

Preventing a return to conflict

*A discussion by
ex-combatants*

compiled by

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Published August 2009 by
Island Publications
132 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey BT36 7JQ

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<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications/>

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ISBN 978-1-899510-85-6

The group who came together for this initiative emerged from the 'Competent Helper' course run by ICPD (Institute for Counselling & Personal Development), under the stewardship of Prof. Chris Conliffe and John Foster

The 20 participants who took part in the discussions from which this pamphlet was compiled came from the following organisations:

Teach na Fáilte (ex-INLA prisoner support group)

An Eochair (ex-OIRA prisoner support group)

Prisoners in Partnership (ex-UDA prisoner support group)

The facilitating group comprised:

Issac Andrews
Gerry Foster
Tommy Hale
Fra Halligan
Gerald Solinas

The organisers wish to thank Farset International for their ongoing support

Finally, the group wish to thank the **Good Relations Unit of Belfast City Council** for their assistance in funding this pamphlet



Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

Introduction

In 2008/9 a diverse group of individuals, from both communities, came together to undertake a 'Competent Helper' course. The course was designed to equip community activists with the skills to respond purposely to different issues affecting their communities. For those participants who were ex-combatants many of the issues important to them focused on the legacy of the conflict, whether at an individual or a communal level.

As the relationships built up over a six-month period proved to be so positive – particularly among the ex-combatants – it was decided to work jointly on a pertinent community issue. The one which came to mind among those from a Loyalist background was the alarming tendency for many young people in their communities to express the view that they had somehow 'missed out' because Northern Ireland had entered a period of peace, even to the extent of voicing a desire to become the next generation of Loyalist paramilitants and prisoners.

When the Loyalist ex-combatants initially brought these concerns to their Republican associates the latter expressed surprise, saying that they did not really hear such sentiments expressed within their own communities. However, subsequent to the murders of two soldiers in Antrim and a PSNI officer in Craigavon in March 2009 the Republican ex-combatants became aware of similar attitudes, and they too were concerned at the way many young people were romanticising not only the conflict but the prison experience.

Accordingly, a focus for a joint project became clear: to engage with young people and endeavour to dispel whatever unrealistic or romantic notions they held about the recent past, and to try and educate them as to the reality of the conflict and imprisonment. They also wanted to share their belief that in today's society a return to armed struggle was the entirely wrong way to proceed. None of the ex-combatants wished to see today's young people go down the route they themselves had taken, particularly as they genuinely believed that political progress had made such a route both unnecessary and unacceptable.

The group of ex-combatants who came together represented the UDA (Ulster Defence Association), the IRSP (Irish Republican Socialist Party) and the Official IRA. (The fact that no-one from the UVF or the Provisional IRA was involved was unintentional; invites to participate in the Competent Helper course had been sent out to *all* groupings; no-one had been excluded.)

The group hope to use this document directly with the young people, who they hope to engage in a wide-ranging education programme, which will include taking them inside the Crumlin Road prison.

Gerald Solinas *Facilitator*

Preventing a return to conflict

1: The impact of the Troubles

In the following quotes [R] stands for a Republican participant, [L] for a Loyalist, and [Facil] for the facilitator.

[Facil] What was happening in your communities which got you involved in the conflict or in a paramilitary organisation?

[R] I was fifteen in 1969¹ when the burnings and all occurred, and nearly everybody in my area was involved in some way. It started out as defence and developed from there. When the British Army first came in they *were* welcomed; they got tea in quite a few places, but some people said that sooner or later they would turn on us. You seen that with the Falls Curfew², then Internment³. The first time I saw somebody shot dead was Internment morning. The Paras goaded people into rioting. Then, when somebody threw a petrol bomb, they shot him dead. A young fella. I was eventually interned, followed by a couple of periods on remand and then I received a life sentence. I have spent most of my adult life involved.

[R] Generations of my family have been Republicans, and many had done time for the cause. My mother got twenty years' hard labour for her part in Republicanism and it just carried on that way through the family. I actually joined the Fianna⁴ in '66 when I was about thirteen. I'm from Ballymurphy and Protestants and Catholics lived together, there was no trouble until Internment. For me it was all happening again, from what I had been told growing up. Then I lost a friend in August '69, and things just kind of snowballed. One minute the Brits were the saviours, the next minute they were the pushers, and manys a time they would take me or my mates up the Hannahstown Road and give us a hiding, for nothing. They wrecked homes, they beat people half to death and shot innocent people. Everything just sort of escalated, especially after Bloody Sunday⁵. I joined the Republican movement. I felt we were living under occupation, and I genuinely believed in defence and retaliation. I ended up in prison in '75.

[R] I was thirteen when the soldiers came and remember getting beat up or abused by them, and I began to hate them more and more. Eventually I was caught rioting and done for assault. Then I got married and pissed off to England. The marriage didn't last and when I got home again the 'dirty protest'⁶ was starting and that got me involved in the movement and I ended up in jail.

[L] In the heyday of the riots, everybody done it, and to be honest that's exactly why I started, because everybody else was doing it. And right through your teenage years that was it: rioting for the sake of rioting. Because there was very little one-on-one contact with anyone from the other community; the walls were going up, the fences were going up. When I was older I decided to join the UDR⁷. I used to work in a factory on the Springfield Road, and a friend who also worked there had joined the UDR the same time as I did. And one day he and I were walking across from one part of the factory to the other when a car came up behind us and this fella got out and blasted him. His blood and everything went all over me. I eventually got threw out of the UDR for rebelling against their system. As the violence escalated I struggled to find what the IRA meant by a 'legitimate target'⁸; I couldn't understand this. All these attacks were taking place, and innocent people were getting killed and I was saying to myself: what's going on here, how can you legitimise that? I made a conscious

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decision that I was going to fight these people who were attacking my community. And so I got involved in Loyalist paramilitarism and ended up in jail. Eventually there came a time when I began to question things, particularly my own actions: was what I was doing changing the bigger picture? And I realised that it wasn't. There was still innocents getting slaughtered – on all sides.

[R] I actually thought the early '70s were great, because as a kid it was exciting to run around and watch everything going on, the gun battles and stuff. Some people will try to tell you they were 'politically motivated', but most of us just reacted to the events happening around us. I can't put my finger on any one incident that got me involved in the Republican movement. I don't even blame the environment I grew up in, because most of my childhood friends *didn't* get involved. I had two older brothers who were interned, and when I got involved in the H-Block⁹ protest and things like that the eldest tried to talk me out of it: telling me not to get involved, saying it wasn't worth it. My dad was of a similar vein; his attitude was that you only have the one life, so live it to the full. But there was one night myself and a friend were coming home along Shaw's Road from a dance. It was the week Airey Neave¹⁰ was killed. I remember that because the cops came driving down shouting the usual abuse at us and we were shouting back 'Airey Neave, Airey Neave!' They came round a second time, with the back door open, and then started shooting. Initially, we thought it was plastic bullets, but the shooting was too quick. My friend ducked to the ground. We thought nothing of it and went on home. That was a Friday night, and on the

Sunday, in a small article on the front page of the *Sunday News* it said: ‘Forty attack RUC.’ As I was reading it I wondered where this had all taken place, and then I realised that it was about the two of us! The police were saying they had checked in the hospitals because they believed they had shot one of the petrol bombers – that was obviously my mate ducking down. And I started to think: say they’d killed or injured him, what could you have done about it? Gone to the RUC? Sure they were the ones who opened up on us! And if we went to a solicitor and they tried to bring a case forward, we’d have been arrested and charged with riotous behaviour or possession of petrol bombs. And who was the judge going to believe: the police or us? No journalist came into the area to ask what had actually happened that night, they just accepted the police story. It was then that I realised that it wasn’t just the Brits and the RUC, it was the media and the whole judiciary which was rotten, the whole system. But your political awareness mostly came into it afterwards, when you were in prison.

[L] It wasn’t just youse ones who got it from the police. There was one night a couple of us were walking down the road, out for a few drinks, laughing and joking, and two Landrovers – one coming from one side, one from the other – pulled up and the cops started beating us for no reason. Just then a mate of mine happened to walk round the corner and said, ‘What the f***’s going on here!’ And a peeler hit him full in the face, ripped his mouth right open. Well, we went and seen solicitors about it, and the next thing we were scooped and done for disorderly behaviour. Because of things like that we had no love for the peelers. Also, my brother was shot by a soldier, so I have no love for the Army either. I ended up joining a Loyalist paramilitary organisation. The first sentence I got was six years –for robbery and arson – and I was only out six months and got more heavily involved – and was given sixteen years the second time.

[R] 1969 and 1970 were totally reactionary. I hadn’t a political thought in my head. I can remember this oul lad coming up our street in Andytown on a moped shouting: ‘The Loyalists are coming, they’re burning houses!’ This was after Bombay Street was burned. And the whole district panicked. That was when they put up the barricades; they thought that the Loyalists were coming into Andersonstown as well; everybody felt it wasn’t just down the road or somewhere else, it was coming to them, and they were terrified of it. We had always been terrified. When I was young nobody ever went to the peelers; they were never trusted. If you did something wrong it was a priest who got involved. After that you learned a bit of politics, but by then things had become so entrenched and so divided, between Protestant and Catholic, that you were just digging a hole which was getting bigger each year, no matter what we tried or no

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matter what we thought about. You tried to reach out to Loyalists or Protestants at that time but it wasn't very successful. There was a number of meetings took place, especially when the Blocks were going up, between Republicans and Loyalists. But we were all too entrenched and everybody saw themselves as protectors of their own community. Nowadays we have a chance of addressing the sectarian issue, especially from the bottom-up, for I have always been a believer that it was imposed from the top down, not just on youse by the Unionist establishment but on us too, by the Catholic Church. They both kept it going because it suited their purposes. I developed a socialist analysis but in the early years when I tried to preach this inside the RA, I was told I'd 'get shot for talking that Communist crap in West Belfast.' That's why I later joined the INLA, because of their socialist aspect.

[L] In our community it was basically defensive. You were watching everybody and everything coming and going in your area. And you weren't just watching out for Republicans but for UVF too. For at the time and over the years we've always had trouble with them. You were always watching your back.

[R] When the Troubles started I was only a kid at the time. So I suppose for me it was more like childish adventure type of thing. When Percy Street got burnt, I remember walking past the gutted houses. It's those kind of things which stick with you. But I hadn't a political bone in my head; I agree with the others – the politics comes much later. I think an awful lot has to do with the people you run about with at the time, and what is going on around you. I remember hearing that the soldiers were coming in, and you're wondering what way they're going to come in. We imagined they were going to come in by parachute, but that was the way kids thought. I remember people going to the shop for them; they were stationed in St Joseph's School which I attended. And then it all changed. I had never seen soldiers before walking about the streets with guns. Then there was other people came out with guns. Then the rioting got worse. I remember getting up one morning and every kerbstone, every paving stone in my street had been pulled up, to be used as ammunition to throw at the soldiers. And barricades up at the top and bottom of the street. But, to be honest, it wasn't bad, it was like a community sort of thing, you felt safe within your own community. Okay, it wasn't a normal upbringing, but you didn't really feel as if you were in a war zone, it was just, as I say, childish excitement. Then when we moved into Divis Flats, I remember gun battles taking place there on a constant basis. Then you were rioting because everybody else rioted; you weren't doing it through any sort of political sense, it was just because everybody else was doing it. It was good craic, it was all

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a bit of excitement. The politics only came into it later on, and with my interest in socialist politics I joined the Official IRA. There was never any sectarianism on my part; my mother and father are a mixed marriage; all my father's ones are from the Shankill, and we went up there quite a lot before the Troubles got really bad.

[R] I grew up in a Republican family and in '71 my uncle was shot dead by the Paras in the Lower Falls. The Hunger Strike was a turning point for me. I was fourteen, and there were daily riots and these riots were hot and heavy, with masked and armed men on the streets. Margaret Thatcher was allowing the hunger strikers to die so we decided that the only way to vent our anger and frustration was through street rioting. You didn't go to school, the school closed down on 5 May when Bobby Sands died, and everybody just hit the streets. During the day you were just hanging about looking for vehicles to hijack. At night-time 'the boys', as I grew up to know them, came out and there was gun-battles. Growing up I was never exposed to any sectarian attitudes, for my father worked with Protestants all his life, they were always in and out of our house. The struggle was always about the British occupation of this country. Nor were we prepared to accept being second-hand citizens any longer. Also, growing up in a working-class area, issues of social injustice started to come into it for me. Having said that, there was other lads there whose attitude was: let's go up the Shankill and get into the Prods, or let's get into the Brits. But nobody really asked what might happen if the Brits actually did pull out. There was no real exploration of that, and that's why the politics of socialism attracted me, and I joined the Republican Socialist movement when I was about fifteen and I've been there ever since. Now, not everybody was motivated to get involved. In our street there was only four houses which were Republican – ours was one of them, and it was constantly raided and wrecked and people battered. But the rest didn't. A lot of my friends went on and had good jobs, their own business, and out of my class of thirty-two there was only about four of us went into Republican organisations.

[R] Let's be honest about it, around your own area being involved brought you a certain amount of respect for what you were doing. But during my initial involvement I held all misconceived and muddled ideas until I started to get more into the politics of it all. You knew you were second class, and that as a Catholic you were being discriminated against. The first time I was sent for a job from Lisburn Tech – one of the tutors had recommended me – I went back to him and said I didn't get it. And he phoned them and found it was because I was a Catholic. Another time three of us got sent over to a job vacancy, two Catholics and a Protestant. Now, us two Catholics had the better marks, but the Protestant got it. Again our tutor phoned up and found it was the same thing – because we were Catholics. And all this discrimination was happening all around you.

2: Family

[Facil] What were your family circumstances? And what did they – whether your parents or your spouse – think of your involvement?

[R] I was born and reared in a working-class Protestant area of Belfast, although I went to a Catholic school and all that. All my friends were Protestants, and I used to go to the bonfires. My mother was Protestant, my father was a Catholic and we still have Protestant relatives in the area. It was only when I went to Feldon House [Training Centre] when I was sixteen and met fellas from the Falls and I started socialising with them. Through them I was eventually brought into the movement, into the Beechmount unit.

[R] My da, first visit after Internment, came up and he says: ‘You think you’re a big lad now, you think you know it all, but you’ll never get any thanks for this.’ Both my parents came from the South, but they weren’t Republican, and never wanted me near it. None of the wider family ever followed in my footsteps, I was the only one in the family.

[L] After I got my first tattoo –it was ‘LFC’, Linfield Football Club –I was walking down the street when my father seen it and for some reason he thought it said ‘UVF’. And he kicked the crap out of me, even though he and my mother had separated by then. And I think that was one of the reasons I joined the paramilitaries – as a way of rebelling against my da. My mother never knew I was in them until I was seventeen; a neighbour seen me and told her: your son’s in the UDA. While I was out on remand I had been planning to get married but when I was given sixteen years I said to myself that I don’t want that. Because in prison having a girl has a big effect on your mind. You’re in there thinking: what’s she doing, who’s she with...? I didn’t want that, I wanted my sentence done on my own. So I just chased her and said: ‘Look, when I get out if you’re still around we might pick things up again.’ In fact, when I got out I picked another one! It is hard having a family when you’re in jail, for that’s all you think about. I have seen a lot of friends in jail going through a hard time with their girlfriends; a mate of mine hanged himself in jail over it.

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[R] My whole area was Provisional, and it was hard being the only *Irp*¹¹ in the district. They tortured me, and they still do, especially in the local bar. They gave me grief and dogs’ abuse: what would your mother think, and all this. For

my mother was an out-and-out Provisional. My family didn't know too much about the *Irps*, they thought they had something to do with the Officials, and it was a case of: what are you doing with those weird people –as if I had brought shame upon the whole family. But when the IRA called their first ceasefire and the *Irps* didn't I think she tried to change sides! The wider family, who looked down their noses a bit, didn't bother at all, and didn't want you near their houses in case they got raided. There were neighbours like that as well, they didn't want you calling into the house either. But it was strange belonging to an organisation on your own in that sort of area. Anyway, I eventually started up a relationship, we moved in together, and then they started raiding the house. Although my partner wasn't a Republican her father was, so she was used to her parents' house being raided and him being lifted and battered in front of her. However, it was difficult for her. She was trying to get our own house done up with the limited amount of money we had and they were coming in and wrecking it. She was also afraid of me getting shot dead, what with the different feuds. And when the kids came along, she didn't really want them to have to go through all that. And when I say the house was raided, I mean Kango jobs. I was coming home out of work and dust was flying out the windows! And of course I got the blame for that. I tried to turn it round; obviously it wasn't my fault, it was the Brits' fault –after all, it was them who were Kangoing the house! And she said: well, if you weren't doing things this wouldn't have happened.

[R] You know a common thing you heard:relatives coming up and saying they were glad to see you in jail. At least they knew you were safe, they didn't want to hear that there'd been a knock on the door and you had been shot dead or whatever.

[R] That's true. My brother is a bit headstrong and my mother was glad the night he was caught and got eight years, because she felt he was otherwise going to get killed. And when he was in jail, it was the first proper night's sleep she actually had.

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[L] My ma was born here; she married a soldier. Lenny Murphy¹² didn't agree with my mother marrying a soldier so he put her out. So the first twelve years of my life I lived in Wales. We moved back here, my father was shot and injured by the IRA and things just spiralled from there. I went out rioting, went about with the wrong crowds. When I got myself into a lot of bother with the UVF I joined the UDA. Had two kids, a girl, went to jail, still don't see them now. My mother was dead against me getting involved. She didn't agree with anything I done, didn't agree with anyone I ran about with, and when I went to jail she disowned me; she didn't

come and visit me. She just didn't want me to go down that road – but I did and it just went deeper and deeper, until I ended up in jail. When I got out I felt even angrier about what was going on, and unfortunately that's when many people started getting into the heavy stuff.

[R] My family wasn't Republican. It was a mixed marriage, my father was from the Shankill, my mother was from the Lower Falls. My mother was very much into the Catholic Church, she was in chapel every day. When my father married her he became more or less the same, but they hadn't a Republican bone in their bodies. Although the wider family had a mixture of Officials and Provisionals, my mother and father wouldn't have agreed with anything to do with Republicanism. Like most parents they worried about your personal safety, but they never agreed with my politics or what I was doing.

[L] My father died when I was fifteen which meant I hadn't got a male figure to guide me on the right path, and my ma found out I was in the UDA when her front door went round her one morning at 7 o'clock and I got wheeled out by the neck! And, as you do, it was: 'See you later, ma!' And the last words I remember her saying as I was taken out the door, were: 'What the f***...!' I was seven days in Castlereagh¹³, and when I got back home I got a bigger bating than I got in Castlereagh! And no word of a lie, but what I had to listen to was worse than what I had to put up with from them other clowns. And her whole thing was: 'Why did you not tell me? I'm not saying that I agree with what you did but I might have been able to understand it if you had talked to me about the things that were going through your head, that made you want to go down that road. Rather than them ones putting my door up the hallway and wrecking the bloody house!'

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[L] Your ma was the last person you wanted to know what you were up to.

[L] I was involved with a Loyalist paramilitary organisation when I got married and had a kid, and again, the usual: into the house at five o'clock in the morning and at half six the cops put the door in around me. But I was expecting them. I was actually sitting with a cup of tea and the kettle on, and I said, 'Look, before you start wrecking, do youse want a cup of tea?' I was trying to make light of it, for I knew where I was going. And, again, the wife's – well, ex-wife's – words were: 'What the hell are you bringing to this house!' She just believed that all that stuff was wrong: Protestant/Catholic, Brits, Peelers, guns, are wrong, so to hell with the whole lot of youse.

[R] I remember one day my da said to me: 'If they kill you, I'll bury you. But if you go to prison I'll not come anywhere near you.' And neither he did. He

didn't agree at all with what I was doing. His attitude was: you have one life, live it. I remember at the graveside during a relative's funeral, he said: 'This is all you get at the end of it, kid. What the f*** do you want to go to jail for, what do you want to die for?' That was his attitude and he tried to push that on us. But it didn't work, I think there were five of us went to prison. My mum was a typical Catholic mother, she didn't support your politics but she worried about you.

*I remember at the graveside during a relative's funeral, [my father] said: 'This is all you get at the end of it, kid. What the f*** do you want to go to jail for, what do you want to die for?'*

[R] My cousins were Protestants, they eventually moved from the Lower Ormeau to Newtownards, and I can remember going to Ballywalter as a kid and we used to just play football. I used to wonder why I seemed to get kicked more than you should do, but it was probably because the other kids all knew I was a wee Taig in their area. But they would come over into Andytown as well. They were your cousins, but you knew that they weren't just your cousins: to your friends they were your *Protestant* cousins. But there was no sectarianism in our house.

[R] I can remember getting the bus to the other side of town and having to tell the Protestant side of my family that the Official IRA thing which was on the front of the *Telegraph* wasn't really me; the cops had made a big mistake. Brutal. Even to this day I don't think they were convinced. Which would be hardly surprising as it was all true!

[R] I came from a big family, thirteen of us, seven brothers, most of them were in the Republican movement. I joined the Republican movement, at about sixteen, because at that time things were hot and heavy in Ballymurphy – Brits coming in, breaking into your house, kicking doors down, pulling your brothers out. I can remember my ma going through a hard time worrying about all my brothers, as well as the Brits coming to the door and saying: 'We're going to get your other son too and bring him home in a box.' It deteriorated my mum in a way because she knew in the back of her mind that one day she actually might get one of us back in a box. And just to see my mum go like that there, it really bugged me, and I said: no, I'm not standing for this. I blamed the Brits for the whole situation so I joined the Republican movement when I was sixteen. Then in 1975 I went into prison and was inside, on remand, when my mum died. She just couldn't handle it any more, any more pressure, and she took an overdose. That really hit me hard. And from then, 1975, I have been in and out of prison; my last stint there in '85 I was in for seven years. Jail life was very hard on the whole family, but mostly my mother.

3: The prison experience

[Facil] Can you describe any experiences in prison, whether positive or negative, which made an impact on you?

[R] Education was the main positive aspect. I think it was good getting a chance to educate yourself more. I learned a lot about socialism. We had debates. On the negative side I didn't like my kids, who were very young, going through the prison visiting system; I didn't like the way they were treated. And my mother too, I told my ones not to bring my mother up. It was too upsetting for me and her.

[L] Doing education helped you to pass each day. If you were on the blocks and then getting off for education, going down to the old tin hut and all, it broke it up for you, it was getting you away from that same environment.

[R] I first went in when I was nineteen, and I found very little negative. The second time I was a lot more aware of your family and the difficulties and hardships you put them through, making sure you had your visits, parcels, stuff like that.

[R] There were some days when time seemed to drag, for whatever reason, then there was other days it seemed to fly. Weeks would fly by, then at other times you would really struggle for one or two days, for no apparent reason.

[L] I always felt it most at holiday times, when the visits stopped – the likes of Christmas when you were going a week, ten days, without a visit –and that really seemed to drag.

[R] I think, looking back, you felt it went fast because each day was so similar, it was so hard to see one day as being any different from the next. I seen people, who, as soon as they came back from a visit, were getting ready for the next week's visit – and would waste their whole week doing that.

[L] Aye; it only seems to have gone fast looking back at it now –because it's done, it's gone.

[L] You were hearing about things happening outside, and you were missing so much – other people were maybe getting married, having kids, and you were stuck in this regime going nowhere.

[R] A lot of that doesn't register. I heard about people who died in the street where I lived and it wasn't until I got home and into familiar surroundings again that you realise that there are things missing or people not there any more.

[L] You don't see no change taking place while you are in. Even things like clothes. You get out and back into your old jeans and you see people walking down the street with these flashy tracksuits and you say: where did they get those from? As part of my punishment for assaulting a screw they took away my TV. The irony was that that was the easiest time I spent. When you had a TV you seemed to spend all your time just staring at it, but when it was taken away I read books, done more portrait drawings, tried to educate myself better. I realised I couldn't really be annoyed with a TV, it was only a hindrance.

[R] The thing I was glad about was that I didn't have children. Having children now I can imagine the missing out, even with the visits, which went on. And I think that would be difficult to come to terms with, even after release from prison. How do you play catch-up, or try and fill in for what you missed? And I feel that having no family made time inside a lot easier, you had less worries. It's amazing about how much more your family worries about you in prison than you do yourself. I have seen the worry that people go through about you in prison, and I often said to myself: if they only knew what it was like in prison, what was all that worry about? Not that prison was easy, it's just that the families always thought the worst of it.

[R] The second time in prison for me was more difficult. The first time round you're young and maybe the impact of it is easier. Also it was during the supergrass¹⁴ trials, and I remember 'A wing' was bugged; there was 180 Republicans in it, so there was always banter. But the second time was more difficult. I went in and two Loyalist prisoners had been killed just before I went in. And the Loyalists fired a rocket in while I was there. There was all that fighting going on, people were losing noses and ears. It was pretty vicious, and they had the riot squad waiting from seven in the morning to seven at night, and I know that the screws encouraged that whole situation, for financial gain, to keep men employed. They could easily have segregated the prisoners along landings or wings, but it suited them to keep the pot boiling. And it did boil. I was involved in an attack on Loyalist prisoners and we all got the ninety days, with a loss of everything. And at the end of the ninety days they said: you're unfit to mix with other prisoners. It ended up I did eighteen months on remand before I got out, and during those eighteen months I was only in three weeks when the attack happened so I did the rest of it on lock-up. You got out from half seven to half eight in the morning into this tiny yard, and were left to your own devices in your cell the remaining twenty-three hours.

[R] After the Shankill bomb the temperature in the jail went up tenfold; the screws even approached this other guy and myself, the only two Republicans on our wing and said: 'Look, we can't guarantee your safety, we think they're going to try and get the keys.' And when I said, 'Well, you may let me go home then,' they laughed at that. But that tension was there. We had made knives,

myself and this other guy, and just decided that if they get into the cell you're f***ed so you may stand at the cell door and stab at them, to try and stop them getting in. For if they do get in they're not coming in to just bite your nose off, they're in to finish you. And that period was extremely tense... after the lock-up at seven, okay, things calmed down. But before it, if there were Loyalists out on the wing you were always wary. Even when you were lying down on the bed your ear was always waiting for any sign that something was happening on the outside, on the landing. And you always had the knife nearby.

[L] I always felt that the screws were trying to set people against one another.

[R] One of the things about jail is the lack of personal control that you have. You have no control, you can basically send your visit passes out and that's it.

In the early days you couldn't even go to the toilet, you would be locked up from seven at night to seven in the morning. It was an illusion that you had any control. They had total control over 95% of your life. When I got a life sentence I took the decision I wasn't going to take most visits. For as far as I was concerned the only thing I had control of in that jail was whether or not I sent out a visit pass. I just wanted that bit of control to say that I have something left here.

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[R] Time was a funny thing. I remember going up to the hospital one day and they was a couple of ordinary crims in there and I remember asking this guy what he was doing. And he said: 'I'm up to see the shrink to get sleeping tablets.' I thought he was doing big time –but he was doing six months. Sometimes you found that: people with the least time found it hardest to deal with.

[L] The more you have the more you push it to the back of your mind. If you get ten years you've got five years to do, so you don't think about it. If you get six months you think: in three months time I'll be out of here.

[L] In '92 I was in nine years, and the first thing I noticed when I came out was the change in the area. The bottom of the Shankill, you wouldn't have thought they would have a Kentucky Fried Chicken on it. There have been a lot of changes on the Shankill: new health centre, nurseries...

[L] See when you go to jail at twenty-one, do ten years, you get out when you're thirty-one. But in your mind you're still twenty-one, because you haven't seen time change outside. All you seen is small minor things inside, like

different rules, maybe better food. That's why I think a lot of people, when they got out, found it so hard to deal with coming back outside, because your mind still thought things would be as they were ten years previously.

[L] I think the worst aspect of being in prison was being away from your family.

[R] Yes, the lack of any real communication with your family.

[L] And your family not telling you bad things, only telling you things you want to know, not giving you the full story.

[R] I was in the Blocks, I was on one of the wings, H-4, and it was all big men, all from around Ballymurphy and different areas. And they were okay on the outside, but see when you go behind that cell door? I've heard –I've done it myself – grown men cry, missing their families.

[L] Same on our side. The guy in the next cell to me was a big man in the organisation, and one morning I could hear him crying, the buzzing of the bell and him saying: 'I need an MO.' And you're like: flip me, you're walking about the place during the daytime as if you own the place, and now you're ringing the bell. People had a face

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[R] The first time I went to the boards was the first time I struggled, because all of a sudden you literally had nothing to do –not a book, a paper, nothing. I remember Bobby Sands had said, 'Self-pity is your only worst enemy' – it didn't help though! You're still thinking: how am I going to get the day in? Then you settle into it and the boards didn't even become a threat any more, because sometimes the boards was a relief to get away from the bustle of the wing.

[L] Even when you were on the boards you had nothing at all, even your usual clothes. They gave you a boiler suit, no curtains, they turn the heat on at night-time, you had an itchy blanket, every time you came out of the cell they strip-searched you, when you went to the yard they strip-searched you. Do that there for a week and a half and you get used to it –the boards –it becomes normal.

[R] A lot of those things worked on a fear of it, but once you got to know it, that fear went. You heard that when you went on the boards you probably got a kicking from the screws, whatever, but you got used to the routine. The first

time one screw went to hit me I went to hit him back and I never got bother from him after that. Sometimes the pettiness was worse than the big so-called punishments. The screws were always at you for stupid things. You weren't allowed to walk across the circle with your hands in your pockets, and things like that. The screws would be on your back at every chance they could. When you're going for a visit I have seen the screws start slabbering, and they would stop the visit because you won't take your hands out of your pockets. It was all that petty control they exercised.

[L] They had ways of wearing you down, but you had to stay above it. You knew there was a parcel for you, and then it didn't come –them ones left it there out of badness. Wee things like that there; that was their way of getting back at you. They liked playing games.

[R] They didn't do the full strip-searches with most families but when they did do a search of a family that annoyed me. You expect it yourself because you're on the inside, but to put the family through that was wrong.

[L] My girl had a child and the child was only five days' old and she had to take off its nappy. Things like that would get at you.

[L] Then people lose it and a row develops, which then escalates, others get involved and eventually the whole place is locked down.

[R] Screws have told people to their faces that they have deliberately provoked prisoners into punching them, because a dig in the gub is worth four weeks on the sick, with full pay and holidays. That sort of stuff was deliberately done.

[R] I'll give you an interesting story about the Crum. My grand-dad was a Protestant from the Shankill; as well as that my aunt married a Protestant, who ended up in the UVF and was shot dead by the UDA around '73/74. And it was quite ironic, he got a UVF funeral with the flag and all that. They were from the Lower Ormeau, and when the cortege came out from the Donegal Pass on to the Ormeau Road local Republicans were spitting at them and us, and they didn't seem to realise how many people from Andytown, who were Republicans, were among the funeral. But, anyway, my female cousins married three guys who were screws, believe it or not, and the last time I was in prison I also had two male cousins in with me who were members of the Provisionals, and it was embarrassing at visits because sometimes you'd be on the visit and these screws would walk by and my ma and my aunt would be talking away with them and you'd just be sitting there trying to look somewhere else! And you had other prisoners looking at you, as if to say: what's going on here? There were some embarrassing moments like that, through family connections... Well, I suppose we live in a small city and it was a lot smaller forty years ago, and the crossing over shouldn't be such a surprise.

4: Time for reflection?

[Facil] While you were inside did you reflect on things: including on why you were in jail or on political issues?

[L] Being in jail you do have time to sit back and listen to other people. You do think about why you are in jail, and why you did what you did, and what results are going to come out from it. And, at the end of the day, the conclusion I came to was that we were all just pawns in a bigger game played by politicians and the government.

[R] Once you started to think and study you realised you were entitled to express your views. I was meeting guys who were supposedly top men, and they were saying things which you didn't agree with, but initially you wouldn't have had the confidence to come out with your opinions. But once you got to know them you realised that people are just people, some are better at some things, some at others. And if you have something to say, and feel strongly about it, you should try and say it.

[R] But it didn't matter how intelligent what you had to say was, if it wasn't the party line you got nowhere. You think you have a say but you don't really. Coming up to the ceasefire we asked for debates to explore what you would look for from the government, and we were accused of being anti-IRA, or of undermining the movement. You tried to talk about major issues, such as the argument about the guns: you know – not an ounce, not a bullet. But no. Anyway, there were so many people there who didn't have an opinion. They were told by a certain section what to think and that was that.

[R] The debates which did take place were fake, they were controlled. Sometimes I felt their real purpose was to suss people out, to look for the dissenters. Even four or five people talking in a cell was a no-no. Even people who had good, strong, staunch Republican backgrounds.

[R] I remember there was a big meeting called in the yard, and two particular individuals in the Provie leadership were dictating to those gathered there: no more deals, right? We weren't involved in it because it was a Provie thing, and we just went on walking round the yard. But they were slabbering about how you're not to take deals, not to plead guilty, and all this sort of stuff. The Provies had been using the international stage about the Diplock courts¹⁵ as being unjust, and the Northern Ireland Office released the statistic that over 90% of people plead guilty; basically saying, well, we're getting the right people if they're all pleading guilty. So at this meeting in the yard everyone was told: no more deals. And that lasted about eight months, and the first to take

deals were those two! One for eight years and one for eleven years! That was sickening, because I know there was young lads were offered ten years, turned it down and got twenty. Some could have got eight years and got sixteen years.

[R] But see the way there you talk about control – some people will respond that you have to follow orders, a soldier has to do what he is told. An army needs discipline; you can't have them all running about doing different things.

[R] The first time I was in jail it was alright. You got into the politics, you read the books. The second time the violence was that much in your face in the Crum that you hadn't time to be reflective, you were concentrated on making sure no-one got into your cell. The change for me came about when in 2002-2003 I started to go to Glencree [Centre for Peace and Reconciliation] and meeting Loyalists and former British soldiers and cops and people like that. For me, that's where the reflective thoughts came in. First of all the challenging thoughts from Loyalists, trying to see what perspective they were coming from. But in prison it wasn't reflective, unless you were doing heavy whack. Anyway, that sort of thinking, of looking back at the struggle, even looking back at individual actions and analysing them, sometimes is just a waste of time. If I dwell on the conflict too long it just gets too annoying.

[R] Most often your reflections weren't on big political issues but on ordinary matters. You learned to appreciate many things a lot better. You wouldn't have been concerned about clothes, about having to be seen as a man of fashion. You learned that many of the simpler things meant a lot more to you. I would spend more time now with my nephews and nieces, and

You learned that many of the simpler things meant a lot more to you. I would spend more time now with my nephews and nieces, and you appreciate that sort of family thing a lot more than you would have before.

you appreciate that sort of family thing a lot more than you would have before. I'm not orientated towards money as I might have been. I like to have it, but I find ways of getting by. One of the things that jail taught you was how to get by; if there was something you couldn't afford right away you knew you could pace yourself.

[R] I remember during Internment you could get anything sent in. As many cigarettes as you needed, a parcel twice a week, with cooked meat and all. After a while you started to think about the family. It was nice to get steaks sent in, but you had to sit back and ask yourself how your family were affording it all.

[Facil] Do you reflect on the nature of using violence for attaining political goals? What conclusions did you come to?

[L] That's a bit of a loaded question.

[R] No, I don't think it is. I started to see too many mistakes being made. Something like strapping somebody to a bomb and telling them to drive to a checkpoint¹⁶. That was something I could never get right in my head. Strapping somebody to a bomb and maybe a hour before he gets to the target! No way can that be right! There were some things like that which made you think: does the end really justify the means? Whether or not people want to say it openly I think everybody went through it; especially if you were doing a long time you eventually began to ask yourself: what did I achieve by doing what I did? In the long run, with hindsight, it's terrible when you think about the amount of people killed and what was done... including some of the things I myself was involved in. I remember being out during the '72 ceasefire and there was as much on offer then as now. Some people were genuinely committed, but for others it was more the razzmatazz and the name they were after. And it was armed struggle at all costs. I think anybody who came through jail –I don't care whether it was six months or sixteen years –you dwell on it sooner or later: what was it got you in, what was the worth of it, and what was the aim of it?

I think anybody who came through jail – I don't care whether it was six months or sixteen years –you dwell on it sooner or later: what was it got you in, what was the worth of it, and what was the aim of it?

[R] It is a difficult question because you are looking at it with hindsight, and trying to remember what thought processes you had in prison at the time. You must have thought about it at some stage, but I don't remember sitting dwelling on it. In fact, it used to be great to get up and put the radio news on in the cell first thing, and hope that someone had been stiffed. That's the mentality you had – hoping that something, some sort of action had happened.

[R] We could have gone on killing, and it would have got even more sectarian. But by the end of it, with all the manipulation which was going on with MI5, and police agents working inside all the organisations, you didn't know when you were going out to shoot somebody, where that order was actually coming from. For all you knew the target was just somebody MI5 wanted out of the way to cover their tracks. By the eighties you just didn't know the truth behind it all.

[L] When I was younger I know why I got involved and if anybody had've come to me with information [about someone on the 'other' side] it was: happy days, here we go. You got a car and away you went. Without a thought of who it was or who it wasn't. Because I said to myself: this guy knows his stuff, so away we go. That was it. And then as you got older you said to yourself: where is that information coming from, how did they find out that? But you hadn't the balls to turn round and question things. Sometimes, God willing, you couldn't get through certain places. And then you're trying to think: how do you get out

of this? Then, all of a sudden some incident would happen, like the Shankill Bombing, and you're saying to yourself: f*** it! And incidents like that personally put me back years.

[R] When something like that happens in your area, whether it is an individual gets killed or a group of people or whatever, it's hard. And I can appreciate people in the seventies and eighties, genuine people who stood up and said: 'Look, think about what you are doing.' Because it's very difficult. Can you imagine the day after Bloody Sunday or the Shankill bombing, someone from that area standing there saying: 'Hold on, don't react the way these people want you to react, remain calm...' It would be a case of: 'Get lost – we're going to get them back!

[L] Yes; there were actually people on the Shankill who said at the time: look, you can't do this, for somebody innocent will get hurt. They were told to piss off.

[R] I remember when the Enniskillen bomb¹⁷ happened –I was in the Blocks at the time –one of the now-top Shinnners trying to justify it to me. He tried to say it was all police, or off-duty police, as if that made it okay. And I remember saying to him: what type of half-wit are you? Do you know what that done, do you know how far back that put us? But because the RA wanted to minimise any doubts among their own people, they were at pains to justify it. But anyone with a titter of wit was saying that just put us back twenty years; that it didn't promote the cause in any way. The problem was the lack of debate among our own people. And yet there *were* questions being asked, there's no doubt about that.

[L] Everybody was just used as pawns.

[R] You're right. Working-class people were used by politicians and outside influences. We had some conversations with veterans from the '56-62 campaign, and they are adamant that you should never use violence for political ends in the future.

[R] Within the Republican struggle, instead of the violence being behind the politics, the violence became the *reason* for the politics. People can look back at '69-70 and see it as a genuine response by people defending their areas from attack. There was no great major political line of thought, it was a 'them and us' situation. And as the interface violence worsened communities quickly grew apart from one another. It was easy for people to harbour slight suspicions and turn those suspicions into fear, and then

Within the Republican struggle, instead of the violence being behind the politics, the violence became the reason for the politics.

turn those fears into violence – and communities became even more polarised.

[L] Look at what is happening right now with those Romanians being put out of their houses on the Lisburn Road¹⁸. People are turning their aggression on the newcomers.

[L] I think working-class people on both sides of the divide are wising up, and meetings like this will hopefully ensure that we never use violence again. The problem is that you drive into many areas two or three in the morning and there's kids hanging about with no jobs, no sense of a future, no career. That's dangerous. Those things need to be addressed.

[R] We were manipulated by people at Stormont¹⁹ who didn't want to lose any of their power. We were put at each other's throats by politicians way back in the sixties. The old policy of 'divide and rule'.

[R] But see Stormont, it's an easy target. The Catholic Church on our side was the same: keep them divided, keep as much control as they can. Wasn't it the Jesuits who used to say: give me the child and I'll give you the man. And they practised that.

[R] Certainly they wanted their community, their church, and their schools, they wanted control over all that, and they got it. Stormont gave it to them willingly, because it suited them too. There was a mutual sectarian benefit.

[R] I have been asked if I think the struggle was justified and I say of course it was. Do you think it is justifiable now? – and my answer is 'no'. Because I don't see sporadic violence achieving British withdrawal. If over a thousand state forces were killed during the conflict and that failed to remove the British, a few here and there is certainly not going to.

I have been asked if I think the struggle was justified and I say of course it was. Do you think it is justifiable now? – and my answer is 'no'.

[R] It's more the attitude of the people. People are just tired and weary, and pissed off, and are more worried about putting a loaf of bread on the table than about 'four green fields'²⁰ or anything else. But if we were sitting here now with a load of young lads, you could easily justify the armed struggle. You know the usual line: we need to get the Brits out of Ireland; it didn't start in '69, we have been oppressed for 800 years; our generation has been defeated but your generation needs to rise again... blah blah blah... And the young lads would be rearing to go.

5: Cross-community contacts

[Facil] What has been your experience of the ‘other community’, either in the past or more recently?

[R] Prior to the Troubles I worked in a training centre –I had joined the Young Communist movement and was with a couple of Protestants there. And I had mixed with them in Lisburn Tech. It was strange to me how things went; after ’69 a line was sort of drawn in the sand and it was a case of you can’t trust them any more. I left home about sixteen and was interned a few years later. I had Protestant friends and they were the same as us. Just people. It wasn’t like anyone had a stamp on the back of their heads which said ‘Protestant’ or ‘Catholic’ or whatever –they were just ordinary people. Okay, come the Twelfth it was a wee bit dodgy. You knew to stay away from some of them. Same with the Falls Road for that matter; there are times I wouldn’t go down the Falls Road.

[R] I have always been of the opinion that working-class Protestants and working-class Catholics have got more to unite us than we have to divide us. I lived in London for ten years and that reinforced my belief when I saw other races, colours, creeds, people from all over the world, all living next door to each other, all their kids going to school together, everybody drinking in the same pub. So I know it *is* possible to live together.

[L] Before the ceasefires I wouldn’t have walked the Falls Road. But my wee lad has ADHD and I have to take him to Cupar Street Clinic. Now, my girlfriend takes a taxi up and a taxi down. But I would take a walk up. I was walking up one day and we were passing Divis Tower and the child said: ‘Daddy, is that the flats we see from our side?’ I quickly tried to shut him up! Kids can so easily get you into trouble!

[R] My cousin and her husband still live on the Shankill and they were separated for a while, but they got together and renewed their vows. They said to me: ‘Look, we’d love to invite you and your partner to the wedding, but unfortunately the club that we are going back to is on the Shankill –we would be worried in case anybody said or did anything.’

[L] I can remember having no contact with Catholics until I left here to go across to England where I joined the Army. But there was a dehumanisation process took place during the conflict. It came too from going to Sunday school and stuff like that. We got the blood and thunder message: don’t go anywhere near Catholics, don’t be talking to any of them, you’ll burst into flames, they worship the anti-Christ... and all that sort of thing.

[L] My first cross-community encounter was edgy. You think you're going to walk into a room and there'll be people there with two heads, but when you got there you found you were all the same. I thought it was going to be mad, but as soon as we started talking and things settled it all seemed normal. Now, I have just as many Catholic friends as Protestant friends, through work, through jail. But they were always seen by us as the 'others'.

[R] Since the ceasefires I have met with ex-soldiers who came over to talk. I wasn't comfortable at first but as you talk to them ... I always believed that the average squaddie was someone who came from the same environment as ours and the Army was a way of escaping from that. A lot of Catholics here joined the Army; there were a lot of ex-servicemen in the Provs. At a meeting like this I don't mind, but I would be fearful of going onto the Shankill Road because of my background, and it might be a misperception, but I feel that there is more lack of control over there. See like that recent incident in Coleraine²¹... I could bring any of you over to our district and could near enough guarantee that you wouldn't be touched. But I would be fearful of doing the same thing on the Shankill, to this day. I think there is still a roguish element. If some wee bastard picks on you for some reason a lot of people might be afraid to take your side, in case they would be branded a 'Taig lover' or something similar. I have that fear still about going into Protestant areas. I feel there is a rogue element that no-one in the Loyalist side would have control over. It is also because of some of the things I have been involved in, for they would be justified in the way they felt about me.

[R] I think everybody has that in their head. It's like a trust thing, and it's been drummed into us from we were no age –you don't talk to these people. It's something we have to work on ourselves, to come out of that.

[R] It's not the Loyalists I would be worried about. As you know, I do be on the Shankill a lot now and I work with some of the schools. I would be more worried about someone saying, who is *not* connected with the UDA or UVF: there's that guy who came to our school, he's a Republican –and then it escalates. That's what would worry me. Your perceptions become your reality and that is the problem, no matter how unfounded they might be.

[R] For me the first contact with Loyalists when I got out of prison was in Glencree Peace & Reconciliation Centre in 2003. At that stage the UDA were still beyond the pale, for whatever reason, it was just the UVF who were there. And seemingly the Provs had said a lot of things to them about us: they had called us the 'Nationalist UDA', sectarian, non-political, blah blah blah. So the UVF ones came at us with a whole lot of baggage. I got into them and said a lot of things in return. I was actually surprised they took it, but I realised afterwards that they had already been meeting with Republicans. I think if that had've been

their first contact with Republicans it could have had a different outcome. Definitely. Now if a Loyalist who hadn't met Republicans before was to come in and say: 'The INLA? Sure they were only murdering scum; they were this and that.' Instead of reacting to what they were saying I would just let them say it. It's a matter of letting people vent their spleen, so to speak, and put the subtle questions in later. But it's a slow process.

[R] That happens all the time; you hear things about other people, other organisations, and begin to believe it.

[R] Quite often you *want* to believe it. The same thing about Loyalists: we want to believe it all.

6: Young people

[Facil] Are you concerned at some of the attitudes expressed by young people? Do you think some of them have romanticised the prison experience and almost want to become the next generation of Republican and Loyalist prisoners?

[L] Aye. A whole load of them want to go to jail. They want to do the things most of us here in this room done, because they think it was a good idea; they don't understand why, or for what agenda. Kids don't see things like going to school and getting an education as options; they just say: let's follow where our da's or brothers or uncles went. They want to go down that road, but it's a road that doesn't lead anywhere.

[R] I have a nephew coming up to eighteen and I heard him a couple of times coming out with that stuff: I'd love to fight for my country and die for my country. I told him that wasn't a realistic attitude.

[Young people] just say: let's follow where our da's or brothers or uncles went. They want to go down that road, but it's a road that doesn't lead anywhere.

[L] Maybe they don't all want to put a Balaclava on and go out and shot someone, but they have this idea they want to be like the ex-combatants they live among. And even though the things ex-combatants were involved in aren't happening any more they still want to be that kind of person.

[L] Half the people went to jail looking for respect and when they came out they were giving respect to the ones still in jail.

[L] You come out of the jail yourself and sit in the bar with a lot of young ones, and you talk about the things you done inside – the drugs that you took to parties, whatever. You never told them the bad story, only the things that they seemed to want to hear.

[L] I think they are attracted to paramilitary organisations because they are thinking of self-gain too. They're looking at certain people and what they've got and saying: look at him, we can do that there. They think they will make a few quid.

[R] The deprivation in these area is causing 90% of the problem. And we have no role models for them to look up to. Most of the community centres are maybe open only once a week for them, so they're standing at the street corners, and they want respect within the gang; or some of them want notoriety. There's nothing for them, damn all to do.

[L] Okay, there's some of them torture old people and smash bottles on people's car, but there's others just stand at the street corners having a few beers. If they aren't doing any harm I say let them stand there. They're being victimised by other people, who see things going on in their areas which shouldn't be, and

They're being victimised by other people, who see things going on in their areas which shouldn't be, and then because these young people are standing at the street corner like a gang, they get the blame for whatever has been happening.

then because these young people are standing at the street corner like a gang, they get the blame for whatever has been happening. And all that does is actually push them towards that type of behaviour.

[R] When I came out of jail I couldn't believe how they even talked to the RA, with, 'You're effin' dirt, you're scum, eff off!' They have no respect for either paramilitaries or the state. When a police vehicle comes around they stone it. But then *we* taught them to do that –and now we are telling them to stop. It doesn't work that way. They don't understand. Why was it alright last time, but not alright now?

[L] Although they *will* sit and listen to you.

[R] They're not bad kids. But, when so-called organisations attack them the young people see that as the community doing that, and that is why they then have less respect for their community, because they think everyone in the community hates them. And then you get confrontations. To me they lack an identity. I see it in the club where I drink. Some of the young GAA lads there will start singing IRA songs, and I just feel sorry for them. But then it's partly our own fault. It's not that you deliberately romanticise the conflict or deliberately romanticise prison – it's human nature to remember the good times and not the bad times. And when you talk about prison, like a protest and you throwing roof tiles at the screws, that's the joke bit. You don't talk about the 30-day lock-up afterwards and stuff like that. We have to recognise that we do that. And we go on a bit of an ego-trip at times, especially if you have an audience of young

people. That was why the idea for this programme came about: we realised we weren't talking about the bad things about prison, we were concentrating on the more humorous things.

[R] And these young people are an easy touch for the dissidents. We have these organisations wanting to go round to shoot them or beat them 'on behalf of the community' because they feel it helps to improve their standing within the community, and this in turn will help to justify their return to armed struggle.

[R] There is another side. I know kids who will sit and discuss politics with you, and you can sense that they have a fair handle on what they are talking about. Now, certainly we can try and explain to them that the conditions for armed struggle no longer exist and that the people don't want it, and then ask them why they want to join one of these dissident groups, and take up the gun to maybe carry out more Antrim and Craigavon²². We can try and get across to them that it is a totally different game now than it was in the seventies, eighties and early nineties, but many of them won't accept what we're saying. Indeed, there seems to be a growing support for the dissidents' message, from young people especially, in North Armagh and East Tyrone, and – believe it or not – in the 26-Counties, around Cork and Kerry and around the border counties. I mean, one website shows you Republican Sinn Féin's Bodenstown commemoration a few years ago – only fifty people there; aged mostly from their forties to their eighties. But last year? Close on 800, and the majority of them young. Now, as a Republican I am not going to say to any seventeen or eighteen-year-old that Republicanism is wrong, for I don't believe it is, but *physical force* Republicanism – especially now in 2009 – is definitely not going to achieve anything. Those two soldiers and the peeler; behind that was the dissidents' hope that maybe they'd bring down Stormont. But they didn't. The killings actually brought the parties together. McGuinness was *not* expected by the DUP to say what he said about the dissidents being 'traitors'; he said it from the heart, you could see it from his face. So there's two issues there: as well as the alienated kids hanging about the street, getting involved in whatever, there's also those young people who have given some thought to things. And we have to look seriously at what is happening in 2009 which would make someone sixteen or seventeen say: 'I want to go out there and shoot a peeler'. Obviously something is going on there.

And we have to look seriously at what is happening in 2009 which would make someone sixteen or seventeen say: 'I want to go out there and shoot a peeler'. Obviously something is going on there.

[R] I don't believe they can think far enough ahead. They might feel they want to join the IRA or the UDA or whatever, but they have in their minds the prestige and the fact that 'I'm one of the boys and people know I'm one of the

boys.’ They know nothing in depth about what being one of those ‘boys’ meant. They’re not really thinking about the killing that went on. And we have to ask them: are you prepared for that part of it; and if you think you can justify it now, do you think you will still be able to in twenty years’ time? Talk to us about it and we’ll tell you at least one side of this story that needs to be heard.

[L] I always say to them: what’s the point, it’s over? What do you want to come into the paramilitaries now for?

[R] The problem is that these dissident organisations are going to be vying for their attention, are going to be playing on their emotions, are going to be saying to them: ‘Oh, the IRA just couldn’t hack it any more.’ We need to be brutally honest with them; we need to show them the negative side.

[L] I think that just before the Good Friday Agreement it was the government who romanticised the jail situation. There are kids who are coming into the rebellious age today who still remember Mo Mowlam going into the jail, with the media circus all there. The kids said: ‘F***, that’s some jail!’ Those young kids got a distorted picture of jail life.

[Facil] What message would you like to pass on to young people?

[L] Don’t follow the path we followed.

[R] We need to tell them: see before you do anything, try and think it through as to why you would do it.

[R] You have to tell the young people the negative things about jail; just don’t think that this is an easy touch.

We need to tell them: see before you do anything, try and think it through as to why you would do it.

[R] I made no bones to my nephew: I did a life sentence, for killing people and other things, and we were once talking about one of the latest British Army deaths in Iraq and I said: ‘Look, he has a mother and father and family. No matter how I looked at a British soldier, whether I considered him a legitimate target or what, he had a mother and father, and maybe brother and sister, and it’s not just him that you hurt, it’s the whole family. You need to stress the seriousness of what people get involved in.’

[R] Tell them not to rush into anything, but question and look at what they are being told, as well as question the often jaundiced view they are getting of history.

[R] The ones that I have met will tell you that ‘we were betrayed, there was a Republican sell-out, you lot were defeated, but *we* will defeat them next time,

blah blah blah...' and with total conviction. A conviction you would maybe have seen in yourself years ago. And if they see people as legitimate targets they will not go to bed crying and saying this is terrible, certainly not the young people that I have come into contact with. They are saying: bring it on, the sooner the better. If they get to that stage it is probably too late to tell that kid: 'Look, you want to leave what you are in, for it's not the way to go.' It's trying to get in there *before* that mindset has closed. My son has never been involved in anything and he's now twenty-one years of age. But that's because in the house there was no Republicanism preached, I didn't bring my kids up with that, even though I was.

[R] It's all about challenging the misperceptions they hold and saying to them: 'Okay, we know what you feel, we felt like that at your age but we genuinely believe that it is pointless you getting into that because there are now other ways of doing things. If you are really serious about issues, then get involved in local politics – you will achieve more that way than you could with a gun.'

[R] It will never be the same again. We have got a real vote now, it's all a matter of how we use it. I don't see it going to the boil like that again.

[R] If the killing of the two soldiers and the peeler had provoked a Loyalist reaction then something might have happened. But the fact is it didn't and the status quo remained intact at Stormont. That should tell the young people that there is no desire for another military campaign. At the same time, in this place you can never say this or that can never happen. Some contentious Orange Order marches still retain the potential for inter-communal conflict. You can never be sure.

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[R] I hope and pray that things will never go back to those days. But it only takes one rocket on the Protestant or Catholic side, or the throwing of a petrol bomb through an 80-year-old's house, or a young family getting killed. Now, whatever side that happens on there is going to be a reaction. There could be a snowball effect afterwards. And that's what you don't want it to get to. Can we prevent that from happening? I think we can.

[L] Certainly we can.

[R] I think there are more safety values now, and it can be stopped from gathering momentum.

[Facil] How can we engage with young people. Have ex-prisoners an important role to play?

[L] Aye, big time. Because they have been there before. There's no point in bringing somebody to speak to young people that has nothing to do with what happened years ago, nothing to do with paramilitarism. It's better coming from those with experience. Only those who have been to jail can best tell young people not to follow the path which could take them there.

[L] There are kids now hanging around at the street corners who don't realise that fifteen years ago they wouldn't even have stood there in case somebody drove past and shot them.

[L] Many of them do have a romanticised view – they think you become a 'freedom fighter' and you do such and such and have high stature in the community. They don't realise that in the process some of your mates have been killed, family have been killed, people on the other side have been killed. We need to get them to understand the dehumanisation which went on. And the only way you can do that is by letting them hear people who have been through it. I think it will shock quite a few of them.

[R] The conflict is removed from their real experience, they don't feel the blood and guts aspect of it. It is sanitised, as well as romanticised.

The conflict is removed from their real experience, they don't feel the blood and guts aspect of it. It is sanitised, as well as romanticised.

[L] I know there is talk of using pictures as part of the engagement with young people; that should include pictures of the *effects* of the conflict, pictures of people after they were shot, after they were blew up, to say to them: this is what happens when you go out and do these things. We want to hit them with the reality of what it was like and *why* we don't want them to go down that road.

[R] I think what's important too is that we're not just there to talk to the kids, we have to *listen* to them, for I think we have a lot to learn from them. I think we can help them even more if we can get inside their heads and listen to what they are saying, so that we can relate back to them.

[L] We recently took some young people into interface areas and showed them that many people *still* have shutters on their windows and doors because they have never stopped living with their fears.

[L] They don't see the reality, that even recreational violence at the interface can easily escalate and someone could end up dead.

[L] When I was fourteen, fifteen, I would have been the worst rioter out there,

that was my life: get out there and throw stones. And then I got involved in deeper things. That's the problem. It is so easy to get involved in something which leads you somewhere else and you get into things for which you end up in prison, or seriously injured. It is a waste of your life.

[R] Or you're killing someone.

[R] I'm glad that we're all largely in agreement that there's two sides to this story and you need to see the bad side, or the negative things. Basically, what you are trying to tell them to do is to stop and think: everything that you do creates a reaction and you need to stop and think about the possible consequences of your actions, not only for yourself but for your community.

You are trying to tell them to stop and think: everything that you do creates a reaction and you need to stop and think about the possible consequences of your actions, not only for yourself but for your community.

[R] If they knew all this there would be a lot of young bodies with old heads on them. Unfortunately they have to learn by mistakes and the school of hard knocks. But if some of us can give them a helping hand by saying: 'Listen, this is what lies in front of you –whether or not you want to take heed of it.' You will always listen to a stranger rather than your own family. Even if we can change a few mindsets then it's worth it.

[L] If they can see that the likes of everybody in this room today... we're in here, we're being cordial to each other. We're never going to totally agree with each other, but we can gain from each other by listening and talking to one another. Ten years ago the riot squad would probably have had to come in here to separate us. If kids can see that we went through it all, done whatever we have done, but have now moved on –without giving up our different points of view and politics –and we're sitting here tonight talking, not throwing stones and bottles at each other. That alone will be a valuable lesson to them.

[L] And a surprise... most of them don't think that such things can happen, that both sides can meet like this.

Notes

- 1 Although the Civil Rights marches commenced in 1968, many people view 1969 as the start of the Troubles, largely because this is when the first fatalities occurred.
- 2 On 3 July 1970, when soldiers searched a house in the Lower Falls Road, rioting ensued and hundreds of troops then sealed off the area. The episode became known as the 'Falls Curfew' and the Army maintained the curfew for 34 hours. The Official IRA decided to take on the Army and three civilians died in gun battles. 1,600 canisters of CS gas were fired into the area. The curfew was finally lifted when 1000 women from surrounding areas marched in carrying milk and bread.

- 3 On 9 August 1971 the government, at the behest of the Unionist leadership, introduced 'Internment without trial' and 342 men, mostly from the Official IRA, were arrested in early morning raids.
- 4 Fianna Éireann, Irish Republican youth movement.
- 5 30 January 1972, when British paratroopers shot dead 13 men after a protest rally in Derry.
- 6 In March 1978, in the Maze prison, prisoners refused to leave their cells to go to the washrooms – this was the beginning of the 'no wash protest'. Following on from this, in a dispute over the emptying of chamber pots, prisoners resorted to smearing excrement on their cell walls, and the 'dirty protest' had begun, which by that summer involved over 250 Republican prisoners.
- 7 Ulster Defence Regiment, set up by government in April 1970 after the disbandment of the B-Specials.
- 8 In a statement on 5 August 1986 the IRA said that it wished to clarify who was considered a legitimate target. Their list of people and businesses who were 'part of the war machine' by their work for the security forces, and who would be 'treated as collaborators' who 'must expect to suffer the consequences', included building contractors; civil servants; fuel and cleaning contractors; British Telecom; Standard Telephones; shipping and bus companies who transported soldiers and UDR members; and vending machine suppliers. On the 27th the IRA further warned doctors, solicitors and clergymen who had to visit RUC bases to display 'appropriate signs' on their vehicles. On the 28th a young Protestant was shot dead in Derry because he had worked as an electrician in a local UDR base.
- 9 The H-blocks were within the Maze prison, so named because of their shape, each block holding approximately 100 cells.
- 10 Airey Neave, shadow Northern Ireland secretary, killed when an INLA bobby-trap bomb exploded underneath his car at the House of Commons.
- 11 Members of the IRSP (Irish Republican Socialist Party), whose paramilitary wing was the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), refer to themselves as 'Irps', pronounced 'Erps'.
- 12 Leader of the notorious 'Shankill Butchers' UVF murder gang. Assassinated by the IRA in 1982.
- 13 Castlereagh Holding Centre, the RUC's main interrogation unit in Belfast.
- 14 In 1982/83 police use of over two dozen informers ('supergrasses') led to the conviction of some 600 members of Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organisations. Most of these were released on appeal and the system itself was ended in 1985.
- 15 Diplock courts, established in 1972, dispensed with trial by jury and were heard by a single judge.
- 16 A reference to the IRA's first use of the 'human bomb'. On 24 October 1990, Patsy Gillespie, a Catholic father of three, and a canteen worker in Fort George army base in Londonderry, was forced to drive a van bomb to Coshquin vehicle checkpoint on the border with Donegal while his family were held captive. The bomb was set off while he was still in the driving seat, killing him and five soldiers. His wife said later: 'He put his arms around us and said, "Everything will be all right, don't worry." I think I knew then that he wasn't coming back.'
- 17 On 8 November 1987, eleven people were killed by an IRA bomb as they waited for a Remembrance Sunday ceremony to begin at the war memorial in Enniskillen. Known as the 'Poppy Day bombing'.
- 18 In mid-June 2009, following weeks of racist attacks, 100 Romanians fled their homes in South Belfast, and had to be provided with emergency accommodation in a church hall.
- 19 The building which housed the Northern Ireland parliament, which had been established after the Partition of Ireland in 1921. In 1934 the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Sir James Craig, said in a Stormont debate: 'All I boast is that we are a Protestant Parliament and Protestant state.' It was prorogued (suspended) in 1972, but is now the seat of the new Northern Ireland Assembly.
- 20 The four provinces of Ireland: Ulster, Munster, Leinster, Connaught.
- 21 In May 2009 a Loyalist gang invaded a Catholic estate in Coleraine and assaulted two Catholic men, one of whom died, the other being left seriously injured.
- 22 On 7 March 2009 two unarmed soldiers were shot dead outside Massereene Barracks in Antrim town by the Real IRA. Two days later a PSNI officer was shot dead in Craigavon by the Continuity IRA.