we are experiencing the same sense of loss as millions the world over. But we feel it a little more deeply. Few institutions can say they co-convened a conference with Madiba. It was our finest moment.