

Republicanism in transition

(3) Irish Republicanism today

compiled by

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Introduction

This is the third in a series of pamphlets focusing on the theme *Republicanism in transition*, the purpose of which is to stimulate and facilitate debate and dialogue at the republican grassroots. (The first two pamphlets – Island Pamphlets nos. 96 and 97) are available as free pdfs from <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/islandpublications>)

The individuals who participated in the discussions from which these pamphlets have been compiled are either current members, or were former members, of a number of different republican groupings: Official Republican Movement, éirígí, Republican Network for Unity, Irish Republican Socialist Party, Republican Sinn Féin, 32 County Sovereignty Movement, and Sinn Féin.

While the discussions for the first two pamphlets ranged widely in their subject matter, for this third pamphlet they focused on one theme: *What does Irish Republicanism actually mean in 2011?* (The next pamphlet in the series will likewise focus on a single theme: an exploration of views surrounding the use, and non-use, of armed struggle to achieve the goal of a United Ireland.)

As repeated reference was made during the discussions to the *1916 Proclamation* and the *Democratic Programme of the First Dáil Éireann*, it was thought useful to include the wording of these here (*Appendices I and II*). Also, as the discussions are being followed with interest not only within the wider republican community but by members of the loyalist community, it was suggested that a few of the comments voiced by the latter should be thrown into the discussion to stimulate debate (*see footnote, page 21*). Lastly, as the theme of ‘Irishness’ and ‘Britishness’ also arose within the deliberations, it was felt that a document I had prepared for the Shankill Think Tank in 1997 should also be included, again simply for the sake of stimulating debate around the question of identity (*Appendix III*).

While the first draft of this document was circulating among the participants I was contacted by Coiste na nIarchimí, a support organisation for republican ex-prisoners, expressing a willingness to become involved in the process. Although at that stage the group discussions had been concluded, an interview with a spokesperson was undertaken and is presented on pages 27-30.

Michael Hall *Farset Community Think Tanks Co-ordinator*

Irish Republicanism today

Reflections on the debate so far

- First of all, any feedback on the pamphlets, or on this debate itself?
- People are delighted that a debate is at least beginning, and that ideas are being allowed to trundle out. Not only among the usual suspects – i.e. other ‘dissenting’ republicans – but republicans of all shades. People see this debate as the ending of a long period of enforced silence. Now, maybe the ideas being expressed aren’t as coherent and as cogent as they need to be, but that won’t happen until you have the debate. And the response *we* have been getting, combined with the proliferation of 1916 Societies springing up, is a clear indication that debate is very much needed. Dissent is also the pressure value that is at least allowing you to say: ‘It’s okay that I don’t agree with the Good Friday Agreement, it’s okay to say I’m an Irish Republican, and it’s okay to say I don’t want to be part of the connection with Britain.’ That’s the sort of feedback we’re getting.
- I think, for this last lot of years, that people were scared to open their mouths, put their heads above the parapet, to say that they didn’t agree with the Good Friday Agreement – or parts of it, or whatever. But we have found – this year, mainly – that among many republicans that fear has gone away a bit. And they are able to stand up now and say they don’t agree with certain things. The people I showed these pamphlets to were very heartened when they read them. They were saying, ‘It’s great that this is going on,’ and they were wishing that they could be part of it.
- All shades of republicans who have seen these documents think they are fantastic. It encourages them to come out and voice their own thoughts, as to why they don’t agree with things – something they might have been very hesitant to do before. When they see publications like these, in which people are debating different issues within republicanism openly and honestly, I think it spurs them on to express their own thoughts.
- I agree. For too long many republicans have been frightened to be labelled as ‘dissidents’, frightened to offend Sinn Féin. We need to speak out.
- I think we agreed last time to keep to the small-

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group approach, at least for the moment. I don't think a large public debate would do this process any good at this stage. Public meetings lead to showboating.

- Also, I personally wouldn't want people to use a public forum simply to attack Sinn Féin, because then no debate takes place.
- I gather that Sinn Féin still won't engage?
- A senior member was written to with a request for an interview, but, as before, no response was forthcoming.
- I know you don't want to highlight their absence too much, in the hope that they will eventually engage, but their avoidance of debate should be stated in the document.
- Same here. I think that their avoidance should be noted.
- I think they are being hypocritical. Publicly they claim they are willing to speak to groups of different political views within republicanism, yet here is an open-table offer to have a genuine dialogue and explore issues, and they ignore it.
- Oh, they are quite happy to get involved in dialogue – provided they *own* it.
- It's a pity, because in the second pamphlet, although there was no *official* Sinn Féin response, there were some strong views expressed which were supportive of Sinn Féin's current line, and the feedback I received was that it was very valuable to have that balance.
- Isn't it a bit ironic that – in the interests of fostering 'dialogue' – they recently invited a Presbyterian minister to address their Ard Fheis – and I am all in favour of that – yet they won't enter into debate with other republicans?
- I was talking to a guy recently who had been at an Official IRA commemoration, and he said it was the first time he had seen so many shades of political opinion gathered together. And one of the speakers had this message: 'We have spent a lot of time this last lot of years doing cross-community work. Is it not time within the different shades of republicanism that we actually started doing some *intra*-community work?' So, maybe there is that appetite now. He said the Irps† actually laid a wreath at it, which would have been unheard of not that long ago.

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† Members of the IRSP (Irish Republican Socialist Party), whose paramilitary wing was the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), refer to themselves as 'Irps', pronounced 'Erps'.

What does Irish Republicanism stand for today?

- So, what does Irish Republicanism actually stand for in 2011?
- It is a very serious question, because, at the end of the day, what is the difference to the man in the street between Irish Nationalism and Irish Republicanism? The lines have been blurred – to most people they are one and the same. We need to clearly define what our perception of republicanism is. To me, nationalism, by its nature, is right wing, while I believe republicanism is left wing.
- People tend to forget that republicanism was once very weak in Belfast.
- Just look back to the '60s. If you wanted to collect money for prisoners' welfare you had to do it backhandedly down at the Ceili. We went round the 'Pound Loney', and there were certain doors you could go to to get your penny, and certain doors you daren't go near. Nationalism was more the norm than republicanism.
- Even when the Troubles really took off, and we all ended up getting involved in the republican movement, most of us still hadn't a clear idea of what republicanism stood for. We were so preoccupied with the ongoing war situation, we never had time to delve too deeply into it. I only started learning when I was inside.
- Well: what were people fighting for, what do they *still* want to fight for? What is the vision that republicans want to sell to people right across Ireland?
- Intrinsic to my concept of republicanism is getting the English out of our country.
- But getting the English out of Ireland is something nationalists also desire – why be a *republican*?
- Okay, there is clearly much more, especially in terms of social policies, which to me form the totality of republicanism. Such as the *Éire Nua* policy, which runs back to the Republican Congress, and an attempt to do what we're doing here. But, primarily, it *was* about getting the English out of my country.
- The idea of getting the English out of Ireland dates back to the Confederation of Kilkenny [1642-51], and the stance adopted then was purely nationalist – it was based on 'faith and fatherland' – all they wanted was to drive out the English. And that stance remained purely nationalistic right up to 1798, and people were quite content that that's what they wanted: the English out of Ireland. Then republicanism arrived as a *new* concept; it came from America and France, and it was revolutionary. To me, 1798 reflected this new concept of republicanism far more than it did the old idea of nationalism. *The Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine was one of the most popular books in Ireland at that time. So, we have to ask: what then was *different* about republicanism? To me, it wasn't just about

nationalism, it was about the very *nature* of society, the relationships between people, the rights of the dispossessed.

What then was different about republicanism? To me, it wasn't just about nationalism, it was about the very nature of society, the relationships between people, the rights of the dispossessed.

- That's true, and I believe that today there has been a taming of whatever was radical within republicanism. To me, we should go back to the original ideal, where to be republican you were concerned, not just about national self-determination, but with equality and justice – basically about how people are treated.
- To return to the republican struggle to get the English out of Ireland. Was that to get them out because they were English, foreigners – or because they were exploiters? They might have been the most powerful exploiters but they were far from being alone in what they were doing. The people who oppressed the Irish working class were not only English, but Irish and others. Most oppressors are not necessarily from without, but from within.
- But the *dividers* are from without.
- Yes, but they have their clones within.
- I accept that many people here have profited from our divisions, but they are not the people who *created* those divisions. That doesn't make them any less culpable, but it still shouldn't stop the focus of your attention being on the struggle for self-determination, the reunification of the nation. Then all of the fractures which have occurred *because* of that disassociation can be tackled as part of the rebuilding process.
- So reunification is a priority for republicans?
- Of course. We want to control our own destiny.
- We seek the right to self-determination.
- Basically, we want a unified Ireland.
- If republicanism is defined primarily in terms of Irish unity, I think Sinn Féin can steal a march on us very, very easily. They'll say – with every justification – that they're striving to bring about an eventual United Ireland, by gaining major representation in both jurisdictions, with the intention of eventually drawing the two entities together as one. The only way we can counteract that is to point out to people that socialism does not seem to be part of the Sinn Féin project, and therefore whatever unity they achieve will fall far short of the needs of the majority of the Irish people.
- If we continue to harp on at Sinn Féin people will rightly turn on us and say: well, what are *you* doing, what do *you* propose?

- Yes, I do not accept that we can't align ourselves alongside some of the things Sinn Féin are doing, especially if they seem to impact positively on our communities. Furthermore, they have been very successful in fostering the perception that the likes of us are all just nay-sayers, and I think that's a tactic that is working well – and it's partly our own fault.
 - So, what should Irish republicans be focusing on?
 - I still think that the 1916 Proclamation [*see Appendix I*] is a very strong foundation for what Irish Republicanism requires and what its aspirations are. Leaving aside the religious stuff, what it calls for is very plain and very simple, and can readily fit into concepts of today.
 - Most importantly, we as Irish citizens should control our country's economic system, the means of production, not Britain or Brussels.
 - How realistic is that in today's global economy? For example, if you really wanted *control* over all the means of production, does that mean you would expropriate American and other foreign companies?
 - I suppose that raises the question – what is the relevance of Irish republicanism today, in terms of how far can we do that? The international economic system that we find ourselves in will dictate a lot of what we can and can't do.
 - People like ourselves and many academics will endlessly discuss the finer points of difference between republicans, but, to be brutally honest, I don't think that the vast majority of the Irish population have the slightest interest. Questions like: what is true republicanism? how close was the Free State, or the present Republic, to the ideals of 1916 Proclamation? are really all academic. I think that what the majority of people in Ireland want, although it's at the back of their minds and there's no urgency about it, is a united Ireland. As to what kind of republic it will be – the republic of the United Irishmen, or the republic of the Free State – most don't care. So, I think that to debate the concept of republicanism would interest very few people. What we need to be debating is *socialist republicanism*, because if our republicanism doesn't promote policies which could impact positively on the lives of ordinary people, then we'd be wasting our time.
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- I would agree. I cannot divorce the concept of national freedom from social and economic struggle. But even Connolly acknowledged that we needed freedom from England before we could implement real economic reform.
- The South is supposedly an independent entity, and has achieved its 'freedom'

from England. But how free do you think it has been to implement real economic reform? As was noted earlier, there is a global dimension to our politics now which no nation can escape.

- The bottom line is that while many people might view their republicanism differently, most certainly envisage some sort of united country, with some sort of political structure which is democratically controlled by the Irish people.

At odds with mainstream republicanism

- I was one of those who set up Sinn Féin [in the north]; I shadowed Máire Drumm throughout that process. And Gerry Adams did everything that he could to undermine the political policy that Ó Brádaigh had brought in with the *Éire Nua* strategy, particularly any radical economic aspects within the programme. Adams will not allow Sinn Féin, no more than McGuinness will, to develop a radical socialist economic policy as part of their strategy. I agree that we don't want to swipe at everything Sinn Féin are doing, but I do think we need to develop a political strategy that will allow us to work together at community level to create radical alternatives.
- That is where you go, then. You acknowledge the positive things which have been achieved by Sinn Féin, then, by highlighting the lack of socialist economic policies, you expose the weakness in their approach.
- I was at an event in Exeter College organised under the British-Irish Conference – I was asked by CRC to present some of the cross-community work I was doing with young people. There were other republicans there. I arrived late, and Owen Paterson [Secretary of State for Northern Ireland] was up speaking, and he was lambasting socialism. And I'm glancing around the room, and I'm seeing people I went to jail with, looking as if they were thinking this is all great. And one person got up and said that the old days of republicanism were gone, and he added, 'Well, for us to defeat the dissidents, it doesn't help when you make cuts...' Now, most of the republicans who were there would have seen me as a dissident, and to be honest I felt very much out of place. But it showed me just how much many republicans have changed.
- I believe the top-down, hierarchical structure within mainstream republicanism has been a big part of the problem. We will have to try to avoid that in the future.
- I still think at some stage you end up with leaders. The thing is to ensure that your concepts are clearly defined and there are mechanisms there to counteract any move on the part of the leadership to deviate from those concepts. Mainstream republicanism is seeing more and more administrators, rather than dedicated republicans. More and more career politicians.

- You're right. They have become what they are: councillors and MLAs, and the councils and the Assembly have become ends in themselves.
- We have to show that Sinn Féin have forsworn the whole social agenda in their pursuit of a United Ireland – assuming they're still pursuing that.
- I think in their personal integrities they very much believe that they *are* driving things towards a United Ireland.
- They have achieved a remarkable degree of power. But to me it's all about how you use that power to effect real change. I think they should be honest, about where they are and what road they're taking.
- Do people see the need for a new political party then, that encompasses socialist and republican views?
- I don't know. Irish history is chock-a-block with divisions and breakaways.
- But is there not an inevitability that if republicans really want to challenge Sinn Féin, then at some stage there has to be a coming together with a collective programme? If we are going to challenge them we have to have an alternative.
- It could take five or more years to even get agreement on a common strategy. There have to be forums first, and we need to bring in radical people from the Protestant community. We won't just change things overnight. There will need to be a transitional period. There has to be a time-line of how a strategy will work itself out.
- Similarly, if there was to be an eventual United Ireland, would it have to come about gradually, perhaps even with transitional arrangements to reassure the unionist community?
- Of course it will. In my opinion, whenever a United Ireland comes into being it will come so slowly that you will have the 'two men in the pub syndrome'. Something will come on the TV news and one will say to the other, 'I think that's a United Ireland now', and the other will reply, 'Are you sure? I don't think it is.' That's how slow it will be, the integration will be so gradual. This nonsense that Sinn Féin is peddling that if you get 51% of the vote, then it's more or less a done deal. If they got that and went down to Dublin and asked to join up, the ones down there would say, 'Now, hold on a minute, we don't want to rush into anything. Actually, we would prefer 51% of the unionist vote before we move on anything.' That's the practicalities of it.
- The reality is that there are a hell of a lot of people down South who don't want

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- I was talking to a leading member of Sinn Féin recently. And I told him that they had lost their republicanism: they cannot support prisoners any more, they can’t do street protests any more, and they want to get rid of all the marches on the road that represent republicanism. They prefer to work at things behind the scenes now. I said, well, that’s watering down your republicanism.
- For me, the only philosophy that will take us forward as an Irish nation is republicanism. But I think we need to get out of the corral in which we define ourselves by what we’re against – which is usually Sinn Féin – and begin to define what we actually stand for. We stand for things like civil liberties, equality, independence. All the constitutional politicians now want to claim their republican bona fides: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the SDLP, obviously Sinn Féin, the Irish Labour Party, and to an extent – but not as parties – even some unionists. That to me is clear proof of the validity of the republican ideal. But, having proven its validity, the next question is: what is its content? And that’s where all the differences in interpretation become stark. For me, the open contradiction is that the constitutionalists, who are trying to claim the mantle of Irish Republicanism, are strangling what I believe to be the very basic tenets of Irish Republicanism. I believe that people need to now stand up and say: ‘No, here’s what republicanism stands for, here’s what’s good about republicanism, here’s what’s progressive.’ And we need to get that out instead of this constant tit-for-tat with Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin doesn’t represent the entirety of republicanism; we need to move past them, get *our* definition out. And I certainly believe that things like the campaign by the 1916 Societies for an all-Ireland referendum is one way to do that; it’s a way to start fresh thinking.

Socialism is the bedrock

- I have reached the position now, where, just as James Connolly said, ‘Ireland without her people means nothing to me.’ Does a republic without a concern with social issues mean anything? Not to me it doesn’t. That’s the first thing we have to ask: is republicanism without some sort of socialist ethos worth pursuing? I don’t think it is.
- I agree. You’re just changing the power-brokers. I have no wish to be able to wrap a Tricolour around me and say: ‘Isn’t it great that there’s now a united Ireland!’ It’s of no interest to me if it doesn’t provide for the people. Now, if you had asked me that twenty years ago I probably wouldn’t have had the sense to think like that, and a United Ireland would have been enough in itself.

- Is this not something which should define our republicanism? That we care about our communities, that we actually want to do something to change injustices?
- Irish republicanism for me takes responsibility for all aspects of life. It tries to work for the betterment of the people. For me it is about mobilising people around all the important issues. You can't stand up alone, you need to build up a support base. I have friends – who are solid republicans – whose sons are selling drugs but they feel they can't do anything about it. So, to me we need to give leadership. To me it is the active approach, the delivering on the ground, that will allow republicanism to grow.
- I personally believe that in a United Ireland we should take over the banks. Let them return to their primary purpose, which is to help citizens with their savings, and assist job creation efforts and community regeneration. They're not interested in that these days, their main concern is personal greed and fat-cat bonuses. I tried to organise a picket at the Ulster Bank but didn't get much support.
- People on the ground came out in the '60s because they could see a real struggle for rights. But today, most people think they have won those rights. And the only people who show dissension are groups like ourselves. People will come out if they think they're fighting for basic rights, but now the only thing at issue is which political party can get a better deal out of international capitalism. It will be a terrible hard job for us to get people to realise that the banks are the problem and that ordinary people have the power to change things.
- Would it be possible to agree a basic list that could represent common ground on which to work? We need to come up with a cohesive package.
- If we are talking about a United Ireland, we are talking about a *new* Ireland, driven by republicanism, and it has got to be concerned with the socio-economic reality facing the majority of the Irish people.
- For me it should be a complete socialist revolution. And until such times as there exists a genuinely free Irish nation, and the people in it tell me, 'No, we *don't want* a complete revolution,' then I feel quite legitimate in advancing it as the best way forward for the Irish people. The difficulty we have in realising the republican dream is not that the Irish people can't buy into it, but, because of external interference, the dream has never been allowed to be properly rolled out in front of people. I don't expect Sinn Féin to speak up for the republic. Sinn Féin have moved beyond being a republican party; if they are it is only in the same sense that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Irish Labour Party and the SDLP are. And I think the mistake that too many anti-Good Friday Agreement republicans make is in expending their energies lamenting that Sinn Féin didn't carry it through to the finishing line. That's Sinn Féin's failing, that's their mistake; but we have to say, as Irish republicans, that we're not going to make the same mistake, we're going to carry this through to the proper conclusion.

- Are you talking about using armed revolution, or peaceful revolution such as we have seen in other parts of the world?
 - For me it would be preferable if it was a bloodless revolution. Unfortunately, I believe that the historical precedents indicate that it won't be. The reality is that we still live in an occupied zone that is controlled by a state police force, we are still governed by temporary laws that have been in existence now for almost a century. We still have a corrupt court system that is becoming more corrupt by the day. For me all of these things indicate that the peaceful route to revolution is going to be stopped, but not stopped by Irish republicans; stopped by British and English fascists who know no other way to deal with people than the way Oliver Cromwell did.
 - It should be easier today to promote socialism, because all those sectors which once railed against socialism – the Catholic Church, the bankers – have been rocked to the core in recent years. People are now saying: these are the institutions which rubbished socialism, yet look how corrupt *they* turned out to be.
 - You're right. This is the biggest opportunity now, and for all those reasons you just mentioned. Looking down the South... I mean, the banks in Britain were supposedly bailing out the banks in the South as a neighbourly gesture. They're not; they're bailing out their *own* banks, for they own most Irish banks. Ordinary people, both working class and middle class, are beginning to question the present system. Capitalism has failed.
- ***The Catholic Church, the bankers – have been rocked to the core in recent years. People are now saying: these are the institutions which rubbished socialism, yet look how corrupt they turned out to be.***

- I personally don't believe that Capitalism is on its knees. Capitalism recently went through what should have been its death-knell and yet was assisted in surviving. Capitalism will do that, it will reform itself and come back as strong, if not stronger, than ever.

Self-determination: the core of republicanism?

- So, to recap: apart from socialism, what are the core elements of republicanism?
- The whole core of republicanism is not doing what Sinn Féin has done. They called themselves republicans for years and then turned such a lighter shade of green that they are almost turned into yellow. Sticking by your core elements of republicanism, staying as green as possible by going for a United Ireland, and incorporating as much socialism as you can along the way.

- A United Ireland – that is the core of your republicanism?
- Yes. It would have to be the first objective.
- For me, the essence of republicanism is civil liberties, equality, independence and self-determination. And they are broad enough categories to encompass basic socialist principles. The actual form of socialism of the society can be debated once you have self-determination. Sitting here today, we can all give our personal preferences, but the actual final form of our republicanism will come about as the product of that independent debate – without external interference telling us that the debate will be within certain parameters.
- When republicans demand equality we are usually thinking of equality for ourselves: republicans or nationalists, or whatever. But equality is for *everybody* within the nation. Let's get out of this mindset of wanting equality for our own community – Catholics, nationalists – and think about equality for *everybody*. And any republican who claims that he is a true republican nowadays has to stand by the 1916 Proclamation, has to read it, has to live by its principles.

But equality is for everybody within the nation. Let's get out of this mindset of wanting equality for our own community – Catholics, nationalists – and think about equality for everybody.

- Yes, it would do all republicans good to make a close study of the 1916 Proclamation and the 1919 Democratic Programme [*Appendix II*]. What does 'cherish all the children of the nation equally' mean? What does 'unfettered control' of Ireland's resources actually mean? And once you start those debates you might get somewhere. Rather than focus on what is really a hackneyed phrase – the uniting of 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter' – for that doesn't mean a great deal in terms of the quality of people's lives. But you cannot talk about 'cherishing all the nation's children equally' or the 'unfettered control of all of the resources, without getting into the quality of life. And that's why Irish republicanism stands apart from anything else that we have had as a philosophy in this country, or, to be quite honest, in the whole of the western world. Even French and American republicanism doesn't come close to it, in my opinion.
- Irish republicanism starts out from the sound principle that *before* you can begin to make decisions about the way you are going to organise people's lives on this island *everybody* has to be in a position to have a say. And you can't do that if you take a third of the country and make it a separate jurisdiction.
- It will require a learning process for many people. We didn't go to school and study the *Rights of Man*... I certainly didn't. The reason I became an Irish republican was because of oppression, because of what I had experienced since I was a teenager, getting beat about the street.

- Over the years as I have grown up, see if I was to ask my mates what republicanism means they wouldn't have a clue. That's why I wanted to take part in discussions like these. I don't think it's right that young people nowadays don't have a clue what republicanism is. That's why I want to be a part of this, and so hopefully I can help to educate other young people.
- It's a positive step to admit that, but you're not on your own. Everybody came up through that. A lot of people weren't educated about what republicanism was before they got involved in things. It's been said before that people were in jail and they didn't know what they were in jail for. When you asked them what republicanism was they hadn't a clue; half of them were there to fight Protestants. And all the Protestants were there to fight Catholics.
- All I can remember at school was that you just hated Protestants, and that was it. And you were just learning all the wrong stuff, all the bad stuff. I didn't even learnt much about Irish history.
- We all once believed Sinn Féin was the true republican party, and we now feel betrayed. Adams, Sheenan and Maskey were out canvassing in our area during the election; this was three days after our Harry, one of the POWs, was beaten – and when I asked what they were going to do about it, they backed off. There was no standing by the republican prisoners, nothing like that. Last Christmas when I went to visit my husband, the prison staff messed me around and I never got seeing him. Now, in the past you could have taken your complaint to Sinn Féin. But not now. To me this is all betrayal. We were brought up as a republican family. We were fighting for a United Ireland. But the British government, with Sinn Féin's help, are still running this country.
- So for you the core element of your republicanism is a United Ireland?
- Yes.
- I think Irish nationalism today – and I include Sinn Féin in that description – has bought into the concept of constitutionalism and all their energies are going into trying to prove that solely by working within Stormont and the Dáil eventually the people of this island can be convinced that the best option is a United Ireland. To be perfectly honest, I don't see that happening, I think it copper-fastens Partition. And I think the concept of Irish nationalism has been greatly diluted, even down South. I was watching a TV programme from the South about the forthcoming presidential election and some students from UCD were saying, 'What's McGuinness coming down here for? Sure, he's Northern Ireland.'
- To me republicanism is about showing people that we are *not* on the road to a United Ireland by working through the two parliaments, and that we need to work outside of them, in a non-violent manner, to try and convince people. I also think we need to break down the fears of people – North and South. What is it that has unionists so entrenched against a United Ireland? And why do the

people of the 26-Counties no longer buy into the concept of a 32-county socialist republic? Furthermore, many Catholics in the North are even saying: why would we want to join with the South now, given the mess their economy is in? And all you hear nowadays is talk of the 'new Northern Ireland'. I hear the phrase 'Northern Ireland' used more now by nationalists, particularly in this last five to six years, than I ever heard it used in the previous twenty years. So a lot of work needs to go in to convincing the majority of people that the most advantageous solution for *everybody* is a 32-county Ireland. And I think the best way to do that is mass agitation in and around economic issues. I believe that the conditions are ripe to mobilise people in and around social and economic issues, whether that is through street protests or mass campaigns. But we must begin to educate people, encourage them to start looking at an island-wide approach.

I think we need to break down the fears of people – North and South. What is it that has unionists so entrenched against a United Ireland? And why do the people of the 26-Counties no longer buy into the concept of a 32-county socialist republic?

Is republicanism necessarily socialist?

- Most, if not all, of the people who have been involved in the discussions for these pamphlets, believe very strongly in the socialist aspect of republicanism. Indeed, some of them have said that they are socialists *before* they are republicans. But are the participants representing a narrow grouping? Do socialists actually represent a minority within republicanism?
- We call ourselves 'socialist republicans' but we have to acknowledge that there are many republicans who aren't socialists: we have added socialism on to it.
- Whenever you study republican history, socialism has rarely been the dominant aspect. Even when the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil was published, many members of the Dáil had great problems with it because it was too left-wing. There has always been a left-right clash.
- Socialists were chased out of Bodenstown in 1937 by de Valera and his henchmen.
- In the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War a socialist lost his seat in the Docks ward in Belfast because most local republicans supported Franco. Now, when I was in the republican movement in the '80s and '90s I was led to believe that the movement had *always* been totally behind people like Frank Ryan. But that was not the reality at all.

- And even in terms of the United Irishmen, Jemmy Hope† said that, apart from McCracken†† and a few others, none of the leadership understood the class realities of the poor and the dispossessed. The leadership were engaged in a struggle for economic rights, but not necessarily on behalf of the peasantry and the poor.
- We have to remember that the United Irishmen, when they were first formed, did not want to break the connection with England; they thought that all that was required was some form of local self-government here. And it was basically economic control they wanted, for the majority of the leadership were from the business-type class. Initially, they wanted to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter in the common name of Irishman, so that they could fight against Britain on economic issues and in terms of rights. It was only later that Tone realised that the only way to bring that about was to break the connection with England.
- I was one of those people who would have advocated that a United Ireland was the priority and we would worry about socialism afterwards. There's other people I know who would have pushed a socialist line but their real concern was more about getting a United Ireland. And that, to me, would have been very much to the forefront within the republican movement. Because when you had British soldiers on the streets your focus was to get rid of them. And it's only now that, at least for the most part, the Brits are off our streets, the loyalist guns are silent, people are starting to focus on what they should have been focusing on a long time ago, and that is the socialist aspect. I think most people in our communities felt that if we got a United Ireland things would change for the better. But, to be honest, even if we *had* achieved a United Ireland I doubt very much that the changes that community workers like myself are now looking for would have come into effect. I think that that debate now needs to happen.

† James 'Jemmy' Hope, a weaver from Templepatrick, is regarded as the most egalitarian and socialist of all the United Irish leadership. In his memoirs he wrote: "None of our leaders seemed to me perfectly acquainted with the main cause of social derangement, if I except Neilson, McCracken, Russell, and Emmet. It was my settled opinion that the condition of the labouring class was the fundamental question at issue between the rulers and the people, and there could be no solid foundation for liberty, till measures were adopted that went to the root of the evil, and were especially directed to the restoration of the natural right of the people, the right of deriving a subsistence from the soil on which their labour was expended."

†† Henry Joy McCracken was commander-in-chief of the 'United Army of Ulster' during the 1798 rebellion. When it failed he was executed in Belfast. In his book, *The Year of Liberty*, Thomas Pakenham notes that, unlike most of the movement's other leaders, McCracken saw further than purely political goals, and identified himself with a demand for social justice: "For him political and religious liberty, and national independence itself, were only means to that end. [He] was a gentle, idealistic man, and determined that the rising in the North, at any rate, would not be disgraced by a counter-terror in the name of liberty. And to this principle he remained true in all the horrors of the succeeding week. In contrast to the wild scenes in the South, the northern United men acted with notable restraint [during] the short-lived Republic of Ulster." Mary McNeill, in her book on McCracken's sister, Mary Ann, noted that "Religious differences, elaborate theories of parliamentary reform and constitutional action meant little to Harry [Henry Joy]; he saw only the need of human suffering, the injustice of sectarian discrimination."

- Also, in the past people would have labelled anything socialist as ‘communist’. Even on the loyalist side – where you had people like Billy Hutchinson, David Ervine, Gusto Spence and others trying to promote a working-class socialism in loyalist areas – they soon found themselves portrayed by mainstream unionists as ‘Commies’.
- I think the majority of republicans have always been against radical socialist policies. That’s why I said earlier that socialism was added on to republicanism at a later date. As for the United Irishmen, although they weren’t socialists and far from being socialists – apart from individuals like Jemmy Hope – they were still the most radical movement of their time. But even that radicalism has been airbrushed out of our history – to many people 1798 has been reduced to a nationalist rebellion, led by priests, against the English ruling class.
- It is a legitimate question: where does Irish republicanism sit in relation to socialism? The only way to deal with it is almost to look at it as an objective exercise – that is, not by taking one side of the argument or the other, but by going through the basic tenets of Irish republicanism and seeing whether these lend themselves to a socialist interpretation. I personally think that all the philosophical nuances of socialism *are* contained within republicanism: we just need to define them and bring them out. Furthermore, I don’t believe for one second that Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, or the Irish Labour Party, can claim to be representing those basic tenets. Because by virtue of the fact that they have signed up to the constitutional bandwagon they are quite prepared to accept the reality of global capitalism.

Reaching out to the Protestant community

- Despite the republican movement’s claim to want to ‘unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter’, republicans have often sent the Protestant community very contradictory messages. For example, de Valera, during a radio broadcast on St. Patrick’s Day 1935, said, “Since the coming of St. Patrick... Ireland has been a Christian and a Catholic nation... She remains a Catholic nation.” Nationalists have done the same: O’Connell called for a ‘Catholic Parliament for a Catholic people’ – long before Craig made a similar statement regarding Northern Protestants. Furthermore, O’Connell, in an argument during a House of Commons debate, said that Protestants are “foreigners to us because they are of a different religion”.
- But who put de Valera into the position of being a republican philosopher? This is what happens all too often. People go: ‘Republicanism means such and such, and know how I know? Because Gerry Adams said it at Bodenstown.’ Gerry Adams alone does *not* represent the republican philosophy. Neither did de Valera or Michael Collins. Now, if you want the things that stand the test of time,

look at the writings of Wolfe Tone, the writings of Liam Mellows, the writings of James Connolly – and then start to make up your own mind about what is the core essence of Irish republicanism, as opposed to what you want to grab from something that Gerry Adams or Jimmy Drumm maybe said at Bodenstown.

- Irish Republicanism should not be defined, in any way, by religion – such as in the way it has become identified today with the Catholic community. It needs to define itself around principles which are about creating change for people of *all* religions and none. Part of that change would be the ruling of your own country. Nor is it good enough to simply have a government which has been voted in by Irish people and no external agencies holding any control. It needs to have a programme for government which clearly delivers equality – political and socio-economic – for all. For me, Irish republicanism can't be just a case of removing 10 Downing Street's powers over Ireland, and then say: right, that's it.

Irish Republicanism should not be defined by religion – such as in the way it has become identified today with the Catholic community. It needs to define itself around principles which are about creating change for people of all religions and none.

It needs to be very clearly on the lines of presenting a government which is open to the people, accountable to the people, and which uses the wealth which is there to provide the basic services for a comfortable life for all. So it's certainly not something defined by any religious aspect. I mean, I don't know whether anyone in this room practices religion or not, but religion shouldn't come into it.

- Where do the old values stand today in light of the new circumstances? Take the religious ideal. The first Irish republicans talked about uniting 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'. But fewer and fewer people, particularly young people, bother about church or chapel any more, so a call to bring Protestants and Catholics together isn't a big deal any more, it no longer has the emotiveness it might have had in the eighteenth century. Do we need to update it for today's needs? Should we change it to read: 'the unity of Irish, British and other ethnicities'?

- I think a British-Irish relationship *is* important, because the vast majority of people in the North see themselves as British, and I have no problem with that. I have cousins who are British. Republicanism should not have to worry about what somebody's nationality is, because we're a multi-national/identity society.

- I think that the document which was emailed to everyone prior to the last meeting was an eye-opener [*see Appendix III*]. I was completely unaware of the extent of the interconnectedness – between Ireland and the British mainland – there has been throughout our history.

- I agree. It revealed that we have far more in common than we realise. Even in terms of my own perceptions I found it a bit of a challenge. Maybe it could form

the basis of another debate: trying to draw out just what we have in common, and getting people to challenge their own certainties.

- One of the reasons I would have liked Sinn Féin’s participation in this discussion was because I wondered whether, in the course of being exposed to the DUP mindset on a daily basis, they have asked themselves whether there are things they could be doing which might make the idea of a United Ireland more palatable to unionists. Take the recent passport issue as an example. Seemingly anyone in the South who wants a British passport has to pay a £860 naturalisation fee, whereas anyone living in the North can obtain either a British or an Irish passport without any problem. Willie Hay, the DUP Speaker of the Assembly, was born in Donegal and has to have an Irish passport. And Martin McGuinness has given him his support to get this fee abolished. He has been in touch with the Taoiseach about it. McGuinness said, “If people want to claim a British identity they shouldn’t have to pay a fortune to do so.” It is almost as if Sinn Féin realises that republicanism should move *beyond* the Irish/British thing into something more accommodating and inclusive.

- There are now more Polish speakers in Ireland than Irish speakers, and in a few generations they will be ‘Irish’, yet not have a Gaelic background/ancestry. The concept of Irishness is changing. In my opinion there should be some sort of open forum set up to discuss all these issues, including how we can acknowledge and accommodate our different identities in any new political arrangement.

In my opinion there should be some sort of open forum set up to discuss all these issues, including how we can acknowledge and accommodate our different identities in any new political arrangement.

Furthermore, we ourselves, as socialist republicans, should also have an ongoing debating forum, where people of a left-wing viewpoint get together – no matter whether they also see themselves as republicans, or unionists, or whatever. There should be a socialist debating forum which encompasses everybody.

- I don’t know how, after all these years, and after all we have gone through, that Sinn Féin have made no serious attempt – apart from the odd bit of tokenism – to try and overcome the sectarian divide. Sinn Féin had a golden opportunity, between maybe 2000 and 2006, to basically bridge the sectarian gap and they never took it. I think republicans are wasting their time – if they’re hoping to see Irish unity – if they don’t make that effort. I work with Protestants and I know that many of them were waiting for – and hoping for – Sinn Féin to begin a genuine engagement as the peace process developed – but it never happened. And do you know why I think it didn’t happen? Because I think many republicans are sectarian themselves, but won’t own up to it.

- And how do you encourage the 900,000 unionists up North to engage in that debate without acknowledging the things they hold dear?

- But you're not asking them to relinquish anything. And for me this is the strength of Irish republicanism: you're not asking people to give things up to become Irish republicans. I remember having this discussion at some length with Billy Hutchinson about his British identity. I don't care whether he has a British identity; when the World Cup is on I feel more Brazilian than I do Irish – but this is only because they have a better football team. You can have your British identity, bring it with you. But at least explain what it means, and if your British identity means that I have to live as a second-class citizen, then no. But if your British identity means that you are going to cheer England at cricket, grand.
- Some community activists who are currently working with loyalists acknowledge there is a real opportunity at the moment for engagement, in that many loyalists are very receptive to left-wing and socialist ideas. Indeed, some loyalists promote left-wing views themselves. Should republicans hold back on the drive for a United Ireland until the working classes are united? Indeed, if republicans can't bring along the Protestant community, will they *ever* get to their goal?
- I thought the quotes† from loyalists were very useful because they provided a bit of a reality check as to what people in the Protestant community are thinking. Indeed, somewhat depressingly, those quotes revealed how poles apart we still are and the ground that needs to be covered.

† The following comments had been made by loyalists:

(Regarding republican opposition to Loyal Order parades)

“One of the republicans quoted in your second pamphlet claimed that protests against the Orange Order were *not* an attack on the Protestant community's sense of Britishness, but undertaken in a 'principled manner', because the Order is a 'reactionary, misogynist, elitist and supremacist' organisation [page 33]. Now, in our dealings with socialist republicans we have heard some of them describe the Catholic Church in an almost identical manner. However, despite this desire of republicans to act in a 'principled manner' against 'reactionary' organisations, the only organisation some of them seem eager to confront is the Orange Order. Protestants believe that much of this talk about 'principles' is just a smokescreen and that behind many republican protests lies a blatant sectarianism.”

(Regarding the 'false consciousness' of the Protestant working class)

“Socialist republicans continually assert that the refusal of the Protestant working class to join with the Catholic working class in a United Ireland is an example of 'false consciousness' and a denial of our true class interests. I believe the opposite to be the case. Marx believed that all classes in any society undertake actions which serve to protect or advance their economic interests. This is not necessarily a conscious process, but one driven by the dynamics of class struggle. Using a purely Marxian analysis, therefore, I believe that the Protestant working-class position – to seek to remain part of the British economic set-up and the hard-won gains of the British labour movement – is the one *truly* based on class realities. It is when *other* 'needs' are linked in with the class question – such as nationalism – that the label of 'false consciousness' can be more accurately applied.”

(On Republican scepticism regarding claims to 'Britishness')

“I resent the way Irish republicans/nationalists continually ask me why I see myself as British, and to define what 'Britishness' means. I would never have the arrogance to ask an Irish person why they see themselves as Irish, or to define 'Irishness' for me. I would accept their identity without question – so why can't they accept mine?”

- It is our socialism which has always attracted people from the Protestant community, more than our nationalism – people like Captain Jack White†.
- You are right. Unfortunately, it has been the historical legacy that the objective conditions on the ground have never been enough to motivate the mass of the Protestant and loyalist working class into class alliances. Save for rare examples like the Outdoor Relief struggle of 1932, and even then sectarianism was allowed to eventually destroy working-class unity. That’s why the view that what you do is unite the people first and *then* worry about uniting Ireland is a totally misguided concept, because what you’re basically saying is that the very people who were oppressed and divided have to be the ones to mend the wounds that the oppressor inflicted before they can move forward with a political and an economic philosophy. That is totally disjointed. What you do is say: No; the division of Ireland should never have happened in the first place. It is an historical wrong which is preventing this country from moving forward and it needs to be righted. If in the process you can build that in tandem with relationships with other sections of the working class, that’s brilliant, that’s what you should do. But you shouldn’t have to halt the process of national liberation until that happens.
- I work with loyalists, and I know that at the moment many of them are willing to work with republicans in a way they would never have done before. Things are possible now which would have been impossible even a few years ago. They also tell me that if the focus was primarily on socio-economic issues there is every possibility of increasing joint action on the many problems affecting our communities. But because the focus of many republicans – especially the most vocal – is still on ‘Brits Out!’ and Orange marches, things will never progress.
- I can understand that. Republican mobilisation *is* often against marches, or against the Brits, or in support of prisoners, that’s correct. I would accept that

† Jack White was born in 1879 near Broughshane, County Antrim, into a landed Protestant family. At age 18 he served with the British Army during the Boer War and was awarded the DSO. However, his experiences of the brutalities of war led him to resign his commission. During Sir Edward Carson’s campaign against Home Rule White organised one of the first Protestant pro-Home Rule meetings, in Ballymoney, to rally Protestant opinion against what he described as the Unionist Party’s “bigotry and stagnation”. He was invited to Dublin where he met James Connolly. Enthused by the struggle then being waged to win trade union recognition he offered his services to the ITGWU. At Liberty Hall in 1913 he put forward the idea of a workers’ militia to protect picket lines from assaults by the Dublin police. This proposal to create a Citizen Army, drilled by him, was enthusiastically accepted. He later put his services at the disposal of the Irish Volunteers, and was sent to Derry to train the local corps. However, he was shaken by their sectarian attitudes and soon ended his involvement. When Connolly was sentenced to death after the 1916 rising, White rushed to South Wales and tried to bring the miners out on strike to save his life. For this he was given three months’ imprisonment. In 1936, White went to Spain during the Spanish Civil War as a medic with the Red Cross. Here he made contact with the anarchist CNT-FAI and was greatly impressed by the anarcho-syndicalist social revolution which had unfolded in Spain. When he returned to London he continued to work in support of the Spanish anarchists. White died from cancer in Belfast in 1946.

we have to have a different focus, especially in terms of mobilising against the austerity cuts.

- I think it is all about building up a level of trust. That to me would mean establishing at the very beginning what your core principles are. No matter where I go I make it very clear to people that I am an Irish republican and want to see a United Ireland. Now, if you are a loyalist and hold dearly to the British Crown and want to remain British, I am prepared to accept that. But can we sit down and look at the problems in both our communities that we can work on together, while accepting that we have different aspirations? How we arrive at those aspirations is a matter for another day, but I think the more people work together on those everyday issues, I think the more trust builds up. I hope that I can ultimately convince them, and by the same token the scope is there for them to convince me that I am wrong. The problem is if I am in a situation where I am telling loyalists that we have these social and economic problems which we can work together on, and forget about the constitutional issues, and in another vehicle I am maybe speaking at an event, or am interviewed on TV and I come out with this republican rhetoric, they will be going: ‘Jesus, that doesn’t sound like the guy we were sitting down with last week.’ I think you need to be up-front and honest with people. In all my cross-community work or joint work with people from unionist communities, including loyalist paramilitaries, I have been very clear about what my ultimate aim is, and where I want to be and would love them to be with me.

- Yes, honesty is vital. Indeed, the issue of honesty came up recently in a discussion with some loyalists. One loyalist had been engaged in discussions regarding marching, and he said something to the effect: “We are sitting down and thinking we’re getting somewhere with one group when suddenly they’re told that they don’t represent the area, and end up being replaced with another! And then at the last meeting I was at I got the feeling that these people weren’t being honest with me, that no matter *what* we might concede they didn’t want Protestant marches *in any form*. The talk was false, it was only so they could say they were engaging in dialogue.” And that’s basically what he was saying. Dialogue needs to be real.

- I agree with you, I honestly and truly believe that if you don’t have honesty, you can’t develop any sort of trust. For how can you then work collectively on anything? For no matter what you do, at the back of your mind will be: do they have a hidden agenda here? At least if you are up-front with people, you can work constructively together. Republicans have to be honest in their dealings with loyalists. But, equally, loyalists have to be honest in their dealings with us.

I believe that if you don't have honesty, you can't develop any sort of trust. Republicans have to be honest in their dealings with loyalists. But, equally, loyalists have to be honest in their dealings with us.

I'll give you an example of what I mean. At one of our local interfaces, things had been very quiet for this last number of years. There's been the odd incident but there's been an impressive amount of good joint work done, including some great work done with young people by a specific project. Three weeks ago, out of the blue, there's an incident at the interface involving loyalists beating a nationalist up. Next thing we are told that a new loyalist interface group has been set up in the area. Quite a number of the [Protestant] young people who had been involved in the joint work over the last number of years have suddenly been told they need to be out defending the area. And we're asking: 'Where is this coming from?' I spoke to the family of one of these young people and they were saying how disappointed they were, for he had been doing a lot of good work: they have gone on joint trips to Stormont, to the Dáil... But the young people have been told by certain loyalists in the area that there's money coming down the line, and if youse hang in there with us, we'll be able to benefit from it locally. It's all that underhandedness that's going on in the background that creates a lot of suspicion.

- You also had the situation in East Belfast during the summer, when one day certain loyalists were out encouraging rioting, the next day they were wanting to be seen as 'peace-makers'. You feel very cynical when you see things like that. Is the 'community safety' agenda being stoked up because money – such as from the Social Investment Fund – is coming down the line? To me, funds of that nature should be going into the most deprived communities, and community workers should be asking: what are the services that the people in those communities need to rise above the poverty they're experiencing? How can we start working with young working-class nationalists and loyalists? You look at the report Dawn Purvis produced about young working-class Protestants. It was horrendous. We need to create a situation where our young people – Protestant and Catholic – are not leaving school early, or can get employment when they leave school. *That's* what these funds should be used for.

Working-class realities

- While we sit here debating the nuances of republican ideology and republican history our communities are going through an increasingly difficult time.
- I would agree fully. To me this last two years particularly the levels of poverty in our communities are unbelievable, I have never seen it so bad. And I see it every day of the week, talking to family support workers here. They're going into homes in our communities where people don't have the money for heat. And the parents and children are sitting there with their coats on just to keep warm. We're now distributing food parcels to people, every single week, for there

are people who just don't have enough to feed their families adequately. In my experience it was never as bad as what it has got. We recently had a meeting with St Vincent de Paul and they have told us about the demands on their service, and they're unable to cope. And I'm talking to community activists in Twinbrook, Poleglass, North Belfast – and they're saying the exact same: this is the worst they have ever seen in terms of levels of poverty, including fuel poverty. Last December one person said: last year we gave out 50 hampers, this year we've done over 300 so far. And we're not talking here about toys or Christmas presents, we're talking about basic necessities. To keep your family fed, to keep them warm. And things are getting worse.

- I was down the other day at Divis Flats talking to some young people who I had worked with on the old Auto Project, and one kid owes £3000 to the bastards who are selling drugs. Kids in the Divis Flats complex are tied into it. The loyalist community is the same, and they are trying to confront the same issues. I have been working with loyalists like Jackie McDonald in terms of the drug problem. I believe he is genuine about that. But have we any real strategy for dealing with it?

- You have to remember that when 'peace' came here there was a golden opportunity for political parties and the communities to work together before the drug thing kicked in as much as it has. But it wasn't seen as a priority; it was more important for our politicians to be seen waltzing around up at Stormont.

- The thing is we haven't really hit the major drug thing yet. It is starting to creep in here now, and if it's not dealt with, then we're goosed. There are seven heroin dealers in Twinbrook and Poleglass alone, and we're heading for big trouble if we don't get this sorted out.

- Massive cuts are on their way in education, and in the health service – substantial job numbers are going to be lost in the Royal and in the City. I think when it starts to hit people in their own homes, and they're losing those services, they will really begin to ask questions of our local political parties. Up to now the local parties have shrewdly managed to put the blame on the Coalition parties in Westminster. People have to be mobilised against these cuts, because they are going to affect the working class the hardest.

- I think community activists have to sit down with local people, and rather than have them just lamenting the closure of schools, or the cutting-back in provision, we should encourage a debate and discussion as to creating alternatives. I look at the amount of money being wasted at Stormont on consultants, it is phenomenal.

We're now distributing food parcels to people, every single week, for there are people who just don't have enough to feed their families adequately. In my experience it was never as bad as what it has got.

Two days ago it was announced that we're spending £66M a year on substitute teachers. It's all those things.

- There are real things there we could begin to confront: the banking system, the drug problem, the increase in poverty. These are all immediate issues on the ground that we could be coming together on, and begin to work at – as republicans.

- I think we need to unite the people who live on this island, to buy into a future, 32-county socialist republic that they all feel they have a stake in. I think many people now don't feel they have a stake in society any more. Look at the most recent election here in West Belfast – less than 37% of the population even bothered to vote. That's unheard of! Elections here used to have over 70-80% turnouts. People actually felt that by coming out to vote you could effect change. But now, I just think people have opted out of it, and feel totally powerless. For republicanism to appeal to people you need to be able to say to people: you *do* have a stake in this society. And how

I think many people now don't feel they have a stake in society any more. Look at the most recent election here in West Belfast – less than 37% of the population even bothered to vote. That's unheard of!

you have a stake, how you can effect change is to look at the democratic process, and to get people elected who *are* going to represent you. Initially, I think that is going to be done through councils, getting people working from within the councils and coming back and providing a service for the people within loyalist working-class communities, republican working-class communities, ethnic minority communities... and working-class communities in the 26-Counties. And the more they go in and do that the more they can create a strength and show people that you can effect change. The reality is that the majority of people throughout Ireland don't bother to vote; they feel so disillusioned. I think there's a huge opportunity there, but you will only grasp it through hard work and graft, by going in and convincing those people that you can effect change. That's the challenge across the 32 counties.

In support of Sinn Féin

Coiste na nIarchimí is a support organisation for republican ex-prisoners

Whenever we in Coiste were reading your first pamphlet it looked as if there was, for whatever reason, a reluctance on the part of some republicans to engage in discussion and debate – but I can assure you there's not. Now, I'm not here to speak for Sinn Féin, I'm here to speak for former political prisoners who would be broadly in the peace-process camp, and who would be supportive of Sinn Féin's current strategy. Some of us might be critical of certain aspects of that strategy, but not enough to fall out with people or to decide to plough our own field.

I know you are hoping to bring all the different republican groupings into this debate. I think there is a bit of naivety about that. Carál Ní Chuilín recently went into Maghaberry to get an update on the situation with the protesting prisoners, and to ascertain the current status of the agreement which had been reached last year with regard to prison issues. And while a number of the groups agreed to meet her, some of them said that they were not prepared to sit at the same table as some of the other prisoners, who they considered mere criminals. So Carál had to undertake separate sessions. Among the thirty-odd prisoners on protest there are seven different factions. And some of them are continuously cutting lumps out of Sinn Féin: there's an amazing amount of energy and vitriol used up in attacking Sinn Féin and its strategy. Indeed, republicans who have bought into the current process, who believe that we do now have an opportunity to move forward *without* recourse to armed struggle, have almost been turned into demons by some of these people.

The problem with some of the individuals involved in these groups – even those groups which disavow a recourse to armed struggle in the current context – is that there is a lot of dishonesty there. They say that they don't believe there is any sense in having an

armed struggle, that there's no appetite for it, yet in the same breath they almost lionise the people who are currently involved in this stuff, and they gave Sinn Féin abuse for putting out a message of sympathy with regards to the killing of [PSNI officer] Ronan Kerr. And although they say that there's no call for going back to war, it's not necessarily because they believe that armed struggle is no longer justifiable, but that the time is not opportune. I think some of them believe that if they can create the right climate, it could be started up again.

One of the things which gets me is that some of the guys who have now jumped

Republicans who believe that we do now have an opportunity to move forward without recourse to armed struggle, have almost been turned into demons by some of these people.

ship, and have got involved in some of these groups, were quite happy with the strategic decisions that were made, whether with regard to weapons, or policing, or whatever. They made their move on the back of their own position and status being changed within their community and within the organisations, especially when there was no longer a need for the IRA. I know this might sound insulting – including to comrades of mine going back years – but I feel that some of them don't know how to live a life that *doesn't* involve plotting and planning; they cannot return to a 'normal' life. And possibly some of that is to do with trauma. We in the political ex-prisoner community have been putting together projects to try and deal with that. But the fact remains that these people were there and *were onside* for most of the strategic decisions, so it's *not* the politics alone which is the basis of their disaffection, it's other factors as well.

What has also happened is that younger people, often with no pedigree of involvement in the armed conflict, have moved into positions of leadership within Sinn Féin, and some older comrades are very ill at ease with that. There is this sense of: 'Where were they during the conflict, and how come they are now stepping into these positions?' I accept that this is a big problem.

One of the things some of these groups are involved in is vigilantism: shooting kids who are involved in anti-social behaviour, whether burgling houses, stealing cars, setting fire to shops ... or whatever. But that approach was found to be totally counter-productive. The only thing it does do is it gives these people a status within their community – and perhaps that's all they're looking for.

I would also contend that the attempt to destabilise the current political process is directly assisting the agenda still being pursued by certain elements within the British establishment and their intelligence services, who want to maintain the role they created for themselves in this part of Ireland.

I would contend that the attempt to destabilise the current political process is directly assisting the agenda still being pursued by certain elements within the British establishment and security services,

Some of the 'dissidents' hold on to what they consider to be irrefutable truths; specifically that as long as the British presence remains in Ireland then Irish people have a right to take up arms to oppose that presence. But the problem is that *having* that right and *exercising* it are two different things. They have put a number of principles up on a pedestal and they almost worship them.

Anyway, before we get on to your question of where republicanism is today I think you have to go back and look at how things evolved.

When I was in the cages in Long Kesh we avidly followed different anti-imperialist struggles. We watched as US Marines scammed for the helicopters and boats to get out of Vietnam. And we were convinced that the end of the British government interference in Ireland would come along similar lines. You had

the short-termism of ‘Victory 74’, ‘Victory 75’... where republicans were really buying into this notion that we could drive the British into the sea. That would have been where our heads were at. But after the 1974-75 ceasefire and the British government’s ‘criminalisation, normalisation and Ulsterisation’ strategy, you had the IRA moving to a more long-term view of where the struggle was at.

And that was basically where things were at until the late ’80s when people started to have conversations on the periphery, that there had to be another way, the war had been going on too long. You also had global events such as the bringing down of the Berlin Wall, or Nelson Mandela’s release and the downfall of apartheid. And the question arose: if *other* conflicts can do it, well then, we can possibly do it as well.

In our own context, you had [British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland] Peter Brooke tell the world that Britain ‘had no selfish, economic or strategic interest’ in the North of Ireland. And he also said that he did not believe that the British Army could defeat the IRA. His speech right away threw down a challenge to republicans. If he believed that the IRA could not be defeated, and that the British had no selfish interest here, then republicans had a responsibility to explore whatever opportunities might develop out of that.

If [Peter Brooke] believed that the IRA could not be defeated, and that the British had no selfish interest here, then republicans had a responsibility to explore whatever opportunities might develop out of that.

Having said that, I personally was not convinced that the British would ever be genuine about reaching a settlement. Then the John Major government came and went, the ’94 ceasefire came along and collapsed, then came the discussions when Tony Blair got elected. During this time we were constantly involved in debates and arguments, not only on the outside but also within the prisons.

And what eventually sold some of us on the effectiveness of a campaign that *did not* involve armed struggle were the conversations we had with the members of the ANC negotiating team, the guys who had negotiated Mandela’s agreement with the Afrikaners. In 1997 or 1998, members of that negotiating team were brought to Ireland. They were given clearance to go into Long Kesh. Hundreds of republican prisoners were brought to the gymnasium – including all the female prisoners from Maghaberry – to participate in a question and answer session, in and around the possibilities of the developing situation, and where republicanism could go from that point. That exchange convinced me that an alternative to armed struggle was opening up.

I understood clearly that conflict could only end in two ways. Either in the military defeat of one side by the other, or in some sort of negotiated settlement. And once you were into the negotiated end-of-conflict situation I understood that there would be a requirement for compromise – on both sides. I know it’s

something of a cliché used by conflict resolutionists, but the idea was to move from a ‘win/lose’ situation into a ‘win/win’ one.

I felt it was key that republicans had to outline what their core objectives were by entering the process of negotiation, and then adhere to those objectives. And whatever compromises inevitably arose, as long as they did not contradict your core objectives, they could be accepted. Now, the process hasn’t been an easy one for republicans. What we’ve been involved in has meant the parting of the ways with friends and comrades, who simply haven’t been able to get their heads round some of the compromises that had to be made.

As far as I am concerned, the Stormont Executive is a transitional arrangement. But the project that we are involved in has to convince a section of unionism that their best interests lie in all of us working together to create a new Ireland, however long that takes, and whatever form the different stages along the road take.

So we work with the unionist community and their representatives – whether at Stormont or at community level – trying to convince a section of them, and hope that other options *beyond Stormont* evolve, get genuinely debated and hopefully acted upon.

We’re trying to *evolve* the process of working towards a new Ireland. It will not be easy, we know that. And it’s not just a matter of winning over northern unionists. A leading loyalist remarked recently that Sinn Féin also have to explain and sell the project right across Ireland. But by working in Stormont, in the Dáil – and

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even with Martin McGuinness standing in the Irish presidential election – we hope to see the process move forward right across the whole island.

And that’s also where we in Coiste are at, working with loyalist ex-prisoners. Next week I am going to be sitting down with former loyalist ex-combatants, some of whom have never been in the same room with republicans before. The engagement has to go on at different levels. And it will take courage and compromise from all sides. For example, we would like to be able to facilitate the holding of Orange parades, the way they take place at Rosstown in County Donegal. But an Orange march through Rosstown doesn’t have the same connotations for local people there that it has for the people in Ardoyne, especially after the whole Holy Cross trauma and the abuse that people in Ardoyne suffered. So while I sincerely want to find some accommodation, I think a bit of sensitivity and realism on the part of loyalists would help.

Appendix 1
Poblacht na h-Éireann
The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic
To the People of Ireland

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organized and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State. And we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities of all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences, carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on behalf of the Provisional Government,

Thomas J Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh,
P H Pearse, Éamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, Joseph Plunkett

Appendix 2

Democratic Programme of the First Dáil Éireann (1919)

We declare in the words of the Irish Republican Proclamation the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies to be indefeasible, and in the language of our first President, Pádraig Mac Phearais, we declare that the Nation's sovereignty extends not only to all men and women of the Nation, but to all its material possessions, the Nation's soil and all its resources, all the wealth and all the wealth-producing processes within the Nation, and with him we reaffirm that all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare.

We declare that we desire our country to be ruled in accordance with the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Justice for all, which alone can secure permanence of Government in the willing adhesion of the people.

We affirm the duty of every man and woman to give allegiance and service to the Commonwealth, and declare it is the duty of the Nation to assure that every citizen shall have opportunity to spend his or her strength and faculties in the service of the people. In return for willing service, we, in the name of the Republic, declare the right of every citizen to an adequate share of the produce of the Nation's labour.

It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing, or shelter, but that all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education and training as Citizens of a Free and Gaelic Ireland.

The Irish Republic fully realises the necessity of abolishing the present odious, degrading and foreign Poor Law System, substituting therefor a sympathetic native scheme for the care of the Nation's aged and infirm, who shall not be regarded as a burden, but rather entitled to the Nation's gratitude and consideration. Likewise it shall be the duty of the Republic to take such measures as will safeguard the health of the people and ensure the physical as well as the moral well-being of the Nation.

It shall be our duty to promote the development of the Nation's resources, to increase the productivity of its soil, to exploit its mineral deposits, peat bogs, and fisheries, its waterways and harbours, in the interests and for the benefit of the Irish people.

It shall be the duty of the Republic to adopt all measures necessary for the recreation and invigoration of our Industries, and to ensure their being developed on the most beneficial and progressive co-operative and industrial lines. With the adoption of an extensive Irish Consular Service, trade with foreign Nations shall be revived on terms of mutual advantage and goodwill, and while undertaking the organisation of the Nation's trade, import and export, it shall be the duty of the Republic to prevent the shipment from Ireland of food and other necessaries until the wants of the Irish people are fully satisfied and the future provided for.

It shall also devolve upon the National Government to seek co-operation of the Governments of other countries in determining a standard of Social and Industrial Legislation with a view to a general and lasting improvement in the conditions under which the working classes live and labour.

Appendix 3

‘Britishness’ and ‘Irishness’: a challenge

This document was prepared on behalf of the Shankill Think Tank in 1995

Irreconcilable identities?

It is often claimed that the inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland is unsolvable, because its roots lie in the collision between two irreconcilable national identities. However, this follows as much because of the exclusive manner in which those two identities are invariably expressed: to be Irish one cannot seemingly be British, to be British one cannot be Irish. There also abound gross misunderstandings as to what each identity entails. Gerry Adams, in his book *Free Ireland: Towards a Lasting Peace*, wrote that “The Loyalists have a desperate identity crisis. They agonise over whether they are Ulster-Scotch, Picts, English or British.”¹ Now, not one of the members of the Shankill Think Tank knew of *any* Ulster Loyalists who had ever agonised over whether they were ‘English’. Such a misconception might be expected from a badly-informed foreign journalist, but not from a major player in the politics of the past twenty-five years, and is a reflection of the many misperceptions held by each community about the other.

Just as questionable is the attempt to deny that the other community’s identity is valid. To quote again from Adams: “There are no cultural or national links between the Loyalists and the British, no matter how much the Loyalists scream about their ‘British way of life’.” Not only is this comment quite inaccurate, but even a brief overview of different facets of our shared history can reveal the extent of the ‘cultural and national’ links which have existed, not only between ‘the Loyalists and the British’, but between *all* the inhabitants of Ireland and those on the British mainland.

A common inheritance

- Identical Stone Age burial monuments exist in the northern half of Ireland and south-west Scotland, of which Séan O Ríordain commented: “The tombs and the finds from them form a continuous province *joined rather than divided* by the narrow waters of the North Channel.”² [*Italics added*] Archaeologists have labelled these tombs the ‘Clyde-Carlingford cairns’ to signify the close relationship between the two regions.
- Not only was the North Channel between Scotland and Ulster a constant point of contact between the two islands, but the entire Irish Sea is seen by some scholars as providing for more complex patterns of social interaction than first believed. As archaeologist John Waddell suggested: “Perhaps we have greatly underestimated the extent to which this body of water linked the two islands in prehistoric times.... Maybe we should consider the Irish Sea as a ‘great land-locked lake’, to use Dillon and Chadwick’s phrase.”³
- The prehistoric link between the two islands also suggests a shared kinship. As Irish historian Liam de Paor commented: “The gene pool of the Irish... is probably very closely related to the gene pools of highland Britain.... So far as the physical make-up of the Irish goes... they share their origins with their fellows in the neighbouring parts of the next-door island of Great Britain.”⁴

- It was settlers from the north of Ireland, labelled ‘Scotti’ by the Romans, who bequeathed the name ‘Scotland’ to their new homeland.
- From the 5th to the 8th centuries the Ulster-Scottish kingdom of Dalriada encompassed territory on both sides of the North Channel. From Dalriada emerged the kings who united Scots and Picts in what became Scotland.
- The Gaelic language was brought from Ireland by such settlers and it eventually spread throughout Scotland, a prime example of the close interrelationship between the two islands. In more recent times the influence has been in the opposite direction and much of the distinctive vocabulary of the North of Ireland is of Scottish origin, including words such as *skunder* (sicken), *thole* (endure), *byre*, *corn*, *dander* (stroll), *lift* (steal) and *mind* (remember).
- St Patrick was a migrant from Britain whose influence on Irish history and culture has been profound.
- When St Columba sailed from Ulster to Iona, the monastery he founded there proved of vital importance to the religious and cultural history of Scotland. As the Dutch geographer Heslinga wrote, it was settlers from Ulster who “gave Scotland her name, her first kings, her Gaelic language and her faith.”⁵
- The cross-fertilisation between east Ulster and northern Britain gave rise to what Proinsias Mac Cana described as “a North Channel culture-province within which obtained a free currency of ideas, literary, intellectual and artistic.”⁶ It was this artistic environment – centered in the scriptoria of the more progressive monasteries – which directly led, according to Mac Cana, to east Ulster becoming “the cradle of written Irish literature”.
- Some of the ancient annals of early Irish history concern themselves as much with events in Scotland as with those in Ireland.
- Even in the great Irish sagas major characters such as Cúchulainn and Deirdre regularly commute between Ireland and mainland Britain.
- At the Battle of Moira in 637, reputedly the greatest battle ever fought in Ireland, the over-king of Ulster, Congal Cláen, had in his army – according to Colgan – contingents of Picts (Scottish), Anglo-Saxons (English) and Britons (Welsh).
- In 1316, at the request of Ireland’s Gaelic chiefs, Edward Bruce of Scotland was proclaimed King of Ireland.
- Between the 13th and 16th centuries the importation by the Irish chieftains of large numbers of Scots mercenaries (the gallowglass) – many of whom settled in Ireland – was to prove vital to the resurgence of Gaelic Ireland.
- The Plantation is the most famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) period of major population movement between Britain and Ireland, but it was not the first such movement, nor was it the last – those of Irish descent have made a significant contribution to the present population of Great Britain.
- Rather than the modern Irish Republic being the embodiment of traditional Gaelic aspirations, “the concept and the institutions of the modern nation-state were, ironically, imported from England.”⁷
- Irish Republicanism owes much to the radical ideals of Scottish Presbyterianism.

- Despite the conflict which has perennially soured Irish-British relationships, Irishmen have long maintained links with the British Army, epitomised at Waterloo where it is estimated half the British Army were Irishmen. This close connection was also evidenced in the First World War, during which some 50,000 Irishmen died fighting in the British Army. And in the Second World War 80,000 Southern Irishmen volunteered to join the British forces.
- Irish writers of English descent (the Anglo-Irish), alongside those of native Irish descent writing in English, have established one of the most vibrant branches of English literature (with a roll-call of names that includes Spenser, Congreve, Goldsmith, Swift, Sheridan, Wilde, Yeats, Synge, Shaw, O'Casey, Beckett and Heaney). As Robert McCrum pointed out:

In a remarkable way the Irish have made English their own, and have preserved qualities of speech and writing that many Standard English speakers feel they have lost.... In the fusion of the two traditions, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic, it is sometimes said that Irish Gaelic was the loser. The language was certainly transmuted into English, but it found, in another language, ways of expressing the cultural nuances of Irish society, of making English in its own image.⁸

- The history of the Labour movement has also linked the working-class peoples of the two islands, as did some of its greatest leaders: such as Larkin, who was born in Liverpool, and Connolly, who was born in Edinburgh. During the 1913 Dublin lock-out, for example, English workers organised food-ships to help ameliorate the suffering of their Irish comrades.

This list could easily be extended, but it should be sufficient to refute Adams' claim that "Protestants need to be encouraged to recognise that the common history they share with their Catholic fellow countrymen and women in the common territory of Ireland is *quite foreign to any British experience*".¹ [*Italics added*] On the contrary, it is Irish Catholics who need to recognise that *their own* history is not 'foreign' to the historical and cultural experience of mainland Britain, but is an integral part of it. Such a recognition need not threaten either Britishness or Irishness, but enrich both, and serve to promote a more inclusive identity. Gusty Spence made such a point when a Loyalist delegation visited the USA:

We were addressing this gathering of people with Irish 'connections' and when I told them I was proud to be British but also proud to be Irish, one man remarked, in an irritated tone, "Why is it that you Loyalists can't make up your minds what you are!" I asked him: "I take it you are American, sir?" "How perceptive," was the gruff response. "I take it you are also proud of your Irish roots?" "I am indeed," was the more cautious reply. "Then if *you* can be proud of your 'Irish-American' heritage, are *we* not entitled to be proud of *our* dual heritage?" The man nodded and sat down.

Our mixed background

There are many in Northern Ireland today who still cling to the notion that each community has somehow managed to emerge from centuries of history relatively free from any 'contamination' by the other. By playing their 'own' music, their 'own' sports, and sustaining a host of other more subtle 'differences', they imagine that the two communities have managed to remain two distinct and separate tribes. The reality of our history tells quite a different story. Even during the Plantation period, as Estyn Evans pointed out, "There was much more

intermarriage, with or without the benefit of the clergy, than the conventional histories make allowance for.”⁷

Indeed, no matter how vehemently Republicans may castigate the Plantation, the prevalence of Planter surnames among their ranks indicates their own mixed background, as Ulick O’Connor pointed out with regard to Bobby Sands:

It is ironic that he, who more than anyone else by his devotion to the Irish language while in Long Kesh helped to contribute to the present renaissance of the language in West Belfast, should not have a Gaelic name. (I once published a list of eleven names that could well have been those of a Protestant hockey team of boys and girls from a posh Belfast school. It was, in fact, compiled from a list of members of the Provisional IRA who had been killed in action.) You can see the influence of this mixed background in Bobby Sands’ writing – Scots dialogue here and there; ‘the sleekit old Brit’ for instance.⁹

The 1995 document ended with the following challenge from the Shankill Think Tank:

We challenge Ulster Loyalists to redefine their Unionism. Instead of remaining trapped by exclusivist definitions they should have the confidence to celebrate their link with the peoples of Britain in a way that transcends religious or cultural differences within Northern Ireland. We challenge them to develop a Unionism which can be truly inclusive of *all* sections of our people.

We challenge Irish Republicans to redefine their Nationalism. Instead of remaining trapped in exclusivist definitions they should have the confidence to celebrate *all* the facets that make up this island’s heritage and not suggest that some are ‘alien’ and hence inferior. Their nationalism must become truly inclusive. No longer must they assert that a sizeable section of the people living in Ireland can only be considered Irish once they relinquish their Britishness.

Furthermore, we challenge both Loyalists and Republicans to acknowledge that over the centuries each community has imbued many of the other’s attributes, to the extent that the heritage of both traditions has increasingly become a shared one. We challenge Loyalists to acknowledge the Irish component of their heritage, and Republicans to acknowledge the British component of theirs.

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