

Republicanism in transition

(2) Beginning a debate

compiled by

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Introduction

This is the second in a series of pamphlets on the theme *Republicanism in transition*. They were initiated following requests from republican community activists who felt that pamphlets – and the discussions from which they were compiled – could help facilitate a much-needed debate within grassroots republicanism.

The first pamphlet [Island Pamphlet No. 96, *The need for a debate*†] provided the opportunity for different republican organisations to state their respective positions on a number of pertinent issues, without any editorial censorship and without those positions being challenged in a group setting. The idea behind this second pamphlet was to invite representatives from the participating organisations to engage in face-to-face discussions around those same issues.

The individuals who participated in the discussions which form the basis of this second document are either current members, or were former members, of a number of republican groupings: Official Republican Movement, éirígí, Republican Network for Unity, Irish Republican Socialist Party, Republican Sinn Féin, 32 County Sovereignty Movement, and Sinn Féin. A number of independent republicans and community activists also participated.

The pamphlet is divided into two parts. The first is an edited summary of a discussion involving a dozen participants. A similar number of people who could not make that meeting, but who expressed a desire to contribute, were interviewed separately, and their thoughts are presented in the second part.

[*Note:* Reference is frequently made in the document to two specific events: the murder of PSNI Constable Ronan Kerr by the Real IRA in Omagh on 2 April 2011, which took place two weeks before the group discussion; and the local government and Assembly elections of 5 May, which took place either before, or subsequent to, the interviews.]

Michael Hall *Farset Community Think Tanks Co-ordinator*

† Available as a free pdf from: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

Group discussion

The need for a debate

- First of all, any comments, or feedback, on the ‘position paper’ pamphlet?
- The pamphlet was very well received within our group. There are a lot of people eager to have an input into this debate as it develops.
- Reading through the different submissions, our own group felt that if the name of each organisation had been omitted, and we had been left to attribute one, in some cases you could have listed any number of organisations, the submissions were so similar in content.
- I think it was useful in terms of just opening up the debate, because my concern is that many republicans are afraid to voice their opinions. I felt it useful to see different organisations just stating their positions. And, to me, no position in that pamphlet was a radical departure from what I have always understood as Irish Republicanism. In fact, what it did indicate to me is that there might be a way to find a ‘republican position’ which would command a broad front. So I found it useful, and I also gave copies to people in the Protestant community – and they too felt it useful. One senior loyalist said to me: “It’s better people articulating their own argument, than other people articulating it for them.”
- I agree with you, I think there are more points that would lead to a broad front than those which would militate against it. But sometimes you can pull together a group like this, and then find that – whether out of politeness or whatever – people ignore the hard issues. For example, the question of armed struggle. The use of armed struggle will always engender intense debate within republicanism, because there will be pros and cons on ideological, political and humanitarian grounds, and there will be a massive argument about the tactics, strategy, and timing. I mean, it is hard to find a strain of republicanism which hasn’t interfaced with the use of armed struggle; but the timing, the political backdrop that is required, the political vehicle that carries it forward, etc. – those are all the hard issues. But we mustn’t run away from them.

Sometimes you can pull together a group like this, and then find that – whether out of politeness or whatever – people ignore the hard issues. For example, the question of armed struggle... But we mustn’t run away from [these hard issues].

- I don't see any republican grouping saying that, in the past, armed struggle was not a legitimate thing to use. The question *now* is whether people feel that circumstances have changed, that the conditions are no longer right. I think Gerry Adams said a number of years ago, about physical street protest, that he would sit on the road if the time was right. So is it about timing: you try something, and if it doesn't work you then move to a more extreme position?
- The example you use raises issues about more than just timing. Adams once said that he would be quite prepared to sit with the people on the Ormeau Road, and then in 2010 he made a completely opposite statement and directly criticised the people who sat down on the Crumlin Road in Ardoyne. In Sinn Féin's case it's now not so much about timing, or tactics, but about party politics. Sinn Féin is occupying a different position than they were years ago. That's what I mean when I say that there are a lot of hard issues. Now, I don't think these are issues anybody needs to run away from, but if you don't address them in an open fashion what you end up with is not a broad front at all. For example, the position I would hold on the tactical use or non-use of armed struggle would be completely different from RSF [Republican Sinn Féin]. That doesn't mean that I wouldn't be prepared to sit down and argue the toss and look for what the common ground is. I also think that one of the key issues for beginning any republican debate is us agreeing those areas that *can* be put forward for broad-frontism, and those areas where we are not going to find common ground.
- I can't see any common ground at present. Look at Easter now: *seven* parades going up the Falls between Easter Sunday and Easter Monday! It's mad. It starts to get to the stage where it is becoming farcical, and what happens is that the biggest parade is allowed to claim the legitimacy.
- In relation to the point [on the Agenda†] as to whether we believe debate is necessary, the position we [Republican Network for Unity] came to was that debate between revolutionary republicans *is* necessary, but not with those who have redefined republicanism to the extent where we could now establish little or no common ground. Debate with them would just be for debate's sake; there would be no end goal. So we drew a line in the sand and said, 'If you've gone beyond this point there's not really much we can debate with you about.' And that line in the sand was espousing social democracy as opposed to socialism, or espousing and practising engagement with the state or the PSNI [Police Service of Northern Ireland], to the detriment of the overall republican goal.
- I had a discussion on that theme yesterday with community workers in the New Lodge, who all come from a republican background. And they were saying that if the goal of republicanism is to work for the betterment of the ordinary people of Ireland, then the *needs* of those people should be paramount. However, in

† See Appendix, page 36

the process of doing things for their communities, they have to engage with the state – from the city council, to the housing authorities, to the PSNI. They have no option in that, if they genuinely want to get things done for the community. Now, they didn't feel any less republican, but, according to them, they have been sniped at by other republicans who say: 'Oh, you've sold out...'

- We're not talking about it in terms of people trying to get their bins lifted. We're talking in terms of things which prevent movement towards the goal of a United Ireland. For example, Sinn Féin have redefined republicanism to mean getting as many seats as they can at Stormont, and engaging with the state at all levels. They're not moving towards a genuine republican objective.

- Working in the community you get this argument all the time: does having to work with state agencies make us bad people? And there needs to be a clear distinction made between, say, acknowledging the role of the PSNI in normal day-to-day community life, and political acceptance of them as an arm of the state. I would argue that *every republican*, at some time or other, has had contact with the RUC or the PSNI, whether holding the line at protests or having your car stolen. But these are the arguments which are used and they must not be allowed to get in the way of a proper debate. Having contact with agencies on the ground is totally different from political acceptance of the state, or Partition, so it is.

- One of the points a member of our own group was debating, quite forcefully, was that you can *re-focus* republicanism, but you cannot *re-define* it. If these people have watered it down so much that it is no longer republicanism, that's up to them. But republicanism itself cannot be redefined; republicanism is republicanism. As for the question: is there a need for debate amongst republicanism? Yes, there is. I would say that what we're doing now is taking the first tentative steps towards creating that debate. Okay, it might be on a micro level, but every journey starts with a first step, and this could be it. If you go to the next question [on the Agenda] of who's invited to that debate, how far do you go down the line? Do you invite Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the SDLP...? As far as I am concerned, if you're trying to create a serious debate within republicanism, then every single person who calls themselves republican must be invited, although we know ourselves that some will probably not come along. But they must be invited; you cannot exclude anybody who calls themselves a republican.

If you're trying to create a serious debate within republicanism, then every person who calls themselves republican must be invited... you cannot exclude anybody.

- Sinn Féin won't come. I know they have been sent invites to this discussion we're now having. They're only interested in debate if they *own* it. Their main concern is *ownership*.

- I think maybe we're jumping the gun a bit here, when we're beginning to

talk about ‘broad fronts’ and all. I thought that this was primarily going to be a forum for discussion where we would debate with each other, and influence each other, without any parameters being set. I think the first debate should be: what *is* Irish Republicanism? What does it stand for? And how is it different from Irish Nationalism? And I agree, everybody should be invited to that debate, anybody who calls themselves an Irish Republican. And it should be a forum for ongoing debate. Rather than people accusing us of all being ‘like ducks in a pond quacking at each other’, we can respond that there’s a debate which is taking place where we go along and discuss different issues. These are debates that we can all come along to, so that we can all hear one another’s viewpoints. And we’re bound to influence each other, for we wouldn’t be where we are now without having been influenced by other people over the years. And I think that’s the best that we can aim for at the minute. Any talk about ‘broad fronts’ and such is a quite separate issue, and I don’t think this is the forum for that.

- When I mentioned ‘broad front’ I didn’t mean that we were all going to fly ourselves under the one banner. What I meant was that at least we can identify broad principles. And I agree, one of those broad principles could be: what does it mean to be an Irish Republican in the present day? And are Irish Republican objectives still achievable? And do we achieve it through mobilising community power, or through military struggle, or whatever? I think you’re right, we need to explore those questions.
- Could I throw in one suggestion. After the civil war you had the Republican Congress† in 1934. I was just wondering whether the concept of a Congress might begin the process of developing a strategy, a political and physical strategy that at some level would reflect where republicanism is at today?
- As regards the Congress, that’s where Sinn Féin is at the minute. I think they’re at the question which defeated the Congress: do you go for a Republic, or do you go for a socialist republic? They would argue they’re going for a republic, socialism can come later.
- There were many things on today’s ‘agenda’, and it’s clear we’re not going to go through them all. But I do believe that *every one* of those points is a discussion in itself. And we need to have a thorough debate on each of those points.

† The Republican Congress was founded in 1934, when left-wing republicans split from the IRA. It was a socialist organisation dedicated to a ‘workers’ republic’. At the Republican rally at Bodenstown in 1934, clashes occurred between Congress supporters and IRA members. The IRA leadership did not authorise banners other than its own and when Congress supporters refused to put away their banners IRA stewards moved to prevent them from marching. Clashes broke out during which a banner reading ‘Break the Connection with Capitalism’ – carried by several dozen Congress members from Belfast’s Shankill Road branch – was torn in half. Despite moderate success in agitating on behalf of workers the Congress split during a convention held in September 1934. The group went into decline thereafter and was essentially defunct by 1936.

Republicanism and the Protestant community

- So, what type of things would stand out as being able to attract common ground among republicans?
- Certainly, in relation to the Brits, the republican position is quite clear, and acceptable to nearly everybody: getting the Brits out of Ireland.
- But who *are* the Brits? Just *who* do republicans want out?
- That's an important question. If we're coming from a republican point of view, and talking on behalf of *all* the people of Ireland, we need to define who we actually want to put out. For me, it is the British *government* presence, and the many ways in which they interfere in our country... However, we also have a mass of people here who see themselves as British – that's their identity. So, I think we need to define exactly who we mean, and that's something I feel we could come to an agreement on, through discussion and debate. To me, it is the British government and the British state's interference in our country, not those people who are British.
- If you accept that the Protestant community – who define themselves as British – are part of those who comprise the Irish nation, does republicanism then need to accommodate their Britishness?
- I was born a Catholic, but that's about it. To me, it is not about sectarianism, it is not about religion. The 1916 Proclamation calls for us to embrace the Protestant community.
- To accommodate their Protestantism would not be a problem. But accommodate their *Britishness*?
- There's a massive distinction between nationality and identity, and what you're talking about is identity. I couldn't care less if one million Protestants within a United Ireland considered their identity to be British. It's the difference between identity and nationality, and who has a right to govern over you. Certainly, we can sit down and nail more precisely just what we mean by the 'British presence', but what I object to as an Irish republican is that external influence which has been forcibly instituted upon the Irish nation. Because it isn't something that we asked for, it isn't something that we have a choice about, and for me that's the underlying flaw in the Good Friday Agreement. It builds on the basis that you *accept* Partition, and you accept that the British have a role to play here.
- But the question as to whether the Protestant population will be allowed to remain British for as long as they wish has to be faced up to.
- In the spirit of Wolfe Tone I don't have an issue around it. But I think that the

people sitting round this table, myself included, need to reassure the Protestant community that we're not intending to push them out, that we're trying to reach accommodation for all. Our main objective is a *united* Ireland, and I think the Protestant community need to hear that. Especially in the present climate.

- One of the things we have to do is to define *what kind* of united Ireland we want. That's our problem: no republican group has clearly defined what type of United Ireland we want the Protestant community to be part of. The majority of Protestants still believe that the Catholic Church has got a special constitutional place in Ireland. It hasn't been hammered home to them enough that those days are gone. They still believe it, that's their perception. Now, it's not up to *them* to change their perceptions, it's up to *us* to change those perceptions, and we basically have failed in doing that. We cannot ask someone to come and join us in this great utopian dream, and leave it at that. You have to tell them what the dream is, and what the benefits are for them.

One of the things we have to do is to define what kind of united Ireland we want. That's our problem: no republican group has clearly defined what type of United Ireland we want the Protestant community to be part of.

- The *Éire Nua* programme tried to do that, tried to lay out in detail the shape of a United Ireland, in terms of its political structure, its socio-economic structure, and its relationship with the Protestant community. It's what first drew me to the Provisionals, because the *Éire Nua* concept was the one we were using back then. But, I agree with you, we need to link in to the Protestant community, work with them, and I think there is potential for movement. Now, the centenary commemorations of the Easter Rising will be held in 2016. There's also a 'border vote' in 2016. And unless republicans can agree on how those two events will be promoted, I worry for what could happen.

- As Republicans we would presumably want to bring Protestants into the 2016 commemorations. But they have their own anniversaries coming up soon, such as the signing of the Ulster Covenant. We want them to share in this commemoration we're going to have, but are *we* going to share in that with them? We have to ask them what the Covenant delivered for them; but equally they have the right to ask us whether the Proclamation delivered for us. We need to engage with them on that. And we haven't done it. We have done it on individual things, but have we done it enough?

- I have a problem with this notion that republicans have done nothing to convince the Protestant community...

- I didn't say 'nothing', I said we hadn't done enough. We have failed to convince them, so no matter what we have done, we clearly haven't done enough.

- But at what stage do we stop pandering to those for whom equality isn't acceptable? Because we're offering them equality, we're not offering them anything less. Nobody here is promoting the image of rosary beads and Church interference – indeed, we ourselves have suffered from it. I am blue in the face arguing with Protestants, unionists, screws in the jails, explaining our equality agenda. A significant number of them don't want that equality, and they're happy to use force to prevent us from getting there. So, what concerns me is at what stage do we start diluting our own principles to suit their intransigence?
- Your statement highlights what I said earlier, about us needing to *define* the meaning of Irish Republicanism. Wolfe Tone said that Irish Republicanism was the unity of 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'. He didn't say: but if you can get enough Catholics together you can forget about the Prods. He never said that.
- But in that particular quote of Tone's, he also said to break the connection with England, the source of all our ills. And, with respect, your own organisation [Official Republican Movement] makes a lot out of the second part of his quote but very little out of the first part.
- But *who* did he say would break the connection with England? The unity of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, in the common name of Irishman. He didn't say that if you got enough Catholic nationalists together, you could forget about the Prods. We'd have to change it then. Do we now say: we're followers of Tone but we can dispense with the need to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter?
- I have been working with loyalists, and I make no excuse to them about who I am, or that I want the British out of my country. And I know that it *is* possible to open up debate. I helped organise, along with [loyalist leader] Jackie McDonald, a number of functions over in Taughmonagh community centre. The idea behind that was to get them to listen and share where they happened to be. And they were willing to do that. And then I tried to organise a follow-up event in my local GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association] club, with McDonald and others coming over, and people sitting down with them from the republican tradition. I had Ruairí Ó Brádaigh and others coming along, prepared to sit at the same table with these loyalists, to begin a debate. And then, after political pressure was put on the club's committee members, it was suddenly cancelled. I don't need to tell you who was responsible for doing that!
- We're talking here about winning over Ulster Protestants. But there's an even bigger question: how do we win over the rest of the Irish population? You'd think that we had 95% of the Nationalist population behind us. And how many of the people who vote for Sinn Féin are really republican? Sinn Féin just went in

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and took the Catholic nationalist vote and changed it around a bit. When I first heard Adams say he was ‘representing the nationalist people’ I was shocked, because I was reared with Adams and I know what nationalism meant. His father and my father got bated off the streets by the Hibernians, and there he was talking about representing the ‘nationalist people’? What Sinn Féin have is a nationalist vote, and we have to turn that into a republican vote.

What is meant by a ‘United Ireland’?

- As has already been said, we need to convince more than just the Protestant/unionist community. Go out there and talk to anybody in the nationalist community about a ‘United Ireland’, and they don’t have any real understanding. We ourselves might, but that’s largely because it’s our aspiration and we have educated ourselves about republican history. But the ordinary person in the street hasn’t. And I think that’s why this type of debate is critical. We need to re-educate people about the republican ideal. Through the current process of normalisation we have achieved equality, and most people think that republicans should be content with that. But the republican struggle was about far more than equality, it was about *self-determination*, and getting Britain out of our country. So, we need to educate the public that while most republicans have no problems with the peace process, we have fundamental issues with the present *political* process.
- Same as if you ask most Catholics/nationalists what a socialist republic is, they wouldn’t have a clue. I think that’s where it brings it down to the re-focusing of republicanism, because it has been watered down so much and many people only view what it means through Sinn Féin’s eyes. I think that has to be challenged.
- There are documents out there, like *Éire Nua* – although I disagree with the federalism in it – the 1916 Proclamation, the 1919 Democratic Programme of the First Dáil, which actually state what Irish people are going to do for Irish people, and it doesn’t really matter whether you’re a Catholic, Protestant or Dissenter. *Our* difficulty is not what we would do with a million Protestants, for a million Protestants will decide themselves what they’re going to do, and all we can do is put to them what we consider to be the best option. No, our difficulty, at this particular historical juncture, is that we have to confront the question: *what is republicanism in 2011?* For example, does Sinn Féin represent a republican vision of the future? Not for me they don’t. And that is tied in with the question of who should be involved in the debate. I feel that you need to have an open door, because I would enjoy having Sinn Féin at meetings like this, or Fianna Fáil, or Fine Gael, or even the Free State Labour Party, to put to them my belief that they *don’t* represent a republican ideal or ideology. That what they have is an *aspiration*: it would be nice if it happened, but if it doesn’t, well, we’ll not get too worried about it. For me the key issue is how we put forward the republican

stall in its most attractive fashion, which will prove conclusively, to not just the million Unionists but everyone else, that the republican ideal for the future is the best way for us all to go.

- Sinn Féin is set on electoral success, not ideological purity. If you go onto the Falls Road and ask somebody ‘what’s a republican?’ they’re liable to respond that it’s somebody who believes in a united Ireland. No, that’s a nationalist. The lines of distinction between republicanism and nationalism have been blurred. And that’s not a coincidence. Sinn Féin did that deliberately, to win the middle-class Catholic vote, and that’s how they’re going about it. By claiming to be republicans but acting like nationalists. And they need to be challenged on that. But Sinn Féin don’t want that debate.
- See if you organise a debate about any subject in the world – *except* republicanism – and you bring in a couple of token Fenians, a couple of token Prods, a couple of the statutory bodies, a couple of high-flyers, Sinn Féin will be there. But not if it is about republicanism. Because they believe that the definition of Republicanism now *belongs to them*, and once they then have to come in and sit round a table and say what their republicanism actually is, they risk being exposed.
- I don’t think we should write them off entirely. There might be plenty of the rank-and-file who would be interested in this sort of debate. It is the leadership which is pushing it to the side.
- Sinn Féin don’t mention a Republic now, it’s a ‘new Ireland’ that they talk about. Even worse, throughout Ireland republicanism is regarded as the most extreme form of nationalism. The majority of nationalists believe that, and all of the unionists believe that: that we’re all just extreme nationalists. And even many of those who would have been more sympathetic to republicanism, now tend to look upon it as an ‘old concept’ that failed and failed again. That’s our problem. What this forum for debate will have to bring out is that republicanism is something which has *never been tried*, and it’s a new type of society we are talking about, something which has a vitality about it.
- Republicanism has seen the biggest split in its history, but it has been an ongoing, non-violent split. People have been walking away from the IRA on a day-to-day basis... and there have been different catalysts which made people walk away. I think we need to realise that it’s a leadership-driven initiative, and that there are a lot of rank-and-file republicans who are not happy with what has been happening. But, also, I think we need to get into our heads that Sinn Féin are going to do what they’re going to do. We should not be expending our energies in trying to defeat them. That should not be our objective; we should just be fresh about what we’re about, approachable about what we’re about, and continually giving an analysis to as many people out there who will listen to it. For, make no mistake, this meeting today is being listened to. There’s people out there – republicans, loyalists, British, Irish – waiting to see what the outcome of

this debate will be, and who will want to read the pamphlet. And that's all to the good; we need to ensure that our continuous analysis is being put out there.

- I agree with you: we should stop worrying about what Sinn Féin are doing. They are going to do what they are going to do – so let them go and do it. The debates we're having... let's keep putting our views out on the table, let people see our version of what's actually happening. That's our starting point: stop worrying so much about Sinn Féin. I think we've all gone through that anger bit, let's move on.

1918-19[†] and political legitimacy

- Our [Official Republican Movement] view, which we feel is a realistic one, is to accept that the referenda North and South a few years ago superseded all previous votes. There's no way we can say that 1919 can still hold. There was a vote on the Good Friday Agreement, and whether you agree with it or not, the majority of people in Ireland voted for it.
- But the 1918 vote is no less legitimate than the concept of separate referenda, with the British Army basically saying that if this doesn't go our way we're sending our death squads back in, our troops back in, our choppers back in, and we'll crush you like we always did – if you don't vote within these criteria. That's what Good Friday was, no matter how much it was dressed up.
- Do you seriously think Catholic nationalist voters were afraid of the Brits starting the war up again?
- Absolutely.

[†] In 1918 Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom and was represented in the British House of Commons by 105 MPs. From 1882–1918 most Irish MPs were members of the Irish Parliamentary Party, but following the Easter Rising of 1916 the popularity of the more radical Sinn Féin increased dramatically. In the 1918 general election Sinn Féin won 73 out of the 105 Irish seats in the Westminster parliament. The Sinn Féin MPs chose to follow through on their manifesto promise of abstention from Westminster and instead assembled as a revolutionary parliament called *Dáil Éireann*. Its first meeting was held in January 1919. In 'The Declaration of Independence' they asserted that the Dáil was the parliament of a sovereign state called the 'Irish Republic'. On the same day as the Dáil's first meeting two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary were ambushed and killed in Tipperary by members of the Irish Volunteers. This incident had not been ordered by the Dáil but the course of events soon drove the Dáil to recognise the Volunteers as the army of the Irish Republic and the ambush as an act of war against Great Britain. The Volunteers then changed their name to the Irish Republican Army, and swore allegiance in August 1920 to both the Republic and the Dáil. In September 1919 the Dáil was declared illegal by the British authorities and thereafter met only intermittently and at different locations. The First Dáil held its last meeting in May 1921. The First Dáil and the general election of 1918 have come to occupy a central status in Irish republicanism. The 1918 general election was the last occasion on which the entire island of Ireland voted in a single election held on the one day. The landslide victory for Sinn Féin was seen as an overwhelming endorsement of the principle of a united independent Ireland. Republican paramilitary groups often claimed that their campaigns derived legitimacy from this 1918 mandate, and some continue to do so.

- I think they were more afraid of saying that they didn't want peace. That was the difficulty. The referendum was sold differently in both states, so it wasn't a true referendum. It should have been *one* set of words, *one* statement, *one* referendum. But it wasn't. In the North people voted differently to how they voted in the Free State.
- I think we're beginning to fall into that old trap: we were defeated last time, so we'll put it right next time. You could find fault with *any* election, and what it was supposed to be about. The reality is that if people vote through the ballot box, we can't then come along and claim they voted for the wrong thing.
- They were voting for two separate things, each referendum was different.
- But it's still as relevant today as the 1918 vote.
- No, it's not. And the difference is this. In 1918 you had the *only* all-Ireland vote and it wasn't recognised. To have two differently-worded referenda, even if they're held simultaneously, is *not* the same as the people of Ireland, the whole nation, being allowed to decide on its future. Anyway, I have asked people from the Free State about the referendum vote: 'Look, you voted for the Abolition of Articles 2 and 3, and you voted in favour of the Good Friday Agreement; tell me – what part of the Good Friday Agreement appealed to you, what parts did you like?' 'Well, I never read it. It doesn't affect me, it only affects the North.' The bulk of people in the Twenty-Six Counties – indeed, the bulk of the people in the Six Counties – never read the Good Friday Agreement. What they did was they took on board other people's commentary on the Good Friday Agreement, and then made a decision as to whether or not they liked it. And what the legislators did was they pitched it as a vote for, or against, peace.
- But does that not apply to any election, any vote? Political parties make promises, and people vote for them, and a government is elected. Would you regard *any* government then as legitimate?
- The only government in the world I consider legitimate is the Cuban government. If you ask me whether I consider any of the western parliamentary democracies to be legitimate: no, none of them. Because you are never given a genuine vote, you are given a vote within the parameters set by the political and economic system. And if you step outside that, you become exactly what we are now. You become the social pariahs because you want to talk about something that isn't on their agenda. But just because Sinn Féin defines republicanism in a certain fashion, doesn't mean that *we* have to follow suit, or else we look like we are out of kilter. I don't believe we're out of kilter, I believe Sinn Féin is out of kilter, and that's why Sinn Féin won't take part in debates like this.
- We can't blame the population for voting for Sinn Féin.
- I'm not blaming them.

- If you don't agree with any European so-called democracy now, was 1918 any different, were *they* heading for a socialist republic? Was Sinn Féin not a very conservative organisation? A dual monarchy, and all that? Is 1918 not irrelevant as well, then? It was not a 'legitimate' vote.
- No, it was not a legitimate vote. But it was more relevant.
- Why? Because you would like it to be?
- It is more relevant, because if you chop any territorial entity into pieces and hold different plebiscites in each piece, and then combine the results, that's patently absurd. Even though I don't think that the democratic process that was used in 1918 is any better than is used now, it at least gave a more accurate reflection of what the Irish *nation* wanted, than the Good Friday Agreement and the referenda which went with it.
- If there was a vote tomorrow for a 32-county Ireland, you might struggle to get a majority for unity, simply because of the present dire economic situation. Yes, some people will vote with their hearts, purely on emotional grounds, but I know a lot of people who would say: yes, I want to see a united Ireland, but not at the minute, my pension might be at risk, my mortgage might be at risk.
- It amazes me that republicans keep asking for a 32-county referendum on an all-Ireland. Why do republicans start out by *accepting* Partition, and then ask for a vote to try and overturn it? We don't need a vote. The Irish nation is a historic nation. It wasn't the Irish who decided to partition this island. Why do we accept British boundaries in the first place? And if we don't accept them what we should never ask for is a referendum, North and South, to unite the island. What we should be asking for is a referendum about the *future of the island of Ireland*.

It wasn't the Irish who decided to partition this island. Why do we accept British boundaries in the first place? What we should never ask for is a referendum, North and South, to unite the island. What we should be asking for is a referendum about the future of the island of Ireland.

- Adams has managed to sell the Sinn Féin concept of what republicanism is. I can't see us selling republicanism, as *we* would understand it, to the rest of the people of Ireland, let alone to the Protestant population of the North.
- I am a youth worker, and when we embark on any new programme, it has invariably been written by some adult. And what the young people usually need to do is to break it right down to its core parts, so that they can understand what it's about, and its purpose and objectives. That's what *we* need to do. We need to go back to the drawing-board and break republicanism down into Lego Blocks for people to understand. Especially the socialist aspects; people need to understand the benefits of what we're proposing.

What should be the purpose of debate?

- I think that some sort of forum for debate should be ongoing. There's a picture that's painted of most of the people in this room, by the establishment parties, Sinn Féin especially, that we're either cranks or criminals, and that we have nothing to offer. And nobody is going to come up and rap our office doors, or wherever we are, and ask what our views are, unless there's been an incident. But if there is an ongoing forum for debate, and there's an outcome – like these pamphlets – where that debate can be revealed to a wider audience, showing what different groups said on important issues, to me that would be a positive sign of movement, of dialogue taking place – for such debate has been largely absent.
- As one of the questions on the Agenda asks: how can different organisations be productively engaged, especially when they won't respond to invites? But because they don't come it doesn't mean to say that *we* shouldn't come. And I agree with you, I don't think this should just finish with a booklet. We should be looking now at how we create debate in a bigger forum. Maybe a public debate?
- I agree that it's not big enough, and even the 750 copies of the first pamphlet went within a few weeks. But the idea wasn't that *everybody* would be in that pamphlet, but that it *reflected* the debate which is going on at the grassroots, even if on a small scale. So that when people read it they might say: yes, that's how I feel too, I can see where he's coming from... or, I don't agree with him. Hopefully the discussion taking place today will also mirror what's going on out there, so that when the second pamphlet is distributed, it will bring hundreds more people into the debate.
- What struck me about the reception the first pamphlet got, was the hunger there is out there among republicans for a debate. And the debate doesn't break down on the question of who wants to kill peelers and who doesn't want to kill peelers, or Brits. It's very much people wanting to talk about, and share their views on, the republican ideal, and whether we can make it something relevant and worthwhile. For at present it seems to be something tarnished. Anyone who calls themselves a 'republican' nowadays risks being labelled – as has already been said – as either a crank or a criminal. Indeed, it's more acceptable now to talk about the 'people of Ireland' in some euphemistic way. But that pamphlet showed that there is a republican debate that's needed out there.
- With regard to a public debate, it is probably too soon for that. I mean, this is the first time we here will have sat down around a table, to actually even begin teasing out questions such as: what is it about republicanism which makes it so worthwhile, which made it something that people were prepared to risk life and liberty for? I think there's a process that needs to be gone through, whether it's a

quarterly talking shop, or a monthly meeting... but something that allows people to interact with others, and define what republicanism is all about.

- I have to say that there are individuals within the Sinn Féin rank and file who are good people. We should try to keep the door open for them.
- The intention is to try and keep the door open, not only for the rank and file, but for the leadership.

- I'm not sure we'll have any luck with the leadership. There was talk about Sinn Féin offering to have dialogue with those who blew up that lad Kerr. But Sinn Féin and whoever did it hold diametrically opposed positions. So, there's not an awful amount of 'dialogue' can take place. I think *this* level of debate – which we are engaged in – will prove far more critical, rather than the level of debate at that leadership level.

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- My problem is that I don't know where I am. I'm being honest with people. I believed at one stage in the revolution, I believed it was inevitable. And maybe it's depression, maybe it's age – I don't know – but I feel so despondent now.

- That's not just *your* problem, that's everybody's problem out there. We're all asking: where are we? where are we going? People are lost and don't know where to turn, or if they're even allowed to open their mouths. And if they do open their mouths... we've seen over the years the way people have been attacked or vilified, not only themselves but their families. People were scared to talk, or open up, or put their heads above the parapet for years. But now that's coming to an end, where people like ourselves are raising our heads above the parapet, and are prepared to come to the likes of these meetings and all the rest. So hopefully that change is on the way. But it is not just yourself who feels like that.

- That's a very real point you made there. The nature, the severity of the attacks on people speaking out has been frightening. In the past there was probably more violence directed against people who disagreed, whereas now it is done through innuendo, lies and propaganda. I remember some years ago we were active with the 32-County Sovereignty Movement – this was in 2001, 2002 – and I remember there were four 32CSM activists in the whole of West Belfast. I was one of them and I was living in the New Lodge. I remember standing in my flat, with no electric, no money for food or electricity, reading the *Andy'town News* from the street-light coming through the window. And there was an article about

the criminality that we were all supposedly involved in and about the millions of pounds we had stacked away. But that was all driven by very powerful people in the media who were waging a psychological battle against us.

- I don't think we should be surprised by the lies and innuendos coming out. After all, when we were in the movement we were masters of it! We knew what to do to blacken people's names, how to destroy their character.
- People need to feel comfortable with the discussion, for obvious reasons. If someone plants a car-bomb, or shoots a Brit, they're not going to come in here, to explain why they did it, for the sake of a pamphlet. They'll be too busy keeping their heads down, hoping that they don't get caught. However, I think that the influences around this room should be a way of creating that environment where it's okay for them to come in – and not explain their position as such, for if you blow somebody up, then your position is very much out there – but to engage in debate with others as to whether a violent armed campaign is the way to progress republican goals. We need to create a safe environment, where people can come in and discuss the question of whether armed struggle is the way forward or not. And they certainly need to articulate it. You can't just blow somebody up in the name of a struggle and say: 'Well, we've done it, it doesn't matter.' They need to articulate *why* it was done. We need to use our influences to create that debate. These discussions could open the door to a genuine republican debate on the whole argument for and against armed struggle.

We need to use our influences to create that debate. These discussions could open the door to a genuine republican debate on the whole argument for and against armed struggle.

- If there was a Forum for republican debate it wouldn't be an entity as such, it would just be a coming together of individuals and groups. And if there was, say, a debate on the tactical use of violence, or whatever it might be, we could all state our respective positions, with the outcomes of the debate being published. It would allow a wider audience to see where we're each coming from.
- I firmly believe that we should take any opportunity that exists for debate. I work in a Protestant community and while it might be safer *not* to engage I find myself debating republicanism with Protestants all the time. For I welcome every opportunity for dialogue, and I believe that we *all* need to seize these opportunities.
- When people say to me, 'Why don't these people, these "dissidents", put their views across?' my response is: where? Tell me where? You don't have any fora for an alternative view to be put forward. And that's because Sinn Féin has corralled popular opinion to the extent that anyone who voices an alternative view to theirs risks being labelled – as had already been pointed out – as either

a crank or a criminal. Anyway, see the person or persons who were responsible for executing Ronan Kerr, or the two squaddies, or Stephen Carroll†, I don't need them to come into this room and tell me *why* they did it. I *know* why they did it. I think it is as plain as the nose on your face. The only point we need to be debating in this room, or places like this, is whether or not it has the desired effect, whether or not the political ramifications are worth it, and whether or not the timing is strategically and tactically opportune.

- I was at a conference where a speaker tried to dismiss what was happening by talking about 'young people' being led astray, and hoodwinked by sinister elements. And everybody there bought into this. So I asked: 'Where's your evidence for this? Where are your 16 and 17-year-olds in jail? All the people who have gone into jail in recent years have been in their 30s and 40s; seasoned people from previous campaigns.' The debate must be honest, it must be realistic.
- But how do you do that? I agree with armed struggle. I am sorry that young policeman was killed, I think it was tactically wrong. I think if they went out and shot a couple of bankers it might do the world more good. But the very question of who has, and who hasn't, the right to engage in armed actions, is full of hypocrisy. I could easily argue that the so-called 'land of the free' has killed more people around the world than Irish Republicans have ever done.
- There's a whole range of different views out there, and we must be able to create an environment where they can get an airing – and be opened up to debate.

Taking the debate forward

- So – how do we take that debate forward?
- We have discussed issues in a general way today, but we haven't got into the nitty-gritty of it. Maybe if people could give some thought to identifying two or three major issues – for example: a discussion on what is republicanism, or the use of armed struggle... or whatever.
- I think today has been really useful, even though we've skirted over a lot of things. It would be good to sit down and concentrate on just a couple of topics. Personally, I think that question on the agenda is very important: 'Does everyone agree that a debate within republicanism is necessary?'
- For me, I think the first topic should be the meaning and relevance of Irish Republicanism today. Let's take one major theme at a time. Now, I don't expect us to reach a consensus on any particular theme, but it would still be productive

† On 7 March 2009 the Real IRA shot dead two soldiers at Massereene Army Barracks in Antrim town. Two days later Catholic policeman Stephen Carroll was shot dead by the Continuity IRA in Craigavon.

to present the different views in a pamphlet, and then go on to the next topic. Personally, I think you have to start off with what we all think is republicanism, and what our respective organisations believe they stand for.

- People from our group felt that the last theme on the agenda – looking to the future – especially with such a significant centenary just around the corner, was something that they really wanted to get their teeth into. But how can you plan for the future if you haven't already determined where you're at *now*. So, I too think that the logical starting point is for us to ask ourselves, even if our answer still ends up as a broad compilation of different views: what is Irish Republicanism in 2011?

But how can you plan for the future if you haven't already determined where you're at now. I think the logical starting point is for us to ask ourselves: what is Irish Republicanism in 2011?

- Would people agree that a long-term aim should be for some sort of Republican Congress that would determine republicanism, its political and socio-economic strategy? Would there be general agreement that we could work towards that?
- Too soon at present.
- I also think it's too soon. For me, this debate should remain as loose as possible, until everybody is clear about what we each stand for.
- Maybe we are also jumping ahead of ourselves here. Is everybody first of all agreed that we should come together again?
- I think so, yes.
- Any debate has to be purposeful. Forums for forums' sake are pointless. You ask people why previous forums failed and most will say: it was going nowhere; at the start it was interesting to get people into a room and have them talking, but after the fifth meeting it became boring, there was no structure, there was no set goal. But if we do agree to continue this debate, I think the starting point should be: is a debate necessary? If you ask someone what it means to be a republican some of them will automatically pull the shutters down, because they believe that as they themselves are republican, that's good enough for them. If the discussion was around whether a debate was necessary, it would answer a lot of questions around where we came from, where we're at, and where we're going.
- Have we not more or less agreed today that a debate *is* necessary?
- I'm not so sure. Because there's groups out there who aren't here.
- I said earlier that I think this is the start of a debate, but it is only a very small, minute step, because, okay, while we have certain groups here, others aren't. And a lot of things will need to be looked at. No doubt when the rest of our own

group read the pamphlet that comes out of today they will be going, ‘Wish we had been at that.’ They had already wanted to be here but when they read it I’m sure they’ll want to be at the next one. Indeed, if the two of us don’t come to the next one, we will send other members of our group. We had a lad who almost gave up a hospital appointment – that he’s been chasing for eighteen months – to come here. And we had to say to him, ‘Look, we will go and report back.’

- Regarding the question: is a debate necessary? For anyone who doesn’t come they’re already making the point that they don’t feel the debate is necessary. Anyone who does come, they feel that a debate *is* necessary. For me, the question will be *what the debate is going to be about*, and I think we begin by saying: let’s look at a definition of what it is to be an Irish republican in 2011. That itself will set out the points you’re going to need to address in future discussions.
- As well as people who will say that meetings like these are pointless – they start out great, everyone has wonderful ideas, but never get anywhere – you have others who will ask: are you going along to that debate; who else will be there? If such and such a person is going to be there, then I’m not going.
- That’s a fact. When we leave from here, and people ask us who was present, some will say: ‘What, was so-and-so there! You weren’t talking to that bastard, were you?’ We’re all going to be faced with that; I am certainly going to be. And yet in my own mind there are people, within every one of the constituent organisations here, who I would have absolutely no problem working with, and I am sure everybody else feels more or less the same. So, that is something constructive we can take from today.
- Many comrades have been killed in various internal feuds. Even if the debate was to ensure that there was a genuine sharing and that that type of division would be avoided in future. Because if *we* weren’t doing it on each other, the Brits would be doing it. And you can bet that there will be whatever attempts these people can make to hinder any discussion from progressing, including this one.
- The voice of republicans needs to be out there. I don’t want people to be making a judgement on me on something I *haven’t* said. I want my voice to be loud and clear: these are my values and this is what republicanism means to me on a daily basis. I think if we don’t take such opportunities then we will continue to allow ourselves to be lambasted, to be corralled, and misrepresented.
- Some of us have talked today about extending the hand of friendship to unionism, but the hand of friendship has still to be extended within republicanism. There are republicans would barely look at you the length of the road, who want to marginalise you. And that includes people in the anti-Agreement camps. I think if we break it down into workshops, where people are able to engage, whether in road-shows or public forums, it may open up the arena for perceptions to be broken down, which may make these debates more productive.

- I don't think anyone came here under the illusion that anything dramatic was going to come out of this. It was a matter of sitting down and talking together and seeing where we can go, as well as contributing to the next booklet. As far as I am concerned, if we come out of this with an agreement that we're going to meet again, it's more of a success than what was hoped for. And let's not have any illusions that if we do meet again that we're going to solve everybody's problems. It might go nowhere, it might have a very short shelf-life, but I think everybody is up for it; I think everybody seems enthusiastic to make a go of it. And who knows where it might lead.

- I think it is important to take away from today that no-one has accused the other speakers of being 'wrong'. We might disagree with things, have differences of opinions, present individual analyses, but nobody has come out and said, 'No, you're wrong!' That's something constructive which can help make us move forward. Bar Michael, there's not one person in this room that I have met in my life before, and I don't think any of you have ever seen me. Yet we have given each other the common courtesy of listening to one another. As this develops, and I hope it does, we will have the confidence to say to each other: 'Look, I deeply disagree with you there on such and such an issue.' And maybe some of us, after any meeting, will go to each other's offices and have our own dialogue on those issues of disagreement. To see if a compromise or an understanding can be reached, or to see if we can win each other over to our own argument.

- I hope it does come to that point.

- I would say that there's no group here who hasn't heard a name which was blackened, somebody that they probably didn't know that well. But when they meet the person they go: that lad's alright. It has been a widely-used tactic.

- And it will be used in the future. The first thing they say to anyone who disagrees with the present process is that he's a 'dissident'. But what is wrong with being a dissident and challenging the great and good about the way forward?

- There are three important projects our own group are undertaking at present which Sinn Féin are trying to stifle. With regard to one of the projects, the place we went to hold meetings originally didn't allow us to come in, after Sinn Féin members told them: don't be letting them in, they're dissidents, your man's a leader of ONH [Óglaigh na hÉireann]... a complete load of crap! Eventually, through talking to people individually and us doing things as a group, this club actually realised the truth. They then refused to let Sinn Féin have an event there!

- I say, move on, let them go. Stop worrying about them. There is anger that they are doing that, and that they see each and every group here as a threat to them, or to what they might be trying to achieve. The way for us to proceed is to do things like the way we're doing them now, and move on from here, with our own debate.

Further thoughts. . .

(This section was compiled from interviews conducted with a number of individual community activists and small groups of up to three people)

... from East Belfast

- A debate is definitely necessary. To me, most people have got this false sense that everything is alright, we've got the Good Friday Agreement and the war is over. In terms of pursuing an armed struggle, the conditions do not exist at present – however, you cannot legislate for future generations of Irishmen and women. The struggle is for a socialist republic. There are many means open to achieving this. Firstly we need to radicalise our base. We need to focus on working-class communities and we need to free those communities from drug barons and from anti-social crimes. We also need to lift our community out of the doldrums and ensure that people are not suppressed by thuggery or intimidation. Socialism needs to be built from the bottom up. There is plenty of work for activists in this area and 'people power' has proven an enormous weapon in our struggle.
- One of the problems with the so-called 'peace process' was that it was leadership-led by Sinn Féin, it wasn't a bottom-up agenda. There was no real debate. You could give your views in back-rooms, but at the end of the day decisions were made by the leadership. I think a lot of people, and republican organisations, have learnt from that and instead of stifling debate they are encouraging it.
- Another problem was the lack of debate on policing. The British government and its allies in Ireland – which now includes Sinn Féin – continuously claim that the PSNI is a normal police service for a normal state. Nothing could be further from the truth. The PSNI is just the frontline force of Britain's 'Axis of Evil' in Ireland, with the British Army and MI5 forming the other two elements.
- I am a socialist republican but many people who were in the republican movement along with me had no interest in socialism, they just wanted the Brits out of Ireland. They didn't think or care about the type of political system we were struggling for. But as James Connolly said: if you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the socialist republic your efforts will be in vain.
- Over recent years we have been trying to build bridges with the Protestant working-class community through direct dialogue and interface projects. I believe it's up to us, as socialist republicans, to convince people in that community that their future best lies in a socialist republic. But you can't just state it as a concept,

you have to actually work to build it on the ground. We are trying to convince them that what we are advocating doesn't endanger their Britishness. We have much in common as working-class citizens and we need to build a common front to promote what is best for all of us.

- Anyone who does not go along with the Sinn Féin agenda has been labelled as a 'dissident'. The Shinners say that those who disagree with them want to go back to the dark old days. There's nobody I work with who wants to go back to the dark old days. People want to move forward with their political viewpoint and try to convince other people that socialism is the right way to go. The coalition now in place with the right-wing DUP [Democratic Unionist Party], implementing Tory cuts, was a logical conclusion to the brand of provincial politics followed by the Sinn Féin leadership. Stormont has failed the working class and we need an alternative. But we're starting from scratch, and it will be a long hard struggle.

- When I ask people what has been gained since the Good Friday Agreement, in terms of moving the struggle forward, all they can point to is peace. Now, peace is a great thing, there's no doubt about that. But when you look at what the Brits have gained – and I use that term to mean the British government, not the unionist people – they got everything they set out to achieve: normalisation, Ulsterisation, and the criminalisation of the republican struggle. But where does the sovereignty of Ireland lie? Does it lie with the Irish people? No, it doesn't. In the Twenty-Six Counties it lies with the IMF, the EU and the people who threw money in to save the bankers. In the North it still lies with the British government.

- The question of Irish sovereignty hasn't been addressed. To me, that is always a recipe for struggle, regardless of whether it is peaceful political struggle or armed struggle. And, as history shows, there will always be republicans who will go for armed struggle, because they feel they will not get anywhere politically.

- There are republican organisations out there wanting to prove that armed struggle is the only way forward because Britain only responds to one thing: force. What I am saying is that there *is* an alternative. We can make ground by being radical, by using street politics. Before I would contemplate violence I would ask: for what, to get to the stage Sinn Féin got to? It's not the type of Ireland people went to jail for and died for.

- Today political prisoners in Maghaberry are still being subjected to brutal strip searches and beatings with hardly a word of condemnation from the Sinn Féin leadership. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the political analysis of those republicans who are in prison today is irrelevant. They are in prison as a direct result of the ongoing British occupation of the Six Counties. That makes them political prisoners entitled to political status. Political status is, at its heart, an issue of human and civil rights. Those in Ireland who support the rights of political prisoners in Afghanistan, Guantánamo Bay, occupied Palestine and elsewhere need to extend that support to political prisoners in Ireland also.

...from West Belfast

- The biggest difficulty at present for many people is that there is no room for constructive criticism. If you criticise a Sinn Féin minister you are labelled a ‘dissident’. The amount of control from Stormont is unbelievable. Almost all the key decisions that affect our communities are now being decided by OFMDFM [Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister]. If you look at a constituency like West Belfast, the levels of unemployment have risen and there have been few if any companies setting up over this last ten years. This is despite us having a cross-departmental West Belfast and Shankill Job Task Force.

- There’s people I have known all my life, like Fra McCann, Jennifer McCann or Gerard O’Neill the councillor up here, who work really hard for the community. And people in North Belfast will readily acknowledge that Carál Ní Chuilín is a very good community worker and elected representative there, her door is always open. So there are people in Sinn Féin who I have a lot of time and respect for;

they have been there all their days, they are grafters and work well for the community, and I will work with them. However there are aspects of their party’s policies that I disagree with and unfortunately that criticism isn’t welcomed. To me, when politicians get things right – whatever party they come from – they are entitled to credit. All my life I would have been totally anti-SDLP and their

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anti-republican agenda. Yet in this past two years it has been acknowledged that Tim Attwood has often worked well in partnership with Sinn Féin councillors on housing, environmental and other local issues in West Belfast. Alex Attwood during his time as Minister for Social Development was very accessible when community organisations sought meetings with him. This was in contrast to Catríona Ruane who refused to meet the Chairs of the West Belfast Neighbourhood Partnerships for almost six months. At a recent public meeting in our area about the need for additional youth workers I raised this issue – for Catríona is the minister responsible for Youth Services – but was attacked and accused of ‘scoring political points’. I have publicly acknowledged the positive role that Sinn Féin elected representatives play on many occasions but by the same token I’ll highlight it constructively when they get it wrong.

- I am really worry about the Protestant working-class communities. They have been largely abandoned by the Unionist parties. Now that the DUP have got where they always wanted to be, they don’t need the loyalist working class. They

needed them when the conflict was on, to beat the big drum and fight the war. It's unfortunate that the PUP [Progressive Unionist Party] – when Billy Hutchinson, David Ervine and others came to the fore – didn't make more political inroads within loyalist working-class areas, as they would have been good elected representatives and advocates for their communities. And when people raise concerns about disadvantage in loyalist working-class communities the DUP come out with a set answer: 'We have created this new Social Investment Fund.' Whenever Dawn Purvis brought out that excellent report about the underachievement of Protestant school children, straight away Robin Newton said: 'Ah, but we've created the Social Investment Fund.' Two weeks later Arlene Foster was being interviewed in Coleraine, and a question came up about Protestant working-class needs, and she said: 'There is the Social Investment Fund...' And I'm thinking: this is only £20M a year for the whole of the North. Seemingly all schools will be able to apply, every community organisation in the North can apply, so how on earth is this going to stretch out to match the need? If they were genuinely sincere maybe the funds should have been £100M a year. If loyalist working-class communities get left behind then there is always the danger of paramilitaries filling the void and attracting young men to join up.

- When people like Ronan Kerr are killed I think that, at a human level, it is terrible that anybody is killed. However, throughout the entire Troubles I never condemned republicans for killing soldiers or policemen, and I am not going to start doing so now. But what is it that is driving people to go down that route? Why are increasing numbers of people getting involved in military actions in the Six Counties? There is no doubt that in some of these smaller organisations certain individuals are motivated solely by criminality. However, more recent organisations like Oglagh Na hEireann and this new group in Tyrone appear to be mainly made up of former members of the IRA who are politically motivated and see armed struggle as the only way of achieving a United Ireland and removing the British presence from Ireland.

- I think that the more you ignore the opinions of people on the ground, then the more people will either go to the 'armed struggle' republicans, or to political groupings like RNU or éirígí. The more you leave people out the more you create a vacuum. And the problem is: who is going to fill that vacuum? Or what is it they are going to be attracted to? As the economy gets worse people will be looking for somebody to blame for their increasing hardship. And will that restlessness be channelled through a political movement, or will people revert to militarism? I think republicans need to be sitting down now and asking: where are we at, what can we do for our communities? Whilst the uniting of Ireland is a priority, republicans also need to be in there working to improve the quality of life and the delivery of services to the local communities that they live and work in. And that, to me, is what 'Republicanism in 2011' needs to be looking at. Yes, people still want a United Ireland. The ultimate aim can be to achieve that, whether it

is a socialist republic or a social-democratic republic, but in order to get there, see the guy on the street who can't get a job after being a joiner or a brickie or whatever all his days, or the families who are struggling to make ends meet, they're going to want to know from us what we're going to do to help them. And that's what republicanism needs to be looking at: how do we improve the living conditions of the communities we live in? And how then, having done that, do we bring those people with us to look at a political alternative to what you've presently got at Stormont?

I think republicans need to be sitting down now and asking: where are we at, what can we do for our communities... how do we improve [people's] living conditions?

- With regard to the local elections, Sinn Féin have put a massive amount of resources and personnel into the Upper Falls area in this past few weeks to ensure that they get their vote out and that éirígí don't get a substantial vote. I haven't seen that amount of effort going into a council election for decades. From talking to people on the ground, it would appear that éirígí's Pádraic MacCoitir† should poll well, as he is one of the most respected republicans in our neighbourhood. Also, if he is successful I think it sends out a message to other republicans that if you are prepared to put the work in on the ground, there *can* be a political alternative, and surely that's better than returning to armed struggle. We are told that dissidents have no support, and whether you argue whether éirígí are 'dissidents' or not, they have been labelled as that by the political parties and the media. But if it turns out that they poll reasonably well, then what that is saying is that a significant number of adults in this community agree with their position. To me, the constructive side of that is that it would encourage more people to get involved in the political end of things, as opposed to the military end.

- After the killing of Ronan Kerr, Sinn Féin stated that they wanted to engage with dissenting republican groupings. Yet they don't appear to want be part of this [pamphlet] process. I believe this process can play a constructive role in beginning dialogue among all those who claim to espouse republican views and aspirations. It's better to be talking to each other than verbally abusing or ignoring each other. Constructive discussion and debate threatens no-one.

- I just think this is a project that needs to be done. Because see if this debate doesn't take place, or start progressing, God knows what's going to happen. What happened in Tyrone, or what happened in North Belfast or other areas... there have been so many close shaves. They could have killed three or four policemen with that bomb outside Xtra-vision in North Belfast. And unless that debate begins, and we engage people at the grassroots, then you're only going to find more people getting caught up in all that.

† Although MacCoitir failed to get elected, he received 1415 first preference votes.

...from North Belfast

- We hear a lot of talk at present about people being ‘disaffected’, ‘disillusioned’ or even just ‘disgruntled’, but I think most people are not feeling like that at all. Okay, many might feel uncertain, might not be completely happy with where Sinn Féin has positioned itself, but they’re not disillusioned. And they certainly wouldn’t be supportive of many of the other republican groupings which are out there, partly because it often seems that what motivates these groups is getting a dig at Sinn Féin, rather than promoting a clear political alternative.
- I would agree with that. I also am not totally convinced about every single thing that Sinn Féin has done, but I am sufficiently confident about where they are hoping to get to, to still remain a supporter.
- You say that people feel there needs to be a debate about what republicanism means in 2011. I would be all up for that. But many republicans also claim to be socialists, and I think there is another debate: what does *socialism* mean in 2011? And, more importantly, what does it mean to the people in our communities? The question I would like to see addressed is how do you motivate people who aren’t that interested in class issues any more – indeed, many working-class people are consumerists rather than socialists – into being more socially aware? Talking eloquently about a ‘socialist republic’, without trying to understand where the majority of people are at present, only ends up as empty rhetoric.
- It is impossible to move politics forward if we have violence. I believe there was a growing realisation that violence had to cease in order to create that space for people to begin to look at finding an alternative. And I think that’s where Sinn Féin is now, it’s embedding itself in politics, and trying to establish a base from which to develop on to a new stage. Now, people will claim that they are just repeating the usual pattern of Irish history: grow by being seen as the radical alternative, get into mainstream politics, and then sell out. That’s too simplistic. I think there are enough people in Sinn Féin who are aware of where they want to go, who will try and ensure that the right questions are always being asked.
- In terms of accountability to the community I honestly feel that Sinn Féin has a good track record. There was an anti-suicide rally held in the midst of the elections, at which 400 people turned out, and the *only* representatives there from any political party were Gerry Kelly, Carál Ní Chuilín and Danny Lavery.
- I agree. I am involved with Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin, and I am incredibly dissatisfied that sixteen years down the line we are still waiting on a new-build school. Now, Gerry Kelly and Carál Ní Chuilín – again in the middle of the election – came along to our AGM, and said they were going to take our criticisms on the chin. They accepted that Sinn Féin would get a lot of flak because Caitríona

Ruane is the Education minister. Kelly said, ‘Yes, you are rightly dissatisfied, for I’m dissatisfied too, but here’s what we’ve been dealing with.’ They were able to break down the minutiae of the whole thing, and say: here’s the reality we face. Also, they were able to demonstrate an awareness of the whole history of the school. And people accepted their candour.

- People claim that Sinn Féin is trying to avoid engagement. But I would challenge those groups who accuse other people of excluding them, to ask themselves whether or not *they too* are often the excluders. They frequently won’t let people who don’t fit their image of republicanism into *their* discussions.
- Sinn Féin *do* want to engage, and there are conduits open for that engagement. If there is a threat put on anybody, CRJ [Community Restorative Justice] have a direct line of communication with all groups. Or by using priests out of Clonard or Holy Cross. There are ways to have those conversations. But the very fact that people [from the armed groups] don’t want to sit down and have a conversation with Sinn Féin, is because *they* don’t want to talk about their current positions.
- I understand those people who are talking about *political* issues: they don’t think Sinn Féin’s policies are left-wing enough; they don’t agree with privatisation in the health service... whatever. That’s fair enough, those are things which need to be addressed, and all parties, Sinn Féin included, need to be open to challenges. But I feel that some people out there just *cannot* come to a sense of where they are today without militant politics. Without that militancy they seem lost.
- People also claim they didn’t know what was being done behind their backs. But we all knew that when Sinn Féin went into negotiations it would be a chess game, and some of the moves were maybe not the best. But if anyone didn’t understand that it would be like that, then what kind of understanding did they have? Obviously Sinn Féin were outmanoeuvred in some areas, but I think we need to ask: what alternative path could have been taken at that particular time? Most of us knew that the military struggle had run its course, there was no other option but to pursue a political line, and it was a case of seeing what best you could get out of it while the military struggle was being brought to an end. Okay, some people felt we could have kept the war going indefinitely. Within the republican community there is this belief that it’s not those who can *inflict* the most who prevail, but those who can *endure* the most. And some republicans felt that we had to continue to endure, for in the end we would surely prevail. But in whose interest would it have been in doing so? How would it have impacted on people in our communities, who had already suffered so much? To me it was about

Some people felt we could have kept the war going indefinitely. But in whose interest would it have been in doing so? How would it have impacted on people in our communities, who had already suffered so much?

asking a totally new question: how do we make people's lives *better*, rather than have them *endure* for yet another forty-odd years?

- Some people have made a fetish out of the gun: 'I have no other argument but to shoot the problem away.' The thing is that the problem was never shootable-away, whether it was the Brits or hoods on the corner. Shooting and knee-capping never got rid of the problem. At a certain point the use of the gun is simply a reflection of: 'I have nothing else to offer here, but I know the way we used to do things in the past was to point a gun at it and pull the trigger.' People had to begin to think differently. I don't think that the Provies became the Sticks and gave their swag away – that wasn't the case at all.

- People knew there were different stages to a conflict. You were never going to get to that final stage where your tanks roll into the city centre, capture the city hall and then put the flag up. That was never going to happen here. There had to be other stages somewhere along the line. There was a realisation that the armed struggle can only take you to negotiation – and that's the same situation today. The armed groups know that they cannot defeat the British militarily, but that somewhere along the line they might be brought to the negotiating table. But, to do what? These groups seem to be implying that they're cleverer than the collective membership of Sinn Féin, and that *they* know the solution. If they have the answer, fine, just tell the rest of us – without giving us all the usual rhetoric – how it can be achieved. What is it *they* have that they can negotiate on that would change this into a better position for republicans, or for bringing about the unity of 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'? What is it that they have that would make this negotiation stronger and for which they feel it is worth taking lives?

- Some of the groupings talk about their socialism, and their non-sectarianism, yet they're sitting down in the middle of the road opposing [Protestant] marches. But can they reconcile that? How do you begin to bring about this 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter' vision without seriously trying to find *different* ways of tackling divisive issues like that? The census figures show that we're not going to have a majority Catholic population any time soon. A Protestant recently said to me, 'I will remain a Unionist unless you change my mind for me. But how can you hope to change my mind if you keep putting my back against the wall?' There will *not* be a United Ireland unless we can find support within the Protestant population, and that requires a change in mentality and a change in approach.

- A lot of people feel negative that here we have these two big political parties and they're getting closer together. But that can also be a good thing. The parties know they have to engage with each other, to resolve issues which couldn't be resolved before. And the process of engagement will hopefully lead to a changing of mindsets and a changing of how things work. I think what Sinn Féin is doing is trying to break down those fears and suspicions about a United Ireland. The more

you can demonstrate the value of co-operation the more you move together. Who knows, new questions might begin to be raised. After all, Carson wasn't in favour of Partition; he was a United Ireland man, he just had a different take on what the political governance of that United Ireland would be. Looking to the future, do the DUP want to be a small element in UK politics, or a major player in Irish politics? I have even heard a few voices arguing for the reunification of Ireland within the Commonwealth. Now, those are things that previously you would never have dreamt about as being worthy of serious discussion. But it's about looking at every option, for a 'zero-sum' approach leaves us *all* with nothing.

- Some of the loyalists we are talking to have actually said to us: 'Thank God Sinn Féin took the direction they took, for it has taken us out of the trap we were all in; it has allowed us all to move forward.'

- I personally think that for a lot of people it wasn't that they felt there was *no* debate, it was more that they didn't like the *result* of that debate. Yet the Sinn Féin position around key issues was always endorsed by over 90% of the party.

- One of the things which annoys me is that you have these people who see themselves as highly intellectual, and somehow *they* know what Gerry Adams is doing, but see the rest of the Sinn Féin membership who follow him and vote for the party? Well, they're just sheep who are doing what they are told. That attitude is very dismissive of some very good, intelligent people within Sinn Féin.

- Things change and as they do you need to be able to adapt to those changes, and reflect on what you are doing. That's a sign of political maturity. What good is a 1916 mentality in 2011? What analysis do you have for *today*? If anyone said to me: 'Here's an analysis of why we are doing this, and how we believe we can get from A to Z...', then I will sit down and listen to them. But

Things change and as they do you need to be able to adapt to those changes, and reflect on what you are doing. That's a sign of political maturity. What good is a 1916 mentality in 2011? What analysis do you have for today?

what I am hearing, more often than not, is just the usual old rhetoric. Or else just personal attacks on Sinn Féin: 'Youse are all MI5 agents, all paid informers, all PSNI supporters.' There isn't a *rational* political dialogue taking place.

- I think we need to find how we can find an accommodation with each other. We *do* desperately need this debate. And in the debate the question must be asked: do you support the use of armed struggle? And those who say 'yes' should give us their analysis of why they think it is legitimate. And genuine discussion around that will help us to move the debate on. For others can then propose political alternatives, and both sides of the argument can assess and critique each other's

analyses. But groups do need to put their analyses up there, to be examined, otherwise the debate won't go anywhere.

- I hope that somewhere along the line there *is* some sort of different analysis comes up, that opens up a wider discussion. For I do accept that we always have to keep those who are in power on their toes. Once political parties get too confident – and even arrogant – that their vote is going to constantly grow, they become complacent regarding the issues people have to deal with. So I think that debate is always necessary. I hope too that somehow we as republicans can reconcile our differences, rather than end up not speaking to one another. We will always have differences, but they do not need to be destructive.

Socialism cannot wait

- I believe that what we need is a wide-ranging, thorough-going, continuous debate and discussion. There is no inner dynamic within Sinn Féin, no tension between Left and Right, and outside the party they are unwilling to put themselves up for examination and criticism. So, anybody who can get debate and discussion going is doing a favour for everyone. Because without that debate it is going to lead to further stagnation, further apathy. I mean, the turn-out at that election there shows that: the *majority* of people are *not* voting. Many aren't even willing to register to vote.

- I think the modus operandi of those groups who are currently involved in armed struggle is very, very limited. They seem to have a fetish about killing police officers, as if that's going to make a single bit of difference. Police officers are merely the buffer zone for the ruling elite and the powerful. And anyway, you will get a backlash – such as you did after the killing of Ronan Kerr – which means that such killings will not achieve anything. I agree when people say that the time is not right for armed struggle, but was the time *ever* right for armed struggle in Ireland? What defined previous times: 1916, the 1940s border campaign, the 50s, what happened in the 60s and 70s? Was the time right then for armed struggle?

- Sinn Féin is now saying to the dissidents: 'IRA bombs were good, but your bombs are bad.' And even using the same words: 'This isn't an attack on the PSNI, this is an attack upon the whole community.' The same words which were used against the Provos back in the old days.

- In the media to be labelled a 'dissident' is a very negative thing. That encapsulates our problem. In any healthy society dissent

In any healthy society dissent is usually thought of as being vital: people wanting to question and make things better. But now... you're a dissident? My God, you must be someone who wants to kill cops.

is usually thought of as being vital: people wanting to question and make things better. But now... you're a dissident? My God, you must be someone who wants to kill cops.

- I don't think it is right to go back to armed struggle. I would rather have a rational debate. The difficulty is that because of the parameters that have been set, everything has been internalised in the Six Counties, and it leaves very little space for purposeful and open democratic debate. All the debate is currently about is shuffling power around between Sinn Féin and the DUP.
- I feel that one option for Irish republicans is not to confine their republicanism to Ireland. Show some solidarity with English republican groups, Scottish republican groups; because if there is eventually some sort of republican entity in Ireland, with a democratic structure, there is nothing to stop it existing in some sort of federal alignment of independent republics within the 'British Isles'. That might even appeal to the sense of 'British' cultural identity that is so prevalent here in the North.
- Since the Good Friday Agreement the Protestant community seems more secure, there are certainly more loyalists prepared to work with republicans on class-based issues. Maybe the lessening of a fixation with the constitutional question is providing them with the space to engage?
- I agree, I have had more contacts with loyalists than ever before, But when you work with people from the UDA and UVF you have to do so in a principled manner, and tell them why we sit down and protest against the Orange Order: not because we are trying to undermine their sense of Britishness but because of the Orange Order's identity and political world view: it is reactionary, misogynist, elitist and supremacist.
- But sometimes the opposition to sectarian marches is, in its own way, sectarian. I know one well-known republican, who fought in the 60s for his right to march through the city centre – and was beaten off the streets by the RUC – but when he said that residents have the right to protest against marches but don't have the right to prevent them, he was lambasted and dismissed as a 'Prod lover'. Maybe both sides to the marching issue need to ask themselves searching questions?
- With regard to the constitutional aspect, I believe, as time goes on that you have more chance of establishing a socialist entity in the Six Counties than you have in establishing an all-Ireland. I think the all-Ireland emphasis will hold back any egalitarian development up here.
- But what kind of scope do you have for change in a Six-County context? There is no power structure that allows you to change the nature of the economy, or bring down economic control to the lower orders. What you have is a post-colonial administration, that deals with whatever is handed across by Westminster, and a budget handed down by London.

- At the time of the Treaty they said ‘Socialism can wait’. I would now say that national unity can wait. Forget about flags and crap like that, and continue to articulate proper working-class politics, fighting against the fat cats, against the closure of hospitals, schools – all the issues facing the working class – and I think your message will get through. Get people to stop voting for someone just because he or she has a Tricolour or a Union Jack wrapped around their neck. Vote for those who are going to tackle people’s *real* needs. I think you have to keep on at that, and forget about the constitutional thing.
- I’m not so sure. I agree that you have to make a stand on these issues, but you will have to confront the constitutional question eventually.
- But if you keep bringing the flags up, and continue all this talk of reunification, you just alienate people. I think it is vital to get the working class together. And as you develop relationships with people, with whom you never had relationships before, you build up mutual respect. And then, once you’ve got that, you can say: okay, now let’s talk about the elephant in the room, the constitutional thing. But *first and foremost* you must deal with the social issues.
- The reputed ‘normalisation’ of politics since the Good Friday Agreement has also normalised this very unreal political set-up, and the continued partition of Ireland. You will find now that even many people from the Falls Road are quite happy to call themselves ‘Northern Irish’ – even some of my own relatives don’t mind calling themselves that. When I grew up it was anathema to call yourself that; ‘Northern Ireland’ was a dirty word. Now this idea of ‘our wee country’ is being embedded deeper as the generations go on – yet this is not seen as abnormal.
- Maybe it’s because an emphasis on sovereignty isn’t as important now to people as what is happening to them in their daily lives. Few of the Catholic middle class would vote for a United Ireland at present; nor would many working-class people, seeing how the South is so heavily mortgaged to the IMF and the EU.
- I think there should be some wider mechanism to approach the constitutional question: maybe you could have a referendum every ten years. If you have a mechanism for national self-determination built into the political system, you are then undercutting anyone who believes that military action is the only way to do it. And if a particular vote went against all that you believed in, you would still have absolutely no right to lift a gun, none at all. Because then people will have genuinely voted for what they wanted. It would be up to all democratic, republican forces to try and persuade people before the next vote was due.
- In the same way that Sinn Féin are blanketing this debate and other groups, I think ‘dissident’ groups should stop blanketing each other and stop being so internal. Some of this is because of previous feuds and fall-outs. Individuals and organisations have a lot of baggage they need to get rid of. Maybe this debate will help them to do that.

Afterword

Reading the diversity of views and opinions expressed in this pamphlet – not to mention the assertions and counter-assertions made by the various contributors – it is obvious that, for any internal republican debate to progress, the wide gulf of interpretation and perception which exists needs to be openly and honestly addressed, even if it can never be fully bridged.

However, the positive aspect is that *all* the contributors to this pamphlet, notwithstanding their deeply-held differences, not only welcome such a debate, but consider it vital if republicans, and the communities in which they live and work, are to grasp the opportunity to move forward productively and purposefully.

Where to next?

The discussions and interviews undertaken for this publication indicate a consensus that two major themes should now be tackled in some depth:

- an exploration of what Irish Republicanism actually means in 2011;
- an exploration of views surrounding the use, and non-use, of armed struggle to achieve the goal of a United Ireland.

Once this pamphlet has been disseminated around the republican grassroots, and time given for reflection, another series of discussions and interviews will be convened to address these two important themes.

Appendix

A tentative Agenda

(1) Are there any comments anyone wishes to make on the first pamphlet?

- How was it received within your organisation?

(2) Does everyone agree that a debate (within Republicanism) is necessary?

- If so, what should be on its agenda, and how should the debate proceed?
- Who all needs to be brought into the discussion?
- How can different organisations be productively engaged?
- What are the obstacles to holding such a debate?

(3) Does Irish Republicanism need to be re-focused (or even ‘re-defined’)?

- Also, is Irish Nationalism necessarily synonymous with Irish Republicanism?
- Given the present austerity cuts impacting on working-class communities, does today’s Republicanism need to contain a strong socialist component?

(4) What do people feel about armed struggle?

- For those who believe it still remains an option, what do they feel it could achieve?
- For those who believe it is no longer an option, how do they feel it would be counter-productive?
- How do you think Nationalist communities view the prospect of the armed struggle continuing?

(5) What relationship should Republicans have with the Protestant community?

- Over the past 40 years do you feel that Republicans genuinely took Protestants into account?
- Do Republicans need to re-assess their stance towards Ulster Protestants and their Britishness?
- What needs to be done to promote the Republican ideal among Protestants?
- What proactive role should Republicans currently be playing in building a shared future (i.e. the uniting of ‘Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter’)?

(6) Looking to the future

- What is the way forward for Irish Republicanism?
- What influence will 2016 have on strategies and activities?
- What strategies/actions might move people *towards* Republican objectives?
- What strategies/actions might take people *away from* Republican objectives?
- What role could today’s youth play in the further development and consolidation of Irish Republicanism?