

Bridge of Allan a "Place of Peace" in a World of Conflict



An election rally in Nagorno-Karabakh – "A somewhat more excitable occasion than voting in Bridge of Allan," says George Reid



("our needs are...").

"The borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan are closed, for example, but we still managed to get ten MPs from each country to come to Scotland and sit down together. They have now drawn

George Reid, former Ochil MSP and Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, is off to the wars again.

In May he swore in new Members at Holyrood, hurried home to Bridge of Allan to pack his bags, and left for some of the "nastier hot spots" of the Caucasus.

Since then, he has been to Transdniestra, the Russian-dominated region of Moldova, which has driven out government troops and proclaimed its independence.

And in July he was appointed Chair of the Steering Group for Governance at Stormont – charged with bringing in reforms which, after 38 years of British soldiers on the streets, will ensure cooperation between Unionist and Republican representatives.

"So much for retirement!" says his wife Daphne. "But in our 39 years of marriage he's been away so often that I'm not sure I could cope with him around the house all the time."

Conflict is, in fact, not a new challenge for him. Between his time as an MP at Westminster and an MSP at Holyrood, Reid worked for 12 years as a director of the International Red Cross in wars and disasters in Africa, the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

"I have seen too many people killed and driven from their homes not to try to help, if I can," he told the *Bridge of Allan Times*. "Even when conflicts are 'frozen', they have a nasty habit of flaring up again. While I was in South Ossetia in Georgia in July, for example, one village shot up its neighbour's water supply, which then cut the first village's electricity.

"Between Armenia and Azerbaijan, there are probably a million refugees and displaced persons. And while there is no shooting at present between Moldova and Transdniestra, the economic situation is dire – with over 600,000 people having to work abroad, and many women who have been trafficked for the sex trade."

So what can Reid do in such situations? "I'm not a peace-maker," he says, "but I try to be a peace-builder. "I try to get opponents to see problems not as Positions ("my rights are...") but as Issues

up plans for cooperation on banking, environmental and transport issues.

"Working with civic society is also crucial. In conflicts, women are so much more sensible than men – even in the worst of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, they cooperated together. And young people are far more open to new ideas than old politicians – in both the Caucasus and Moldova, we bring them together for weekends and to produce radio programmes and newspapers together.

"There is no quick fix, though. Managing conflict takes patience, perseverance and a steady nerve."

In his 33 years in politics, Reid has gained something of a reputation for these qualities. First elected as MP for Clackmannanshire and East Stirling in 1974, he had to wait more than two decades before his "key objective" of a Scottish Parliament was realised. "By the time Holyrood was set up, I was too old to seek Ministerial office," he said. "But that was more than compensated for by becoming first Deputy Presiding Officer, and then Presiding Officer of the Parliament – with the opportunity to work neutrally across the parties for the good of Scotland."

In 2003 Reid was elected Politician of the Year for his work in "getting a grip" on the escalating costs of the Holyrood Parliament. Two years later

he was elected Politician of the Year again, this time for his promotion of the Parliament at home and abroad.

In 2005 he was appointed a member of the Privy Council. He has been awarded doctorates by St Andrews and Queen Margaret universities and shortly by Edinburgh University. He holds the Stevenson Professorship at Glasgow University. And he is a trustee both of Culture and Sport Glasgow and of the Edinburgh International Tattoo.

"The honours which have touched me most, though," he says, "are those awarded by my own folk – the Freedom of my home county of Clackmannanshire and the Chieftainship of Bridge of Allan Games.

"This is where I belong. No matter where I am overseas, at the back of my mind there is always the picture of the Ochil Hills, the Wallace Monument and Stirling Castle.

"Bridge of Allan is a place of peace in a world of conflict. People who have their homes here, in tranquil and beautiful surroundings, are extraordinarily fortunate."

Reid says that he would be "impossible to live with" if he did nothing. He reckons that he is now semi-retired: away a lot, but also at home with Daphne far more often. We now see much more of our two daughters and four grand-daughters. And our two dogs, Cailleach and Gaisgeach, are certainly getting more walks.

"I came into politics, however, to help build a more prosperous and peaceful world. As long as I am fit, I shall do what I can to realise that goal."

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