

# **The Death of the 'Peace Process'?**

**A survey of community perceptions**

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**ISLAND** (17) **PAMPHLETS**

Published March 1997 by Island Publications  
132 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey, Co Antrim BT36 7JQ  
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ISBN 1 899510 08 7

*The author wishes to thank the following organisations for their continuing support, and some of them for allowing their premises to be used for many of the meetings from which the material in this document was compiled.*

Farset Youth and Community Development Ltd  
Shankill Development Agency  
Springfield Inter-Community Development Project  
Springhill Community House  
Turf Lodge Development Association  
Conway Mill Education Project  
Systemax/Megabytes Cafe  
Upper Springfield Resource Centre  
Shankill Think Tank  
Falls Think Tank  
MICOM  
Ulster People's College

*and not forgetting the many individuals who met with him and gave so freely of their time and so openly of their opinions.*

This is normally the place for acknowledging funders or sponsors. Unfortunately, I failed in my efforts to obtain financial assistance for this document, and the five months spent interviewing, transcribing, editing and writing, as well as the printing costs, had to be borne at my own expense. This is not an unusual situation, for half my pamphlet titles had to be published this way. The reason, so I have been informed by a total of eleven major funding organisations, some of them well known to the public, is that individuals cannot be given funding, only groups.

I bring this to the reader's attention not as a grumble, but as an act of solidarity with all those 'individuals' working away tirelessly within our two communities, who have built up their contacts through patient work on a one-to-one basis and feel they should be assisted in continuing with such an approach. When I encounter these individuals and see the difficulties they work under, I often wonder where all the so-called 'peace money' goes and who is really benefiting from it. Sooner or later people with responsibility for resources will have to take on board the fact that social change starts not with groups, but *with individuals* – and the same applies to the building of peace between our communities.

Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

# Introduction

The desire to compile this pamphlet originated not long into the ceasefires of 1994, when it seemed clear that the very people with the greatest desire for peace in Northern Ireland – the ordinary people in both our embattled communities – were rapidly becoming the ones with the *least* say over the development of the so-called ‘peace process’. As one community activist said: “Once the ‘Peace Process’ commenced, the *peace process* stopped.” He explained:

Before the ceasefires, there was a very real community groundswell pushing for some sort of dialogue, a constant grassroots reminder to paramilitaries and politicians alike that things couldn’t go on as they were. And I really believe that this message was getting through. Sometimes it was voiced in community meetings, at other times it relied on behind-the-scenes contacts. Whatever form it took, there was an undeniable *process* at work, driven by genuine community desires. Yet, what happened when this ‘push’ for peace eventually developed into an official ‘Peace Process’? Suddenly it became the property of politicians, government ministers and civil servants. The *community process* which had helped it to bear fruit rapidly receded into the background, and we lost any hold we had on what was happening.

This loss of community ownership was highlighted in recent months with the realisation that the ‘Stormont talks’ – the current ‘public face’ of the ‘peace process’ – were basically in limbo because of the pending General Election. As another community activist said:

It’s unbelievable that, after twenty-five years of suffering, the struggle to build peace between our two communities is put in cold storage because of a bloody election! A genuine ‘Peace Process’ should be *ongoing*, simply because *we*, the people, need it; it should not be subservient to the needs of politicians. But it looks as if that’s what it has become, another pawn in the political game. And as always our two communities are the losers.

Soon after the Canary Wharf bomb a meeting of community activists from the Shankill Road expressed their helplessness in the face of a process visibly falling apart. One worker voiced a sentiment shared by most of those present:

I haven’t felt I’ve been any part of the peace process for the past eighteen months and I believe there are many would share that opinion. The problem is that if the thing begins to fall apart, all *we* can do is sit back and watch it fail, for if we’re not part of it there’s no way we can get in there and save it.

Those at the grassroots have many questions now about the ‘peace process’. Why is it so dependant on what happens at Westminster, or even at Stormont? Why are there not different layers within it, different points of access where dialogue could be promoted and trust developed? Who is dictating its pace and

development? What is it achieving? And one fundamental question which is heard with increasing regularity, especially within the Catholic community: was there ever a genuine ‘peace process’ in the first place?

This pamphlet is an attempt to provide a platform for the often ignored views held by those working at the grassroots, about a ‘peace process’ which initially seemed to offer a way out of our long nightmare. It is also an attempt to let those at the grassroots hear *each other*, for with all the negative news dominating the headlines – whether IRA violence or the fall-out from the Drumcree ‘stand-off’ – both communities have begun to retreat again into a dangerous insularity. What the ‘voices’ in this document clearly reveal, however, is that both communities are equally distressed at the seeming failure of the ‘peace process’, and that many people are anxious that whatever hope it offered is not extinguished.

The ‘voices’ in this document were recorded at numerous meetings I held with community groups and individuals between October 1996 and February 1997 (apart from the meeting of Shankill activists already referred to, which occurred in March 1996). I kept to a policy of not naming contributors, as I felt this allowed people to speak more freely.

*Note on format: All indented paragraphs are quotes. At times, especially when interviewees were addressing a similar theme, I have strung quotes one after the other without any intervening editorial comment. However, it should be noted that spaces between quotes indicate that different contributors are ‘speaking’.*

## **Falling apart at the seams**

When the IRA bombed London’s Canary Wharf, and thereby ended its seventeen-month ceasefire, it sent shockwaves throughout the community network in Northern Ireland. There was a widespread feeling of disbelief and apprehension. At the meeting of Shankill Road community activists held in March ’96, one community worker said:

The night the ceasefire broke down I was devastated. I felt a real sense of powerlessness: you know, what can you do and who will listen? I also felt a very strong desire to do something, almost anything, that could contribute to a restoration of the ceasefire and which would also move the peace process further along. My feeling was actually reflected in something that was said on TV the next day by Gerry Adams – who people from the Shankill wouldn’t think themselves to be much in agreement with – when he said “I have to ask myself the question: did I do everything I could to keep this thing alive?” And everybody has to ask themselves that same question: what you could have done personally or along with others? And how much was taken for granted? How much did we fail to understand that a cessation of violence is not peace?

For some at that meeting any initial optimism had begun to evaporate long before the Canary Wharf bombing.

Unfortunately after the first few months the really disappointing thing was that the rhetoric coming from Sinn Féin had not really changed, it was still the same old 1920s stuff which had never developed. Certainly it can be articulated very well by people like Adams, but nothing in it had really changed to the extent that many people hoped for.

Others felt that the blame belonged to everyone.

We should have taken opportunities to build bridges in those seventeen months. We didn't do that and now it's going to be more of a struggle for working-class people to get things back on track again. I don't think you can simply blame our two communities. We should also blame the two governments and all those people in the establishment who should have taken the opportunity to get everybody to the talks table, to make sure there were no more killings.

While accepting this failure, some were still of the opinion that responsibility for renewed bombing ultimately lay with those who had decided to plant bombs. Others felt the resumption of the bombing campaign was the culmination of a long sequence of negative signals emanating from each community.

Our political representatives were allowed to put a block on momentum. My analysis of Canary Wharf was that the IRA perceived that there was no genuine desire for change coming from the Unionist community. I think the British Government could have implemented changes but the signal they were sending was that they weren't interested in doing so.

Even on the issue which put the greatest block on movement – 'decommissioning' – there were divergent opinions. Some felt it had to be confronted.

Now whether you feel it was a realistic issue or not, it was still an issue over which gestures could have been made to build trust. It is much easier to trust someone when they're not pointing a gun at you. And even though the British government were eventually reduced to begging the IRA to 'give us even a bullet, anything', nothing could be given. But it's still a relevant issue – it's part of the horror which has been inflicted upon *both* sides of the community over the last twenty-five years.

Others felt it was an unrealistic expectation which became insurmountable.

If you have your focus on only one problem, then you just keep hitting that problem. Decommissioning became such a focus people couldn't see past it. I agree it's still an issue of trust within the wider community, but even there I would imagine that people were actually saying 'get on with it – as long as the guns and the Semtex are silent we can sort that part of it out afterwards'.

The question was then posed as to what would have been the 'quid pro quo'?

When you link decommissioning with trust – 'if you decommission, we will trust you' – what were we giving in return; where's the trust for them? We also have to do something for them to trust us, to show we're genuine.

## Waiting for a process: the Catholic community

In the judgement of many in the Catholic working class the blame for the return to violence lies squarely with the British government and the Unionist leaders.

I think from the very start John Major was dragged screaming into the whole thing. He saw this process – ‘Hume/Adams’\* – developing outside his control and he was scared. He went in with the intention of scuppering it and he has managed to do just that. For seventeen months of the IRA ceasefire he did nothing other than place more and more obstacles in the path of any possible movement. And the Unionists haven’t moved one millimetre.

The key is in the hands of the British government – they have to act boldly. They are the ones who squandered all the chances in the past, they have to say ‘right, in the event of a new ceasefire, Sinn Féin will come into talks immediately, without any preconditions, that decommissioning is something that can be discussed along the way’. Total decommissioning *before* talks is *surrender*, and until they recognise that then we’re going nowhere.

The British cried out for ages for the IRA to ‘give peace a chance’, and they even promised they would “respond imaginatively” once the violence ended. But what happened? They just used the lack of violence as a way to humiliate the IRA. The IRA were conned into a fraudulent ‘peace process’.

Major is in the pocket of the Unionists at Westminster. Trimble’s nine votes carry more weight in British politics than the 116,000 people who voted for Sinn Féin. We felt surely this was a strong enough mandate to convince the British that our representatives should be listened to, but we were wrong.

You think to yourself: ‘do they really want peace?’ There hasn’t been a ‘peace process’, there’s been a ‘pacification process’. What’s happening outside on the ground is a good example of the reality. Some Unionist politician begins to moan and mouth and the system reacts – community groups lose all their computers; homes get repeatedly searched. They don’t come in and get the IRA, they take it out on community people like us.

The IRA going back to war was a disaster, but it was inevitable after all the obstacles that were put in the way. They were being provoked into a response. I can only hope that the violence acts as an incentive to speed up the process again. Our community is trapped: on the one hand we don’t want violence, and yet people see it as the only alternative to just sitting here and waiting for the State to grind us down, bit by bit. Maybe violence will re-focus attention on what needs to be done to salvage the ‘peace process’.

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\* John Hume and Gerry Adams began a series of talks in June 1993; by September they felt they had made ‘considerable progress’ and ‘agreed to forward a report on the position reached to Dublin for consideration’. This was to become known as the ‘Hume/Adams’ initiative.

Not everyone, however, is convinced that more violence will necessarily move the situation ‘forward’, a sentiment voiced more often by females than males.

But you would be fearful, all the same, that violence could bring us to a point where rather than getting us back onto a genuine ‘peace process’ everything would just begin to disintegrate. I mean, I was horrified with what happened at Drumcree\*, I never felt so sickened in all my life. People here keep telling us that violence will produce the desired result, but throughout the twenty-five years we were constantly told ‘this will be the year’. I’m still waiting.

The current apprehension and uncertainty, especially as it follows a period of such welcome calm, has brought a profound disillusionment in its wake.

I get the feeling, from *both* communities, that they don’t know if there *is* a ‘peace process’ any more, and if there is one, they don’t know *where* it is, or *who* has control over it. And they’re asking what it should be about: is it dealing with the right issues; should we not be asking for control over our everyday lives? We could end up with a peace but total disempowerment.

Events taking place even as people deliberated – in one case the searching of houses for weapons – only added to the gloom.

With what’s happening down the street right now, with the Crown forces wrecking houses, the ‘peace process’ seems a million miles away. I wonder what anyone got out of it, ‘cause it certainly wasn’t us.

## The disbelievers

Some people, of course, never had much faith in the ‘peace process’ to begin with, and even less as events unfolded. One well-known community activist from Ballymurphy did not mince his words.

We should get a coffin, paint the words ‘Peace Process’ on the side of it and carry it down to the City Hall. The only problem is that people might assume we actually believed there had been a ‘peace process’ in the first place.

In the Protestant community there are those who are just as disbelieving, though for different reasons.

What we had from the beginning was not a ‘peace process’ but an ‘appeasement process’. Those who are out to appease Republicanism haven’t understood the trap they’ve fallen into. As far as I am concerned Sinn Féin/IRA sat down some years ago and set out their long-term strategy. They would

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\* In July 1995 the RUC were involved in a stand-off with Orangemen (known as the ‘siege of Drumcree’) after the latter were prevented from marching along the nationalist Garvaghy Road in Portadown. A compromise agreement eventually allowed the marchers through. In July 1996 the RUC again prohibited the Orangemen from marching, but this time there was no agreement with the residents, and a more serious stand-off resulted. Three days of Loyalist rioting across the province finally led the RUC to reverse their tactics, and they forced the marchers through against the opposition of the residents. Days of rioting ensued in Nationalist areas.

intensify their killing until the entire community was crying out for peace, and then they would suddenly call a halt to it. It was excellent psychology. People suddenly experience what it is like to live in a peaceful environment. Then, after a few months of this, with the likes of Adams perfecting a squeaky-clean image as a peacemaker abroad, Nationalists and Republicans begin to step up their demands, with more than a hint that things could revert to what they were like before if these demands weren't met, and 'no-one would like that, would they?' Inch by inch the British government gave way.

But the IRA's psychology failed to analyse things properly. When people have experienced twenty-five years of relentless terrorism, there are different processes they have to go through. They've got to assess what the Hell happened; they need time to mourn just who and what they have lost; and they need to gradually feel that such an experience will not happen again. But we weren't given that time; we were expected to see door after door opened to the people who had been responsible for our misery. And as the pressure was built up again, and the threats became more obvious, people began to say, "hold on, enough's enough!" I was at Drumcree, and it's true that Drumcree was about Protestant fears for their culture, but it was *as much* about our anger at what has been done to us over the past twenty-five years.

While most of those from a Republican background give the leadership of the Republican movement their support, whatever doubts they may have entertained, not all are so enamoured with the path now being pursued.

I think we must begin to ignore the political parties; they're all – including Sinn Féin – obsessed with being incorporated into the system, but it's a system that's quite irrelevant to grassroots needs. People on the ground are being ignored. Nobody understands what's going on at Stormont, or at the Forum, or what the so-called 'peace process' is all about. We're relying on guesswork. I think we should ignore all the political parties, and get down to a community level and start talking. Let it all come out, let's get rid of this self-imposed censorship – where we're afraid to question in case it damages the 'cause'. Let people say what they really feel for a change. This struggle has gone so far down the drain, it's got to the stage where Republicans will soon be writing 'my struggle for a revamped Stormont'.

Prior to the ceasefire what bothered me was people marching in support of 'Hume/Adams'. 'Hume/Adams' was secret; no-one knew what was it was, and every time Hume and Adams were asked to release their document they said they couldn't. And yet there's all these marchers shouting "Hume/Adams Now!" A whole lot of people marching up and down like the faithful blind – I found it appalling. They should have been marching up to Connolly House asking what bloody 'Hume/Adams' *was*! Where have our critical capacities gone to? Same with the Ceasefire. I felt sick seeing that cavalcade down the Falls, waving Tricolours, and for why? Anyone who thought about it could see it was a case of turkeys celebrating Christmas. There was nothing coming out of the 'peace process' for Republicans. But if you said that at the time, you were a cynic, a dissenter, you were nuts.

Such disillusionment among Nationalists does not, however, necessarily indicate that the disbelievers want a return to the ‘armed struggle’. Far from it: for some *everything* has to be questioned now.

It’s one thing for people in a community to react spontaneously to State violence, and if people feel angry enough to kick peblers up and down the street, I may not like it and would counsel against it, but what I think is irrelevant, it’s what the community feels necessary to do. But what I *do* object to is the notion that people’s lives are expendable to the extent that violence can be turned on and off by elitist leaderships. I don’t think that those leaders should be saying that killing is okay one week, but not the next. That’s not spontaneous community violence – that’s something quite different. I feel we should call a halt to violence as a means to an end, it’s totally unnecessary and counterproductive.

## The ‘politics’ within the process

Once the ‘peace process’ became focused on talks at Stormont, many at the grassroots could sense that any tentative community hold over that process would soon dissipate completely. And even before the ‘all party talks’ began (soon to become ‘multi-party’ talks when Sinn Féin was barred pending a renewed IRA ceasefire), doubts were being voiced:

The evidence of the last twenty-five years shows us that if any ‘peace process’ is totally controlled by our politicians then it could be a disaster. I don’t see ‘all-party-talks’ working; I think they will be all-party-*confrontations*.

Some in the Protestant community try to deflect what they feel are somewhat hypocritical attacks on Unionist ‘intransigence’.

I think we must get away from this notion that it is the Unionist politicians who won’t move, that it is solely they who are intransigent. The fact of the matter is that if the Unionists or the British government had moved any more than they did, there would have been a hue and cry from the entire Protestant community.

Others, while unconvinced of this, are prepared to give the Unionists ‘time’.

Sinn Féin claim these talks aren’t getting anywhere, and I accept that they are slow, but we now accept that this was inevitable. At first I felt that the Ulster Unionists’ preoccupation with rules and formats was just a stalling tactic – and I felt as frustrated as everyone else – but I eventually realised that, for them, it was *necessary*. They had been excluded so often in the past by things emanating from the British and Irish governments, they needed to feel they had a real say in it for once.

And some of the Loyalist representatives at the ‘talks’ have an answer to those, in both communities, who claim that the obstructionism perceived to be indulged

in by Paisley and McCartney is evidence that the ‘talks’ are pointless.

That’s the nature of politics. Whatever ranting comes from that quarter, the fact remains that Paisley and McCartney are still in there. Partly because *we* are still in there. Years ago Paisley would have stormed out of anything he didn’t like, shouting ‘the boys are not going to like this!’ But now ‘the boys’ – us, that is – are staying *in* and he has no option but to come back again. All politicians will do what is necessary to survive.

Other Loyalist talks participants, however, express a deep-seated sense of frustration:

If I’d had my way we’d have been out in September. I’d have walked out and said: “stuff it up ye; go back to war, if that’s what you want, and forget about peace!” The constitutional politicians aren’t interested in building peace, they don’t give a shit about our lives. When you try to tell them that there’s still a view within the Protestant community which they’re not hearing – the grassroots desire for them to work together – they turn their noses up as if to say ‘we’ve been elected by the people, and no-one tells us what to do.’

Disenchantment is nevertheless widespread in Protestant working-class areas.

It’s quite obvious that some Unionist politicians are overjoyed that the IRA have gone back to violence; it lets them off the hook completely. They can go back to their usual intransigence; the threat of having to think seriously about creating a new society here must have really put the wind up them.

We should be asking just what our politicians are afraid of, and then maybe we would get closer to the heart of the whole problem. Religion, culture, nationality – these are only the symbols used to disguise the real issue: it’s always been about power, and who wields it.

What’s going on at Stormont is nothing to do with the ‘Sinn Féin/IRA threat’ – that’s something Unionists have always coped with, that’s what they’re most comfortable with. In reality it’s a struggle for power within Unionism.

There’s a terrible hypocrisy about Paisley’s attitude towards the Loyalist parties and his demand that they adhere to the ‘Mitchell Principles’. Let’s not forget Paisley’s past record, he wasn’t exactly renowned for preaching moderation. Indeed, at the massed assembly of his ‘Third Force’ in Newtownards in 1986, he was quite explicit. I kept this cutting from the *Belfast Telegraph*; here’s what he said: “My men are ready to be recruited under the Crown to destroy the vermin of the IRA. But if they refuse to recruit them, then we will have . . . to destroy the IRA ourselves. Many of us here tonight will have to lay down our lives to give our children the freedom they deserve. The killing of the IRA is over as far as Ulster is concerned. One of my commanders said to me: ‘any rat will suck eggs in the presence of a chained dog’ – that is what the IRA vermin have been doing in the presence of the chained dog of the security forces. If that dog is not unchained, we will be the unchained dog.” I wonder what Mitchell would make of all that!

Some admonish mainstream Unionism for its arrogance.

Look at the way the Women's Coalition were treated by some Unionists at Stormont, it was disgraceful. It was typical of the disdain they display to the entire working class. How dare these backstreet plebs and upstart women intrude into their domain; after all, don't they know better than the rest of us!

Loyalist representatives, however, feel frustrated with more than Unionism.

I feel the UUP genuinely want an accommodation, but they're afraid of being destroyed by the DUP and UK Unionists if they make a wrong move. I personally think they should take that risk, for I really believe that if ordinary Protestants felt that an acceptable accommodation was to be the outcome of UUP actions, they would go for it. But to move they need some 'give and take' from the representatives of Nationalism and Republicanism: a step-by-step confidence-building process. Yet the IRA won't make any concessions. They point to their ceasefire, but that was hardly a risk. They had reached the limits of what they could achieve by violence and while the ceasefire was on, *irrespective* of British stalling, they were gaining international support, they were marshalling the rest of Ireland behind them, they were still building themselves up. So where was the risk? They say they risked a split, but *we* have had to face that also – there were many disgruntled and uncertain men around the place, still are, but we worked hard to keep things together and we didn't balk at trying to force through new policies and new attitudes. To us the need for a new approach was more important than any risk of a split.

As for those within the Catholic working class, the analysis is straightforward:

Those talks are a fraud! Our community has been completely disenfranchised. People always preach at us about the glories of 'British democracy' and yet those *we* vote for, in our thousands, are locked outside the gates. And even if a new ceasefire was called, there's no guarantee that Sinn Féin's entry into those talks wouldn't be put off indefinitely, using excuse after excuse.

## Waiting for dialogue – the Loyalists

What of the two working-class Loyalist parties, who have made such an impression on Northern Irish politics in recent years, a fact acknowledged in both communities. What do they feel about being in the 'talks' process, but unable to sit face to face with their fellow working-class adversaries? In the following responses from both the UDP and PUP, 'frustration' seems to be the key word.

We want them in here, but it's 'make your mind up time' for Sinn Féin. They are betraying their own people by not getting in here and making their case. We aren't going to be arrogant to them or rude, there'll be none of the antics or attention-grabbing tantrums from us that Paisley and Co have been so good at down the years. I accept that they have aspirations – honourable aspirations – but we have aspirations to, and all we demand of them is that

they treat our aspirations as equal, and that they accept that any accommodation between us must come about through dialogue and discussion. They're not going to force us into anything; they've tried that and it has failed totally.

Do they want us to just capitulate? Despite all their propaganda which claims that the Protestant community won't 'give an inch', Loyalists have repeatedly tried to create openings for them, but you'd think that they weren't interested in 'inches' – all they really want is for us to give them a United Ireland on a plate. But that's impossible and they know it. They should have the guts to admit it and get into dialogue, to hammer out the best possible compromise for all of us.

I'm slowly coming to believe that they don't have the courage to come in and put their beliefs to the rest of us. Just as I think hard-line Unionists are secretly happy that the IRA have gone back to war, because it gets them off the hook of having to deal in *real* politics, I think many in the Republican movement seem to be of the same attitude.

If they push us back to what we've just come out of, it will be they who will be responsible. And I hope they can look their own community in the face afterwards, for we know that ordinary Catholics don't want to go back to all that. None of us are going to get what we want; we all have to compromise. A United Ireland is not around the corner and the old Union is gone – both communities need to sit down and work out how we're going to share responsibility for all our futures.

People don't realise the effort it took, and the personal risks involved, to get us to this stage. It is still an effort – at the time of the Thiepval bombing we were literally holding the line hour by hour, that's how close it got. If the IRA blow that apart, and our appeals for them to enter into a democratic process with us fall on deaf ears, we'll be pushed aside and others will step in who would never dream of trying to reach out to them the way we have. Most of the grievances which started off the Troubles have either been resolved, or else there are mechanisms in place whereby they can be aired and addressed. And where these are imperfect we can sit down together and really tighten them up – through a Bill of Rights as we've suggested, for example. So what would a return to violence be for, then? A United Ireland? Are they really prepared to plunge us back into the abyss again for something which has proven to be unobtainable by such methods? They would gain more by getting in here and engaging us in honourable debate.

Over the past twenty-seven years the Protestant community has changed. Okay, much of that change was forced upon us. But, forced or not, we're prepared to accept that things can never go back to what they were and admit that we need to start from where we are now. Nor would any sane person want them back, for there was never any 'golden era' for the Protestant working class. But the Republican movement seem unwilling, or unable, to start from where we are now. After all those years telling the world that it

was the Protestant community which was intransigent and unable to move forward, the reality is that it is the Republican movement which cannot move forward. *They* are the real drag on the development of Irish politics.

But what about ‘Drumcree’ and intransigent Unionism?

Don’t forget that we have to face down those elements too, we argue daily with hard-line Unionism. What do Sinn Féin and the IRA want? To wait until that hard-line goes away of its own accord? Or should they not get into the debate and argue their point. Not only will killing and bombing never get rid of the Drumcree mentality, it actually makes it harder for us to fight it too. By staying out of talks, Sinn Féin are damaging us as well.

I accept that there should have been more movement during the ceasefire; I was as frustrated as they were. But it’s pointless of them dwelling obsessively on what *didn’t* happen. We all have to move on and respond to *today’s* possibilities. The opportunity exists for them to get into talks. And they know that that requires a new ceasefire; those who think they can get in without it are only deluding themselves. Yet it would appear that the IRA are bereft of any alternative to the ‘armed struggle’, and as well as selling out the Catholic community they are selling out those members of Sinn Féin who have the willingness and the capability to take the path of dialogue.

For the UUP to move – and move in a way that would bring its supporters with it – Republicans would have to show movement too. Even a small cache of weapons would let the politicians move the decommissioning debate forward. Republicans say there should be no ‘preconditions’, but they should see it as a *necessary* confidence-building measure. I don’t think it’s an unreasonable request – you can’t expect Unionists to go into talks with people who show no willingness to part with their guns. What are the IRA afraid of? Of losing face? Of breaking with tradition? Then maybe they need to get into *counselling*, not dialogue. It’s time the Provos started *growing* up, instead of *blowing* up.

## **The outsiders and the disenchanted**

Then there are those who are totally alienated from the entire process, and are not clamouring to join it at any level, either because it is remote from their needs, or because they have long since washed their hands off it. In the first group would fall the growing number of youth who are seen to be ‘beyond the Pale’ in their anti-social behaviour. No amount of ‘punishment beatings’ inflicted by the paramilitaries seems to dent their preparedness to pursue their hedonistic rebellion. This was obvious during Christmas ’96 when gangs of ‘joy-riders’, in an almost concerted onslaught, took over the streets of Twinbrook and stole hundreds of cars. Community activists feel helpless and close to despair.

I can’t decide whether the behaviour of these kids would arise in *any* modern

society, or whether we have created a monster over the years. One of them said to me: “The ‘Ra’ have killed and bombed for years and been applauded for it, and then they turn round and tell me that stealin’ a friggin’ car is ‘anti-social’! Who the fuck do they think they are to tell *me* what to do!”

Young people have been totally left out of it. As well as that they see the IRA as part of the establishment they rebel against. The Republican leadership is too middle-aged and many haven’t understood the dynamics of youth rebellion. They even feel these young people have let them down: here we are in the midst of the ‘struggle’, possibly in the end-game, and you have these wee bastards more concerned with doing handbrake turns at each end of the street! Both groups have totally lost touch with each other’s reality.

Often those who express most disenchantment have travelled or worked abroad.

The further I got away from here the more petty our problems appeared; they weren’t the life-or-death issues I had always taken them to be. I see so many critical issues which should concern us – environmental issues, global issues – yet people here are more concerned with demarcating their territorial boundaries, like dogs pissing against lampposts.

I’ve worked amidst some of the direst poverty in Africa. There the burning issue for people is where their next meal is coming from, or whether their child will see the year out. To them our quarrel must seem such a luxury. I get really angry sometimes, for no-one here is dying of malnutrition or such; our problem is mostly in our heads – in that it mainly concerns aspirations and identities – and should be settled *solely* by using our heads.

However, you don’t need to go abroad to feel disenchanted by all that is happening. Even those who have spent their lives here, striving to effect change at community level, can succumb to profound feelings of disillusionment.

Just when you think you’re getting your head above water, along comes another bomb, another Drumcree. The community work done at the grassroots, involving such personal effort by ordinary people, is treated with contempt by the extremes, manipulated by government and ignored by the politicians. I often wonder whether the efforts I go to are really worth it in the long run.

People in our two communities, and I mean those ordinary people who have to struggle to make ends meet, have got to ask themselves one fundamental question: what slightest gain in our lives could possibly ensue from the next IRA or Loyalist killing?

## **Marching: the new flashpoint**

The issue of ‘contentious’ parades has provided the focus around which a community polarisation not seen for years has dramatically increased. The events surrounding the ‘stand-off’ at Drumcree, and the widespread violence

which followed in its wake, have cast a question mark over the very possibility of bringing a genuine ‘peace process’ into being. To the Catholic community such events seem proof that ‘nothing has changed’.

The only concession Orange leaders will make is that they’re prepared to wear their bedroom slippers instead of their football boots when they walk over the top of us. Some of them aren’t even concerned about getting rid of their boots, like the mob outside Harryville.\* So much for Protestant respect for ‘civil and religious liberty’! A load of balls! It’s pure triumphalism and pure hatred. I’m an atheist, but when I see them attack or blockade Catholic churches I feel my whole community is under attack.

Of course, it can all be resolved so quickly. All Nationalists have to do is let the Loyalists march triumphally through Dunloy and it’s all over . . . until they picket some other church. Our objection to their marches is nothing to do with religion, but to the symbolism they attach to these marches – keeping the ‘croppies’ in their place, showing us who’s master. They say that we’ve only started to complain about marches recently, as if it’s some well-planned conspiracy. But people just kept their heads down before. And just because something has taken place for years and years, and become a tradition, doesn’t automatically make it right.

Most people my age have bitter memories. My grandfather was a Prod who turned Catholic to marry my grandmother. He came from the Short Strand area, and when I was a child I used to be terrified by the Orangemen every July. Some of the Orange Lodges would stop at the top of Mountpottinger Road – we lived just three doors into the street – and shout all sorts of obscenities over at my grandfather’s house. When that happens every year it’s scary, very oppressive, and that’s where my distrust of Orangeism comes from. It’s pathetic to see the way some Orange leaders, and many non-Orangemen, are trying to convince us all that Orange marches are really some kind of inoffensive folk festival. What crap!

## **Internal debate: the Protestant community**

Perhaps the only positive aspect of such ‘contentious’ issues is that rather than dividing this society into two sharply opposing camps, they have engendered widespread *internal* debate within communities, as if people realised that finding the answer to such problems holds a key to the question of whether this society as a whole can move towards a truly pluralist future. The following debate occurred among a group of people from the Protestant working class, and one

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\* Harryville Catholic chapel in Ballymena has been picketed by Protestants during Saturday Mass for twenty-five weeks (at the time this pamphlet went to press). The protesters link their actions to the refusal of a Nationalist ‘Residents Group’ to permit an Orange march through the village of Dunloy. The abuse directed towards the Mass-goers has been condemned from all sides.

can only assume that such debate and self-analysis must be taking place elsewhere.

Drumcree is not just some isolated Orange march out in the countryside; it symbolises the determined efforts being made to destroy our cultural heritage.

I don't believe that Orangemen getting down the Garvaghy Road is the be-all and end-all of my culture. My Britishness will survive even if they don't.

Well, many people would disagree, even ones who never got involved before – middle class people – who felt that enough was enough. They all came out.

For twenty-five years the Orange Order did nothing about the situation here and it was left to other people to act – rightly or wrongly – and they ended up serving time. I'd like to ask all those people who came out and put their sashes on and blocked roads: where were they for the last twenty-five years?

People have just had enough. Protestants are facing a deliberate attempt to destroy their culture. After the IRA called their ceasefire they changed tactics and used the marches as a way to continue their 'war' on our culture. Those marches were never objected to before; this is all part of a plan.

I would dispute that what's at stake is religious freedom – how many of those who march up and down around here bother to go to church?

If they're members of the Orange Order they should do.

The Unionist/Loyalist community have picked on the marches issue as being symbolic of our whole future. The problem is that when we pick something from the *past* to represent our *future*, we're never going to move forward.

But if we ditch our past and the right to express our culture, what future will we have? This is a matter of defending our religious freedom from Romanism.

Give me a break!

What do you think it's about then! What do the Lambeg drums signify?

They're war drums. What's that go to do with religious freedom!

That was part of the struggle against Romanism.

But that was 300 years ago; it should be a celebration of what we are *about*, not a celebration of what we are *against*.

Why can't it be turned in a type of Mardi Gras?

It should be respected for what it is, it's not just some carnival!

Well, you should tell that to the Orange Order, for the crowds seem to treat it as a Mardi Gras – when they come down the road half of them are 'blocked'.

I think we're all missing the point. There have been big changes taking

place: first, geographical changes in terms of where people live; and secondly, changes in that the Catholic community feel they don't have to take what they took in the past. I think the issue that people have to get their heads around is this: that this society is in a process of change and what went down thirty years ago is different now and it's how we deal with that which is the important issue, because surely we can't allow ourselves to slip backwards?

## Internal debate: the Catholic community

A similar debate is occurring within the Catholic working class, and, significantly, as with their counterparts in the Protestant community, people there are not just addressing their own needs but are looking at the concerns of the 'other' community. They may treat these concerns with anger and cynicism at times, but nevertheless *they are beginning to address them*.

I really doubt that there'll be any agreement, because Unionists want to preserve the status quo, and can't think beyond that.

I think some of them want change; some of the Loyalists seem prepared to think differently.

But even they keep saying that Sinn Féin needs to compromise; they don't realise that the very fact Sinn Féin is even prepared to enter the bloody 'Stormont talks' is *itself* a compromise on old positions. Nobody is under any illusion that a United Ireland can lead directly from those talks. A united Ireland is some way down the road. What we want is an *agreed* Ireland.

It would have to meet with *our* agreement too! I don't blame the Prods for not wanting to be part of it. The 'inclusive' talks I would like to see wouldn't be ones in which all our energies were directed at the Brits and the Unionists, with the Southern government sitting smugly as observers. I think they should be put under the spotlight too, I think we should demand how *they* intend to change *their* society.

Especially for women; as a woman I would be demanding fundamental changes. Anyway, I suspect the Southern politicians are secretly hoping to postpone a United Ireland for as long as they can.

After Partition the 26-Counties stagnated just like up here. Connolly forecast a 'Carnival of Reaction' and he was right. The South became a priest-ridden society where the church carried more influence than anybody else; up here we had the Orange-bigot society. This island will only reach its real potential when all its people are involved in creating its institutions. That's one reason why I want the Prods into the South, not just for the sake of a United Ireland but because they would counterbalance what gives down there and force us to become a truly pluralist and secular society. And think what

influence a united Northern working class would have on Irish society. Think of the potential – it would be a real breath of fresh air. Imagine an entire community sitting down and defining a new democracy.

I imagine the Southern establishment would shit themselves at the thought of us lot up here defining their democracy for them!

I think we're being unfair to people in the 26-Counties; I think they *have* changed a lot. I think they would be more ready to accommodate Protestants and their heritage now than they would have been before.

I'd like to know just what this 'heritage' was! I really would, 'cause they keep saying it's under threat, and if we only knew just what it was they feared losing, then we could take steps to allay those fears. But what the bloody hell is it? We're told that Orangeism is a 'cultural tradition', but our *experience* of it is as a vehicle for hurling obscenities at us. We're told that their 'Britishness' is all about the 'Glorious Revolution' and 'democratic institutions', but our *experience* of it is as something *undemocratic* which has always been promoted at the expense of our Irishness, and which saw our Irishness as something to be stamped down. So if I could only find out what it is the Prods are afraid of losing, then I could begin to look at their fears.

I think the Republic's Constitution would have to be completely overhauled, not to placate the Protestants, but to bring it into line with the needs of its present citizens. There has to be a complete separation of Church and State; a Bill of Rights; the right to hold either an Irish or British passport; and the right to consider oneself either British or Irish.

This dual passport thing – fine if that's what it takes; I guess the Vikings who came to Ireland didn't give up wanting to be Vikings overnight. But you look at America. There's all types of groups there, diverse ethnic communities, and I'm sure they hold to their different heritages as strongly as we do here, and yet they seem content to accept the *one* passport. Why? Because the Constitution and laws of the country supposedly protect every group.

I have no problem with the Prods bringing their heritage along; if we were all wee Paddy Irishmen it would be a very boring place. But while I will accept their culture, whatever they define it to be, I will not accept their old dominance and superiority. Half the trouble in the 6-Counties was that they tried to strangle *our* culture; had we been allowed to practise and develop it, there would have been no problem. In the 26-Counties you've had Protestants in government, in high office . . . but up here you can't get a Catholic anywhere that's really important.

When it comes to protecting our different cultures I think we should call in experts in international law, or people who have experience of other societies with mixed cultures. They could help us design a system that would protect *everyone's* culture.

It's fine us sitting here talking about some hypothetical 'agreed Ireland'; we're forgetting that there needs to be big changes *here*, fundamental changes, especially to the RUC. There can be no acceptable political arrangement unless it includes fundamental changes in policing.

You're right, it's probably all wishful thinking. People here really believed that, after the two ceasefires, the only thing which could possibly result was a gradual move towards peace, with real negotiations, real talks. We couldn't understand why people wanted to put obstacles and stumbling blocks in the way. Our hopes have been transformed into a very deep disillusionment.

I don't think that that cavalcade going down the Falls was a sign that people felt they had 'won'. I think it was more a sense of recognition that people had suffered, although I still don't think the British government really understands how much we have suffered. Our hopes were that at last there was going to be a level playing field for everybody.

I don't think that anybody around here is under the illusion that if there was peace tomorrow, the Brits would be gone the next day. People obviously hope it happens in the long term, but most just want to know that some agreement is going to be reached for *now*, one that would be fair to everyone. But it looks as if that's as far away as ever.

I think the reason the Republican movement have always focused their energies on the Brits is not only because they are the ones they feel can deliver, but because the Unionists have proven to be a brick wall as far as any dialogue was concerned.

Republicans fully appreciate that there must be a period in which the process evolves, and that it might be lengthy, but that process must be seen to *begin*.

## Suspicion and distrust

For many people, on all sides of our conflict, there is a deep distrust of the motives of one's opponents. For some Loyalists the idea that the Republican movement was 'converted to peace' in 1994 is greeted with undisguised incredulity.

People here believe the Republican movement is devious and cynical. Immediately after the ceasefire Adams stood on the Falls – near the interface with the Shankill – and got the loudspeakers turned up when he said he "reached out" his hand to his "Protestant brothers and sisters". Sounds great, until you realise it was all for media consumption. And why do I think that? Because immediately before their ceasefire the IRA did its damndest to ensure that a Protestant backlash would follow. Everyone knew that Ray Smallwoods was trying to move us into a political way forwards – the IRA would also have known that he was engaged in talks with Father Reynolds

and Father Reid . . . so what did they do? They murdered him – *six* weeks before their ceasefire. *Four* weeks before the ceasefire they murdered two Loyalists on the Ormeau Road, then *two* weeks before their ceasefire they did something they hadn't done for years – they bombed pubs in Loyalist areas. Now, I ask you, what was all this for, from an organisation which had supposedly been brought around to the belief that 'the war was over'. Simple: to antagonise the Protestant community so much that while the IRA were on a ceasefire, we would continue on the rampage, and the world would say that the IRA had been right all along, the Prods never wanted peace. But we didn't respond, not simply to out-manoeuvre them, but because we were responding to the deep yearning in our community for peace. I can tell you there is real suspicion about their motives. And yet, if they walked through that door tomorrow, I'd say: "right, let's get down to business."

An identical response is readily evinced by Nationalists.

People talk of the Loyalist ceasefire 'hanging by a thread', but I think that for the Loyalists to go back to war would simply be unproductive. They now have a world platform which they never had. All the news that went into the USA before was anti-Loyalist, but now you seemingly have 'fair-minded' people in the States asking just who *is* the devil here. I think the Loyalist ceasefire would have been dispensed with *a long time ago* if they felt it would have achieved anything. They are gaining more by keeping it intact.

The problem with always assuming that the actions of one's opponents are purely 'tactical', and by implication insincere, is that it loses sight of the many people in both camps who are striving, with *genuine* motivation, to bring about change, both in perceptions and behaviours.

What if the two ceasefires were partly 'tactical'? Isn't that better tactics than what went down before? And it gives us all a breathing space to work at convincing others that the new road we're going down is a better one.

The 'other side' is often accused of not showing enough preparedness to change.

The Loyalist parties are going to have to break the mould and take bolder steps. Instead of waiting for the Unionists to speak to Sinn Féin, as they will eventually, the PUP and UDP should speak to them now. People keep lauding all this so-called 'new thinking' that's supposed to be happening within Loyalism. Well, they aren't sharing much of it with us, that's for sure.

Likewise, there is frustration when things that *have* been attempted are not accorded recognition. Such frustration has been expressed by leading Loyalists.

People don't seem to appreciate the steps we *have* taken. We convinced our crowd that the time was ready to engage Sinn Féin in debate, and as a step along that road we had John McMichael sit in the TV studio with Pat McGeown. And what did the IRA do? The very next day they blew up Canary Wharf and we were left looking as if we had been used, not as a step in the building of confidence, but as part of the Republican movement's two-pronged propaganda and military offensive.

Much harder to deal with, however, is the deeply-held belief that the ‘other’ community views one’s own community with disdain.

Sinn Féin have done their best to ignore the Protestant community all these years, but they cannot ignore us forever. Sooner or later they have to come into dialogue. When they go on about wanting dialogue it’s really dialogue with the British government they have in mind. I think they have this romantic image of victorious ‘freedom fighters’ sitting down across the table with their defeated colonial masters. Unfortunately for the IRA, the existence of the Protestant community – the *real* British presence in Ireland – throws a spanner into the works of their grand design. So they do their best to ignore us – they would prefer everything was sorted out above our heads. But surely they know that’s impossible. And how on earth they would ever expect to build their United Ireland without talking to us as equals – not as defeated foes, or abandoned orphans – is beyond me.

Such a perception of being denigrated engenders equally dismissive responses.

I’m beginning to suspect that the Republican movement is afraid that its goals and objectives, once held up to the scrutiny, not only of Unionists, but of the rest of Irish Nationalism, will be found greatly wanting, totally out of touch with the needs of today’s Irish citizens.

While much distrust within the Catholic community is reserved for the mainstream Unionist parties, it is tempered with a resignation borne of experience, for, as one person said: “how can you become ‘*dis*-illusioned’ with people you’ve never held any illusions about in the first place?” Catholic distrust towards the British is quite another thing, however, especially when it is directed at the ‘faceless’ people in the ‘British establishment’.

Britain is not an honest broker. People keep looking at this as a sectarian problem between two communities, they forget the divisive role that Britain has always played in Ireland.

There are people in the security services who don’t want any ‘peace process’. They deeply resent that the likes of Adams and the Loyalists should be involved in talks. They would much prefer a military victory, and if that wasn’t possible then the marginalisation of such people. I think that the security input into government thinking must be playing its part in the way the ‘peace process’ has been disintegrating. And most of these security advisors don’t know what it’s been like in working-class areas – they have no yearning for peace. They don’t give a damn anyway. I think that the increased harassment we’ve been getting is deliberate, to create more tension. The military are hoping the community will put pressure on the IRA to react.

What irritates me is that policy-makers across the water don’t even see us as real people. One Secretary of State used a telling phrase when he talked of the ‘terrorist community’. That allows the British establishment to categorise an awful lot of people here as somehow beyond redemption, people almost genetically predisposed to be forever cutting each other’s throats. I think

they look at all of us here with great contempt; if anything this place is just a laboratory to them, for all kinds of experiments and disciplines, where conflict resolution experts or military people can try out their theories. Look at all the clinical terms used to describe our conflict: we're a 'diseased', a 'sick' society, we're suffering from some sort of 'community psychosis'.

Some reserve their distrust for an 'establishment' much closer to hand.

At the minute our professionals, our academics, and organisations like the Community Relations Council, should hang their heads in shame. There's been no leadership, because everybody has been afraid to confront the situation, nobody has been prepared to come out and say 'you may be wrong', because they want a situation where everybody is right. They never point the finger at government, or even at themselves, as being part of the problem.

All those conferences organised by professionals are irrelevant to our needs. There are droves of Community Relations-type people milling about now, and what are they doing? The whole professional establishment has fed off this conflict for years, and in the process has drained energies out of the community. There's stacks of people running around with high salaries yet doing fuck all at the end of the day. We're as marginalised as ever, unless we're prepared to act in a way that makes us 'acceptable' to the establishment.

An increasing number direct their resentment at *all* the main players.

It's this total arrogance that really irritates me. The arrogance of the IRA. The arrogance of Paisley. The arrogance of so many, on *both* sides. . . No humility, no admission that *they* could be wrong, that their intransigence could be partly to blame. No, that would be too much to ask of them all.

One thing is certain, however, and that is that distrust breeds distrust, and those striving to overcome it face an increasingly uphill task, something which one community worker admitted even before the events of Drumcree in July 1996.

In crude terms I think that since Canary Wharf those with hardline attitudes in the Protestant community, and the same in the Catholic community, have gained ground for their views. The sorts of views I would have been arguing have become less defensible. Even some community workers have been shaken from their 'middle ground', if there ever was a middle ground, and sectarian feeling is bubbling up again. I don't know how we wrestle with this and I'm incredibly depressed by it all.

## Seeking mutual respect

Ironically, both communities continually stress the same underlying need: the need to be treated with respect. It comes from both Protestants . . .

For things to move forward here, our community, the British community in Ireland, has to be given recognition, has to be respected instead of being

continually caricatured. I get affronted every time people, particular the foreign media, ask me if I ‘feel’ British. I don’t *feel* British, I *am* British. Yet I know that this recognition is what is also required in the other direction. But people don’t seem able to make the first move in case it’s seen as a sign of retreat or surrender – we’re still playing the ‘zero-sum’ game. But somehow we have to transcend it. I think one of the problems is that the Catholic community still have this notion that we’ve still got everything. But the reality is that we have very little left to give.

. . . and from Catholics:

The Unionist/Protestant/British community in the 6-Counties – whatever they want to be called – have treated our Irishness with contempt. And Nationalist politicians seem to think that ‘cross-border’ bodies will help us feel better. I don’t give a damn about ‘cross-border institutions’, they’d just be more quangos. I don’t need to have my Irishness acknowledged by people over the ‘border’, I need to have it respected *by the people I live among*, by my fellow-citizens. Let the Unionists show if they can create ‘cross-cultural institutions’ in the 6-Counties! Let’s see *our* traditions enshrined in the City Hall for starters! Alongside all those portraits representing ‘British Ulster’ let’s see some of our Gaelic poets, musicians . . . let’s have flags of the Irish Volunteers hanging alongside the Union flags! Let change start *here*, with *us*, in our own city, and the rest will follow by itself! If people are talking about building a pluralist society let them start with this city, and that grandiose building that’s stuck in the middle of it!

When I asked a few individuals from the Protestant community – those who felt most deeply that they had, in their words, “lost almost all” of their “identity, culture and religious freedom” – to spell out for me exactly *what it was* they had lost, the responses were illuminating. For, notwithstanding the genuine apprehension felt by my respondents, there was little of a concrete nature that could be directly attributed to those they blamed for their predicament – the Catholic Church/Republican/Irish Nationalist alliance – other than the blocking of marches, and the restrictions placed on the Union flag or the singing of the national anthem. Many of their concerns would have arisen for Protestants in any country gradually becoming more pluralist and secularised.

Gone is assembly in the morning in schools, gone is the respect for Sunday worship. Gone is the pride in traditional marches. Gone is the pride in being Protestant – it is not the ‘in thing’ at the moment. This is not an accident, it is by design, to pick away at our culture, religion and identity. All this is not meant for this generation and possibly not the next, but the generation after that will be comfortable with Irish terms and phrases and will see no reason why they cannot address themselves as Irish. It will continue through government bodies and so-called dialogue until all pride in a faith that was born through Martin Luther is destroyed forever.

What did come across strongly from the respondents was not their ability to specify concrete aspects of their heritage which had been lost, but their genuinely-

held belief that they *must* be losing something. It is the ‘zero-sum’ game in full play: if ‘they’ are perceived to be *gaining*, ‘we’ must perforce be *losing*. And even if it is not in the present that those losses can be quantified, the fear is that they will certainly become evident at some stage in the future. It is clear that in the present confrontational stances adopted between our two communities more dangers lie in the *perception* than in the *reality*. This is all the more reason for an urgent inter-community dialogue which tries to *identify* what each community fears it is losing, and to *address* those fears where they are found to be real.

## The preparedness to question

Before we address such issues, the *preparedness* to question must exist. Many at grassroots level feel it does, with regard not only to where this society is heading, but to what needs to be done with the baggage we carry from the past. The ‘parameters of perception’ *are* moving, making an accommodation realisable, which in turn makes the tragedy of our politicians’ failure all the more depressing.

People need to sit down and analyse where they are going, and whether what they are doing is taking us forward. I think those involved in community development should be asking themselves just what it is they are achieving. Are we just plodding on, mesmerised by our own ‘patch’? Some of those who were comrades in the early days of community agitation have now become the community development professionals, in some cases directly responsible for the allocation of funding. Have we become the ‘gate-keepers’? And that hasn’t happened out of bad intentions, but simply because we have all gone our different ways, and have never been able to agree a conceptual framework within which to analyse or make sense of what we do, and whether it has any relevance to the trauma this society is going through. We somehow see the political process as being outside of what we do as community workers; we have abstracted ourselves from any sense of political identity and therefore any sense of political responsibility, and have become an amorphous community development mass, without direction or strategy.

The Protestant community has gone through a long process of self-questioning, quite traumatic at times, and it *has* changed, despite the image presented by Drumcree. Most Protestants are prepared to share power with Catholics; many are willing to see acceptable cross-border institutions and build a genuine friendship with the people of the South. Not just as a concession to the Catholic community’s sense of ‘Irishness’, but because we have learnt a lot about the Southerners. We realise that ordinary people down there are not out to harm us; even their politicians – bar a few exceptions – have been dragged unwillingly by the Republican movement into this mess up here.

People are starting to ask what it’s all for. I sense that for many there is a genuine feeling of being let down by the IRA. People around here gave Sinn Féin the vote because they thought it was for peace and there was genuine

disappointment when the military campaign resumed. They'll not say so openly, the desire not to let one's own side down is too strong. But while they ultimately blame the British government, people still can't make any sense of the violence, they don't see what it can gain.

I think what has come out of Canary Wharf and Drumcree is a much deeper thing than people were prepared to acknowledge before. We have in this society two communities who each feel desperately aggrieved, and after the summer I was shocked at just how deep the reaction went in the Catholic community at what happened at Drumcree. There's stuff in both our communities that can be touched like a raw nerve: for the Catholic community I think their perception of Drumcree was that it was 'croppies lie down' all over again, and it went in very very deep; in our community it's the feeling of being pushed further and further, until it's almost too far. The existence and depth of these feelings is not mutually recognised between the two communities; neither side is prepared to admit what it is doing to the other.

I think Sinn Féin and the IRA were terrified of being seen to be defeated or humiliated. I think they knew they were taking a big risk and those celebrations down the Falls were all bluff. They cannot win by war; now they have a situation where they can't win by peace either. How do we enable them to find the way forward again, and prevent this slow slide backwards?

I don't think the issue is whether the ceasefire was tactical or otherwise. The reality is that there are people in the Republican community who want to go on fighting and drive us into the sea, of that I have no doubt. But the question is whether we are going to try and ignore that element and continue to work with those who have been going through new thinking, to build up a real 'peace process' again. It seems that what wasn't a long enough timescale for us was too long for them, and the hawks got into the ascendancy again. We have to take risks, even if it is interpreted as weakness, in continuing to hold out the hope to those within the Republican movement who could rebuild this process, just as they must do the same for us.

One Republican told me he cannot entertain a settlement that doesn't honour what Bobby Sands and the others died for; anything less, he said, would be failing their memory. But surely we cannot allow the memories of ten hunger-strikers to hold our future hostage. That was a tragic episode, but over 3000 have died and their memory too demands that we find a solution that is acceptable to *all* those who have lost loved ones. Anyway, the most important people to be considered are our children and future generations.

I think my community, the Republican and Socialist community, must open itself up to debate. It says it is, but it's mainly a debate on tactics; what we need is a debate on *fundamentals*. We keep saying that everyone else's violence and intransigence is 'unacceptable', but somehow our own is 'unavoidable'. We need to get away from this self-righteousness, and ask real questions about what we are doing.

## Rekindling the community debate

There is a growing feeling at the grassroots that despite the isolation of ordinary people from the 'peace process', a genuine peace will not arrive until *they* are involved in building it. Two things seem to be happening *simultaneously*: people have never been so polarised, and yet at the same time there have never been so many prepared to engage in dialogue, or who accept the need for it.

People at community level should get together more and more, not just on social and economic issues – the safe issues – but deliberately to confront the political problems. It will raise much heat, but we must work through that, for it is the people we represent, the disempowered, who desperately want something better. I would be prepared to talk to anyone on the Shankill tomorrow rather than have somebody else's son killed.

Everybody has to give something to achieve peace. The IRA say they gave us seventeen months of a ceasefire, and I accept that. But are they going to sit back now – like the film star who relies on one big film – and say 'we did our bit – from now on it's up to the rest of youse'? Everybody has to give a little, *continuously*, or we will only get bogged down. Okay, the process was stalled, but that's now history. Those of us at community level have to start again to try and resurrect things, resurrect hope.

I think there is a community process developing irrespective of the political uncertainties. There's a vibrancy on the ground among people for getting something done about their own lives. And while the political situation is obviously a big factor, I think people are beginning to ignore it more and more. I don't know what's going on at Stormont and I don't care, 'cause I know that nothing can come out of Stormont that'll benefit me or the community round here. It's just a power game, remote from our lives. I mean, I'm working away on the ground at community issues, as a member of Sinn Féin, and yet I couldn't give a toss who Martin McGuinness talked to or who he didn't talk to – I just let it go by me now, it's more and more irrelevant. There are many people within Sinn Féin genuinely interested in developing 'community politics', just as I imagine there are in the two Loyalist parties – all these groups have their 'political' element, and their 'community' element.

The pressure for the ceasefire came from the grassroots; the most positive thinking has come from the grassroots; the greatest desire for peace has come from the grassroots. Yet the process has been taken totally out of ordinary people's hands, and is totally dependent on the antics of Paisley and Co. or the inability of the IRA Army Council to relinquish violence. Ordinary people must reclaim the 'peace process'. How, I don't know, but we must.

Whenever we had Radio Shankill and the *Beyond the Fife and Drum* conference as part of Shankill '94, that was a very positive time for me. We had all this

debate at grassroots level, coinciding with the IRA ceasefire, and all of a sudden we had politicians there on the Shankill talking about the peace process and ordinary people were standing up and talking to them, or challenging them, and the community was addressing major issues. That was the only time people from the political parties left City Hall to come to the Shankill. Though they came as much because they felt threatened that it was the people on the Shankill who were making the decisions about how to respond to the ceasefire and they wanted to disrupt things. Do you remember when Jim McDowell [journalist] walked out of the City Hall where he was supposed to be covering a big debate and told them he was away up the Shankill to cover a more important debate taking place on Shankill Radio? That must have set the alarm bells ringing!

That period showed that we were seeing our own people empowering themselves. If we were to sit waiting for people up there to empower us they'd never do it. But we showed that we can do it for ourselves.

Whatever sham is going to go on at Stormont over the next few years is going to be meaningless [to the community]. We have to say we are not prepared to accept it like this: we're going to get on with our lives and the development of our communities *regardless* of what these people who sit around a table say. And if you and I decide that *we* are going to sit down and *we* are going to engage in dialogue, and that *we* are going to talk with the other community, then that's what we should be doing and we should just carry on with that.

## Two challenges

As a contribution to the much-needed debate, I end this pamphlet with two 'challenges', offered by contributors with a long involvement in community action. They deliberately pose their challenge, not to the 'other' community, but to their 'own' community, in the belief that this is where the debate must really begin.

### 1: a challenge to the Nationalist community

The nationalist community, the Republican community, is affected in diverse ways by its experience of oppression, and some of these effects can have negative consequences. My concern is that, having been confronted by sectarianism for so long, we have internalised some of its insidious methods and unconsciously utilise them as we begin to gain a sense of power. Despite our claims that *we* are not sectarian, it is obvious that in our fight back against those who have used sectarianism to oppress us, we have begun to ape their methods and attitudes.

This is evident in a number of ways, but perhaps the most obvious is the Nationalist community's reaction to the question of marches. It seems to me

that we are addressing the issue of marching from two different and seemingly antagonistic perspectives – either the right of people to march, or the right of a community to withhold consent to such marching. I feel we should all be concerned with *both* issues. Now, I can readily understand that a community should have the right not to be intimidated by coat-trailing exercises, should not have to suffer those indignities. But the right of individuals to demonstrate, or celebrate or commemorate or whatever, is *also* a fundamental right. Indeed, it is the predominate issue, for if the right to march has to be based on others' consent, *then it is not a 'right' at all*. I am arguing that by removing the rights of other people to march we in the Nationalist community are unwittingly *handing* the State a mechanism through which *our* rights can also be taken away. If people go to march on trade union issues, or women's rights issues, or gay rights or whatever, and we have previously acknowledged that an undetermined number of people along our route can withhold consent by saying they find our march offensive, then the State can effectively stop us from marching. And we will have given them the right to do this!

Now we from within this community pride ourselves on our Civil Rights marching, and I, along with many many others, have marched and been stopped marching and have been abused; we have trudged over fields and forded rivers, and tried to get into the centre of our own town for years. Now if I was prevented from doing this and I felt that those who prevented me were wrong, how then can my community be right in preventing others from doing it? Even from a Republican point of view, this is a relevant issue. For years Republicans tried to march up the Falls on an Easter Sunday and were stopped. I have relatives who ended up in jail because they refused to comply with police orders to stop them marching, and even though there was a substantial Protestant majority at the top end of the Falls Road at that time, the police were wrong in stopping those marches. Even though they were stopping a march which some could have labelled as 'triumphalist' because it was seen as celebrating the Easter Rising and its martyrs, the State was still wrong to stop it, because it was a celebration of our Republican heritage.

The Civil Rights Movement said it had a right to march anywhere it wanted to within this State. And the State was wrong in trying to stop some of those marches, as were the Protestants who stood in the middle of the street to prevent us getting past – so can *we* be right in refusing other people those things which we demanded for ourselves, things which we fought and suffered so bloody hard for? I'm saying I don't think we can.

Having said all that, I also don't think people deserve to be subjected to the indignities and triumphalism which too often accompanies Orange marches. The history of the Orange Order has certainly not been one of defending or promoting civil and religious liberty, unless it was their own. But while I feel we have no right to prevent those marches, we *certainly* have a right to demonstrate our distaste at their decision to march, whether by protesting along the route, or other forms of protest. Stand silently with our backs to them; hold street parties nearby . . . whatever. Uphold *our* right to protest as we also uphold *their* right to march. I am not saying that confrontation will end by our accepting everyone's right to march, but I think that by allowing

Orangemen to march in this way, eventually, whether through embarrassment or realism, those who march will gradually begin to do so in a way that is less threatening to others, less triumphalist, or even unilaterally decide to pick a different route. By blocking their way or withholding our consent, we only give an excuse for all the hangers-on to descend in their droves and we reinforce their belief that they *must* get down that route at all costs.

I feel that many in the Catholic/Nationalist community somehow imagine that they have scored a great victory, or that history has moved forward on their behalf, by this newfound ability to stop Orange marches. But our victory lies in the fact that the Protestant/Unionist community is now having to admit that there *is* a right to march and that it should *always* have been a right and that they were wrong to deny us that right in the past. Therein would lie the *real* victory, and it would be a victory whose implications could help both communities confront all sorts of questions, not only about the past, but about what type of society we want for our future. But if we do simply as they did, then history is merely going backwards, with the boot on the other foot.

## 2: a challenge to the Unionist community

The last twenty-seven years have been an extremely traumatic and hurtful time for Northern Ireland, unleashing a bloodletting which many of us could never have conceived was possible. And worse, as the violence intensified, there were many in our two communities who found ready justifications for it, something which was just as unnerving as the horrors of the conflict itself. Yet, looking back on those years, it is possible now to see that ordinary people in our two communities had not suddenly become unfeeling and uncaring, they were merely reacting to real hurts and genuine fears. We had besieged one another, armed with our interpretations of the past and fuelled by our genuine concerns for the future.

Furthermore, fear of the encroachment of the ‘other’ community’s ‘culture’ led us to consolidate those aspects of our own culture which seemed to make us ‘different’, for in that seemed to lie the best defence. And now that history has begun to catch up with us – not *our* history, but that of the world outside – and we find ourselves faced with the need to develop a pluralism which encompasses the cultures of *all* our citizens, we have become fearful again, and our feelings of being besieged are resurfacing with a vengeance.

In the Nationalist community’s disdain for all things ‘British’ and the Unionist community’s disdain for all things ‘Irish’, we see the evidence of our division. Both communities seem to believe that by accepting anything of the ‘other’ community’s culture, they must be weakening their own. But there is nothing necessarily ‘pure’ about our cultures, they are *already* amalgamations of many diverse strands. The Irish ‘identity’ has a ‘British component’: Columba on Iona; Scots Gaelic; the gallowglass; Anglo-Irish literature . . . The Ulster Protestant identity not only has deep roots in the personality and history of Ireland, it has spread its roots far afield to encompass

other horizons: witness the delegation from the Mohawk nation who came to Ulster in 1990 to attend the tercentenary celebrations of the Battle of the Boyne. Our cultures are developing and expanding all the time.

I accept that the real fear is not that our cultures will expand, but that they will *contract*, and therein lies the rationale for the opposition to the re-routing of Orange marches and such like. It is as if, by not getting down certain roads, we lose a little bit of our culture in the process. But are those in the Protestant community who feel this way not being somewhat blinkered in using this argument? An increasing number of people – in both communities – are beginning to realise that the root of the problem lies not so much with ‘culture’ and ‘heritage’, but with the confrontational way we have utilised these as weapons. Protestantism and Catholicism, Unionism and Nationalism, Loyalism and Republicanism, have *all* been guilty of arrogance and self-righteousness, and where one was able to dominate – Ulster Protestantism in the North, Celtic Catholicism in the South – they have been able to add injury to insult.

But take away that dominance, take away that self-righteousness, and what have you left? No culture at all? No, what we have left is . . . Protestantism and Catholicism, Unionism and Nationalism, Loyalism and Republicanism. Our differing aspirations of Britishness and Irishness can survive through their own inner strengths; neither needs to retain the unnecessary baggage acquired through centuries of confrontation and conflict.

So let us examine our fears closely; let us determine whether our cultures *are* really being diminished by the actions of ‘other’ community, or whether we just *fear* that this is the case. I appeal in particular to the Protestant community, being the one which held dominance in Northern Ireland, to consider whether the retention of intransigent attitudes actually risks more damage to its heritage and culture than could ever be inflicted by its ‘enemies’, real or imagined. The Protestant and British heritage of Northern Ireland is a strong and broad one, containing a unique blend of traditionalism and radicalism which should sustain it against all but the inevitable changes brought about by the march of time. Such a heritage, if expressed confidently and openly, could easily take the lead in the development of a genuine pluralism within which none of our identities need feel threatened. I only hope we can seize that opportunity.

### **The Death of the ‘Peace Process’?**

The diversity of opinions expressed in this pamphlet should have confirmed to the reader that a ‘peace process’, by its very nature, is a multi-faceted and complex matter, and one which needs to be engaged in as such. Limiting a ‘peace process’ to the wheelings and dealings between politicians risks binding that process into a straitjacket which, should those politicians ultimately find themselves in stalemate, could strangle all our hopes for peace. To protect against this, a parallel and far-reaching debate must be taken right to the heart of our two communities. For only then will the genuine fears and suspicions

held by each community begin to be addressed, and only then will a platform be provided for the many practical and progressive proposals which emanate from the grassroots.

What the opinions expressed here also confirm is that such a debate *is* possible, and that ordinary people in both our communities are *already* engaged in it. The purpose of this pamphlet has not only been to provide ample proof of this, but to act as a vehicle whereby such debate can be facilitated. For it is my firm conviction that ultimately it is only at the grassroots where we will find the real answer to that fundamental question: is the 'peace process' dead, or can it be resurrected?