Foreword

I can still remember the first time I was asked – in my first week at University – what school I had attended. It was only later that I discovered the significance of the question and started to encounter the Catholic–Protestant divide that was all too common in Scotland back then. Growing up in a small, rural community on the Isle of Arran, I was aware of differences but had never encountered the depth of hostility that had built up elsewhere over decades. It shocked me, and it was more than just football rivalry, more than just schools and more than just the West of Scotland.

Twenty-five years later, as First Minister, I had the opportunity to do something about it. For years Scotland's 'secret shame' had been swept under the carpet, but I felt our new Parliament could be a focal point for national leadership and change. Although most obvious at certain football matches, religious bigotry continued to exist in the home, at school and even sometimes in the workplace. But I believe that we showed the power of bringing together churches and faiths, football teams, education leaders, marching organisations, workplace and business representatives. We did drive deep change into organisations and set a positive example for future generations. I have no doubt that our summits and, in particular, the action plans that were agreed and then monitored, made a difference.

Ending bigotry requires consistent leadership and unity behind a balanced approach. But it is also important to study the history and existence of sectarianism to fully understand the causes and to deliver sustainable solutions. This collection of work helps inform this debate and keep these issues alive. It is a very welcome contribution to our national understanding and I congratulate all those involved.

If we learn the lessons of our past and we act with determination to change our future we can consign to the dustbin our history of religious hatred and sectarianism.

*Lord Jack McConnell of Glenscorrodale
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