

The Irish Times

September 14, 2009 Monday

Centre serves as key plank of North-South co-operation;

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A research centre marking its 10th anniversary today has played a quiet but significant role in the peace process

THIS AFTERNOON at Áras an Uachtaráin President Mary McAleese is hosting a reception for the Centre for Cross Border Studies, an important but largely unheralded organisation.

On this date 10 years ago Andy Pollak, a man with a Polish name, a Czech-Jewish father, an English accent, and perhaps most pertinently, a Ballymena mother, launched the centre in Armagh.

On September 14th, 1999, the then 51-year-old Pollak took what he feared might be a relatively short leave of absence from his post as religious affairs correspondent of The Irish Times to set up the centre. But a decade later he is still in charge of what has become a successful and highly regarded research, training and information institution.

Despite the disparate nature of his background, Pollak's chief interest, almost obsession, has been with Northern Ireland, with Ireland in general, and with building better relations between the North and South. Moreover, this in a nutshell is what the centre is about.

Taoiseach Brian Cowen in praising the work of the centre earlier this year said that the tragedy of the recent past was that we turned our backs on each other.

Pollak's mission over the past 10 years has been to get people in the North and South to face each other in a spirit of practical co-operation and, where possible, friendship.

In its short lifetime the centre has: brought together more than 4,000 people for North-South conferences; commissioned nearly 70 cross-Border research projects in areas such as health, education, training, the economy, local government, EU funding and immigration; carried out education and research work with the nine Irish universities; set up practical websites and cross-Border data bases for workers, commuters and investors; and trained 150 civil servants from the two jurisdictions in North-South co-operation.

Pollak says that finance is always an issue. But through the generosity of the EU Peace and inter-regional funding programmes, the Government and other benefactors, the centre has been able to plan and press ahead with its projects.

There's been a seamlessness about Pollak ending up running the centre which has evolved from a one-man operation to employing a staff of seven. It also has a small office at Dublin City University.

He lived in Ballymena until he was two when he moved with his family to England. He studied at Essex University, his subject, it almost goes without saying, history. As a student in the late 1960s he travelled to Derry to support the Civil Rights movement.

He later covered the daily horrors of the Troubles as a journalist, burdened by a feeling that there could and should be a way out of the violence.

The two big stories in his career were helping, with former Irish Times journalist Ed Moloney, uncover the sex scandal at the Kincora boys home in east Belfast. Much later as religious affairs correspondent based in Dublin he disclosed, with colleague Conor O Clery, how Bishop Eamon Casey had fathered a child with Annie Murphy and how church money was used to provide maintenance for mother and child.

In 1992 he received leave of absence from The Irish Times to run the Opsahl Commission, a body that came up with such radical ideas as talking to the IRA, reform of policing and a devolved administration founded on unionist and nationalist parity of esteem. Six years later he was away again to run the press and public relations element of the Yes campaign for the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

There were some mutterings that there was a conflict of interest between journalism and the campaign.

But Pollak's riposte was that working out of Dublin as education correspondent he was no longer a Northern-based journalist and was not in any way compromised. The following year Pollak joined the centre.

He lives half his life in the North, the rest in Dublin with his wife, former RTÉ broadcaster Doireann Ní Bhriain the couple were badly injured in a car crash in 1985 and their two daughters, now students in Trinity.

Typically, Pollak shies away from too much elucidation of his own personal background, preferring to focus on the work and contribution of the centre which is now anchored as one of the key planks of North-South co-operation.

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