

**A response to a documentary about the significance of
Dr Martin Luther King Junior's speech and its relevance in
Northern Ireland
Stormont, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

By
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Chris Little MLA, Members of the Legislative Assembly, Personnel from the US Consulate, My American Friends, Family, Colleagues, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen...

I count it a great honour and a privilege to be invited to make a response to this documentary. Dr Martin Luther King is a global icon and an inspiration. He was a human rights and community activist and a father of four kids. Apparently, he had a sister called Christine King (now Prof C. Farris) and a brother who was coincidentally called **Alfred** Daniel King (I suppose, you can now see a connection).

The 'Letter from a Birmingham jail' in Alabama written by Dr Martin Luther King was in response to the accusation that his activities were "unwise and untimely." The letter is a very thought provoking script and one that I would recommend to all politicians. I'd like to commence my response with a quote from the letter.

Dr King said, "*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice **everywhere**. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*"

It is true that the world is becoming a global village, and as such, we must recognize that we are all interdependent. We must realize that other people's freedom is inextricably linked to our freedom.

The 'I have a dream' speech given at the historical march in Washington on the 28th of August 1963, gave birth to many dreams; dreams of hope, of equality, of justice, of freedom, of unity; revolutionary dreams and a demand for change through non-violent action. Dr King's Dream gave marginalised groups and communities a reinvigorated energy to live in hope and stand up for equal rights and civil liberties.

The cross cutting themes of Dr King's work was centred on an anti-discriminatory message of equal protection, equality of opportunity, the abandonment of hatred and the promotion of inclusion. There are lessons to be learnt from this revolutionary work.

Only quite recently in Northern Ireland, between 2007 and 2012, the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 13,655 hate incidents across Northern Ireland. 9,355 of these were classified as hate crimes, 4,689 of these crimes were forwarded from the PSNI to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). (Research on Hate Crime and the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland by Neil Jarman, Institute for Conflict Research)

So is there a relevance and significance in the words of Dr King to Northern Ireland?

Dr King said, "I have a dream that all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

I don't know about you but although the geographical location is different - I see a clear correlation and an unveiling of Dr King's dream. People are beginning to shake hands in Northern Ireland and there is a black man in The White House in America.

So, what is the historic significance and relevance of Dr Martin Luther King's work leading to the march on Washington in 1963, and in particular, his '*I have a dream*' speech - to Northern Ireland?

I would like to enclose my response within three envelopes:

- (1) The first being the relevance of the speech to Northern Ireland civil society and politics,
- (2) The second being the relevance of the speech to indigenous community groups and associations and
- (3) The third being the relevance of the speech to the black and minority ethnic communities.

Unveiling the First Envelope - Political arena

Does the work of Dr King relate to politics in Northern Ireland?

Absolutely! Dr King started his 'I have a dream' speech by referring to the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. This was an executive order, [it was not a law passed by Congress] but it proclaimed the freedom of 3.1 million of the 4 million slaves in the United States of America at the time.

In my view, the moral action of President Lincoln highlights the need for a moral and transformative political leadership in Northern Ireland. This is a challenge to politicians to ask the right questions and to be willing to take risky, unpopular but progressive positive steps. This may require, thinking around the box, thinking outside the box and in fact; perhaps getting rid of the box in order to create and promote a political leadership where the interests of the masses come before unproductive party politics.

After the long awaited launch of the Cohesion Sharing and Integration strategy, in May 2013, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness unveiled their DREAM by revealing proposals for a Shared Future.

In this proposal, a 10 year timetable and target deadline of 2023 has been set. It is anticipated that all peace walls would have been brought down. Plans for more shared education campuses

and thousands of work placements for young people would have been made available.

This is positive and progressive, however, the challenge goes beyond removing physical barriers to removing the not so visible barriers in the hearts and minds of individuals and communities.

Similar to Dr King's era, for the twin peaks of Jobs and freedom, the issue of community safety, segregation, inclusivity, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity remains some of the biggest political challenges in Northern Ireland. These issues affect and impact on the economy, inward investment and also, international relations.

Although there is a decrease of single identity wards from 56% in 2001 to 37% in 2011, in respect of the provision of social housing, 91% of social housing in Belfast is segregated. There are currently nearly 50 peace walls across Northern Ireland with 88 built interface locations in Belfast alone. Annually, during the July marching season, it is recorded that there are around 4,000 flags flown. As published in the Integrated education: a review of policy and research evidence 1999-2012 - only 7% of children that are of school age attend integrated – mixed or shared schools.

Permit me to once again echo the words of Dr King but with a little twist.

“Is it not time we lift our national policies from the quicksand of sectarian and racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity?”

It is evident that the Northern Ireland Executive cannot continue to promote, pursue or manage “winners and losers” policies that maintain the status quo without altering and effectively addressing the challenges that segregation and inequalities present.

Unveiling the Second Envelope - The relevance of the speech to indigenous community groups and associations

In the last number of years, I have worked with people from both the protestant and catholic communities; and just 3 weeks ago, I had the privilege of working with young people from both communities in Interface areas - Old Park and Cliftonville both in North Belfast.

During the workshop, I carried out a training exercise entitled "If you had a magic wand....what would you change?" A comment in response to my training exercise, stood out. This was from a young lad... and this is what he said.

"I do not like my life. If I had a magic wand I would change my life."

These words keep echoing in my ears and I wonder how many other people have the same thoughts. How many young people are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments?

Can the communities stop the ongoing distortion of children's personalities and the unconscious bitterness toward other people because of their religious or community affiliation; their colour or ethnic backgrounds?

Can we dream of a time when working class and middle class Catholics and Protestants (including minority communities) would be free to work across the East, West, South and North of the beautiful cities in Northern Ireland? Can we go a step further and act on our dream to make sectarianism and racism a thing of the past?

Unveiling the Third Envelope - What are the relevance and significance of the speech and the work of Martin Luther King to the Black and Minority Ethnic communities in Northern Ireland?

Between 2004 and 2012/13 the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 8,088 racist incidents in Northern Ireland, in 2 of those years – 2006/07 – there were 1047 incidents and in 2009, there were 1,038 incidents in that year alone. This is equivalent to 87 incidents per month or 3 incidents per day.

5,940 out of the 8,088 incidents were deemed to be Racist hate crimes.

Just last week, 19th August 2013, an African man was reported to have been intimidated at his home in East Belfast, Racist graffiti **“No Blacks”** was daubed on the walls; A window and door pane were also broken at the house. This act shows that Race Relations is an ongoing concern and an issue that must be tackled in parallel with Sectarianism and all other forms of intolerances.

I must say, it was encouraging to see politicians like Chris Little MLA and Robin Newton MLA condemning the attack and showing the kind of transformative leadership that is required for a new Northern Ireland.

When Dr King said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.” He knew what he was talking about. I have two children both born in Northern Ireland – and I do share the same sentiments.

Dr King understood how it felt to be perceived as different and unequal. He understood the impact of discrimination and injustice, he knew what it meant and how it felt to be denied a service based on the colour of one’s skin. He knew and understood what poverty meant. He understood “the modern stop and search”. He spoke about moving from smaller ghettos to bigger ghettos. He was connected to the change that he sought.

Yet, he still had a dream; and a hope. He did not settle for a convenient excuse for injustice but he put his head above the parapet and stood up for change, fought for change and contributed immensely alongside people like Rosa Parks to bring about equality of rights for African Americans.

Integration of new and emerging communities is crucial and must be based on equality. Minority ethnic communities must take steps to contribute positively to the society at all levels; politically, economically, technologically and socially.

Developing a sense of belonging which includes the ability to communicate effectively must be an aspiration of all citizens. Minority communities must embrace their rights without neglecting their responsibilities. People must work together to remove barriers and erase the “them and us” mentality.

We must work together to promote a society that enables fair and equal treatment of all individuals, where equality, inter-culturalism and human rights are valued and embraced; a society that is inclusive, shared and free from all forms of discrimination.

Permit me to end my response with a re-phrased quote from the letter from Birmingham written by Dr Martin Luther King;

“Let us all hope that the dark clouds of sectarian and racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow, the radiant stars of love and brotherhood [and sisterhood] will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.”

Yes, Dr Martin Luther King dreamt my dream... he dreamt our dream – we must keep on dreaming to do and to become better.

Thank you.
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