

# O'Malley hosts UMass reconciliation conference

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Is Northern Ireland ready for a truth commission?

That is one of the provocative questions being posed in Boston this week, as some of the world's leading experts on truth commissions gather to discuss the thorny road to reconciliation that divided societies must travel after generations of strife and violence have torn them asunder.

The conference — Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Do They Do Justice to Justice? - takes place at the University of Massachusetts in Boston on October 23-25.

It brings together experts from Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile and South Africa - four countries that have already gone through the arduous process of putting together truth commissions.

These experts will be sharing their experiences with participants from Northern Ireland and Serbia - both now pondering their own truth commissions as a way of closing a painful chapter of conflict and sectarianism in their respective societies.

The conference is being convened by Pdraig O'Malley, a Dublin-born scholar, who holds the Joe Moakley Chair of Peace and Reconciliation at the McCormack Graduate School of Public Policy at UMass/Boston.

The three-day conference, which includes ten participants from Northern Ireland, is largely a closed gathering, to give participants the chance to speak freely and candidly about the way forward.

On Thursday, October 25 the session is open to the general public to listen and learn from the process. The event takes place at 7 p.m. at the Campus Center Ballroom on campus.

O'Malley is regarded as one of the most tireless and dedicated proponents in the field of peace and reconciliation.

His involvement dates back to 1975, when he was the first to bring together nationalist and unionist adversaries from Northern Ireland to talk to one another in a neutral setting - at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

He followed these with symposiums at UMass/Boston in 1982 and 1984 that again brought activists, journalists and government officials from both sides of the spectrum together to discuss a way forward for Northern Ireland.

In the 1980s, O'Malley got involved with the conflict in South Africa as it went through the painful and very public transition from Apartheid to a democratic society.

He worked closely with Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress as they struggled to create a truth commission to heal the wounds of conflict.

In 1991, O'Malley convened a two-day symposium in Boston that brought together South Africa and Northern Ireland leaders to debate whether a bill of rights might solve some of the problems in those two countries.

In O'Malley's line of work, there is plenty to do. This past September, he organized a unique conference



Pdraig O'Malley is a veteran of reconciliation work who still finds there is much work to do.

between Iraqi Sunni and Shia leaders held in Helsinki, Finland, that enabled party and tribal leaders from Iraq to learn from the experience of other divided societies like Northern Ireland.

Among the experts brought to Helsinki to share their experiences were Martin McGuinness from Sinn Fein and Jeffrey Donaldson from the Democratic Unionist Party.

"I see my role primarily as finding

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an area of conflict, seeing the things that have to be done, talking to as many people as I can on every side, then coming to them with a couple of ideas and asking them to meet with people from other divided societies," says O'Malley from his office at

UMass, a commuter university in Dorchester that overlooks Boston Harbor

The task at hand, O'Malley says, is to find out "whether talking to people from other divided societies would enable others to gain some insights into their own conflicts, and enable them to untangle some barriers that they can't get across."

That process of using mentors to describe their experiences is being

applied to the truth and reconciliation conference at UMass.

"The idea is to have the core countries share their experiences of the truth commissions: how they were set up, how they were run, what people expected out of them and what they

actually got out of them."

O'Malley believes the representatives from Northern Ireland "will come away with a better understanding of what is involved in truth commission, and how they would have to adopt and adapt from it to make it applicable in Northern Ireland.

"Or maybe (they will) come away by saying that a truth commission in Northern Ireland at this point would hurt rather than help, that it's too early, it's too raw, the place is too small."

Conference leaders will also discuss the political compromises that have to be made to get the truth commissions off the ground. Out of that, O'Malley says, comes "a set of principles that would lay the fundamental and indispensable elements that must be present in any process, in any country, that deals with the past."

For more information on the conference and the public event, contact (617) 287-5550 or visit [http://www.mccormack.umb.edu/index\\_events.jsp](http://www.mccormack.umb.edu/index_events.jsp).