

## Mary McAleese interview: Border lands - The trouble with Brexit



The former Irish president shares her concerns about Brexit and Europe's refugee crisis with Lorna Donlon

Mary McAleese, Ireland's former president, knows what it's like to flee her home, to be, as she once described it, "a refugee on my own island". Growing up in the Catholic Ardoyne area of north Belfast in the 1960s and 1970s, she witnessed first-hand the violent sectarianism that ruptured the city, destroying lives and families, and buttressing hatreds and fears that had blighted Northern Ireland for generations.

Loyalist gunmen attacked her family home in December 1972. The house was empty at the time, but nothing could prepare her for what she saw on her return. The front garden was strewn with shells from machine guns; her sister Nora's bedroom, in the direct line of fire, had been so riddled with bullets it was like a colander. "They had shot only into the rooms with the lights on. There were bullet marks on the dressing table and the drawers. It was the most chilling thing," McAleese recalled later. The family left immediately, never to return.

That experience of watching her strong parents become victims of circumstances over which they had no control, impels her response to the current refugee crisis. Tomorrow, in the Church of Ireland cathedral in Waterford, she will launch "Joy Bells", a bell-ringing initiative that will sound a note of solidarity to counter the intolerance and exploitation that swirls in the volatile ether of Europe's reaction to refugees. Churches and bell-ringers across the world have taken up the invitation of the Dean of Waterford, Maria Jansson, to join this communal summons to a more compassionate, human engagement with people who have been forced from their homes.

It is the simplicity and timelessness of Jansson's idea that attracts her, McAleese explained when we met recently in Dublin: "There's no dogma or doctrine going to get in the way of it because this is

something that everybody can subscribe to. It seemed to me all the more important that it would be a Christian initiative because so often these days the voice of Christians, or at least an appeal to so-called Christian culture, is used to exclude other ethnicities, other races, and again to breed intolerance. And that's always seemed to be so counter-cultural and so contradictory of the Christian faith."

The notion of being an "emigrant people" runs through the veins of Ireland's history and McAleese believes this is why the country has responded with such generosity to the inflow of a significant number of migrants in a relatively short period, despite the financial crash and social dislocation that followed the intoxicating years of the Celtic Tiger.

Across Europe, there is prejudice and hostility to refugees. Pope Francis was recently asked by a young Syrian woman about the fears some have that refugees from outside Europe threaten the continent's Christian culture. How would McAleese respond to the question? Fear, she says, when it is distilled into hatred, "challenges the credibility of Christianity and tests our credentials". The test for Christians is to respond not only when it suits us or when it is easy, she says, but when it is hard.

McAleese believes Pope Francis has been the outstanding world leader on the issue, with perhaps only the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, his equal. His voice has been in sharp contrast to that of other leaders, including some Christian leaders, who, by equating ethnicity with religious belief, have aroused fears and fermented hatred. "He's right, you know. It is about leadership – and leaders can give the imprimatur to people to think and speak in a particular way."

As Ireland's president for 14 years from 1997, McAleese forged a distinct role in Irish public life. She was the first head of state to be born in Northern Ireland, a fact reflected in the chosen theme for her first term – "Building Bridges" between divided communities. Officially, the role of president requires the incumbent to be politically neutral; experience shows it helps if you have political nous. McAleese and her husband, Martin, did a great deal of unobtrusive work building those bridges with Protestant loyalist communities in the years after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 ushered in a working, if at times truculent, peace.

Now, almost 20 years later, Dublin is having to refocus on the border with Northern Ireland as the fallout from Brexit and the relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom rebounds around the political classes. Having campaigned for a Remain vote in last year's referendum, when she was living in London, McAleese still finds it hard to believe that the UK will exit the European Union.

Of particular concern to her is the extent to which Northern Ireland was left off the political agenda in the run-up to the referendum. Looking back to the Good Friday Agreement, she reflects that the role of the EU was crucial. Without it, she suggests, there might have been a different outcome to the vote in support of the peace process which took place in both parts of Ireland once the Agreement was signed.

"I'm not sure, to be perfectly frank, if we had known at the time that Britain was going to pull out of the European Union and with it bring Northern Ireland out ... that people south of the border would have been as quick to sign off on changing the Irish constitution, because it was easier to do that [as] we were all members of the European Union. It was an easier sell and nobody thought in terms of withdrawing from the EU, so now we are in a very, very different situation."

It's gratifying, she adds, to hear politicians in both London and Dublin saying they will do their best to retrieve the situation, but "it is retrieval that we're into now, because if we're talking about Britain withdrawing from the single European market, [and] withdrawing from the customs union ... we know that no matter who says 'Everything will be alright on the day', it won't, because it has to change. And if the border hardens, I would be worried that hearts would harden too."

Just over a year ago, at an event in the Westminster parliament, McAleese said Anglo-Irish relations were the healthiest they had ever been. One year and one referendum later, she worries that this may change. The mechanisms and the infrastructure that it took to create those relationships are about to be dismantled, she cautions, particularly in the context of Northern Ireland, adding: "I don't think that's a good place for any of us to be in." Her hope is that Ireland has a "vested interest in ensuring that the relationship Britain maintains with the European Union is as strong as it can humanly be".

Relationships. Reconciliation. Reform. For McAleese, these are not just the words that anchor the peace process in Ireland. They are equally applicable to the Catholic Church as Ireland prepares for Pope Francis' visit for the World Meeting of Families in Dublin in October next year. A committed Catholic, she studied for a doctorate in canon law at the Gregorian University in Rome after stepping down from the presidency. This gives her a unique position from which to interpret the complexities of church-state relations in an increasingly secular Ireland, which is still dealing with the legacy of what McAleese says are the "formidable and unfathomable" consequences of the clerical and institutional abuse of children and the failure of the Irish bishops to convince people that they cared about the victims as much as they cared about the reputation of the Church.

If his visit is to be a success, Pope Francis must offer something different – "something richer and deeper" – than repeating familiar statements on abortion and gay marriage, she says. "Given that we've been through the gay marriage referendum very successfully and that abortion will be an issue, this is the Ireland that he's coming to. It's a place that's very confident in debating issues that previously might have been regarded as taboo but no longer are. I think the World Meeting of Families has got to be very careful about how he handles that because undoubtedly, post the same-sex marriage referendum, it was hugely endorsed by Catholics. So there's a need for reconciliation there."

Speaking very movingly about the experiences of her son, Justin, who is gay, McAleese campaigned for a "Yes" vote ahead of the 2015 referendum which made Ireland the first country in the world to support same-sex marriage by popular vote. The challenge for Pope Francis, she believes, is to embrace those families who are outside traditional Catholic structures and definitions.

The most important part of the visit, she thinks, would be a trip to Northern Ireland, possibly to Armagh, the historical centre of Christianity in Ireland, although this has yet to be confirmed. The Pope's presence in the north – and the reception he would receive – would "be a test of the credentials of the peace process, it will be a test of how embedded parity of esteem is".

On the other challenges facing Pope Francis, the way ahead is less clear. McAleese has been critical of his post-synod document on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*, which she describes as having come out of "a very conservative synod being cajoled by a pope who had wanted more from them". But what is significant, she adds, is the very real debate about subsidiarity and the push to move power away from Rome to the local dioceses that *Amoris Laetitia* has ignited.

As for the position of women in the Church – of which McAleese has long been a stringent critic of the Vatican – she welcomes the Pope’s commission for the study of the female diaconate, but says it’s not enough. “Francis, so far, is a little better than his predecessors, but we still haven’t got action.”

Does she think women will be given greater responsibilities and powers under this pope? “The jury’s out,” she replies.

Lorna Donlon - The Tablet