

Towards a shared future

(5) Ulster's marching bands

Compiled by Michael Hall

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The **Island Pamphlets** series was launched in 1993 to stimulate a community-wide debate on historical, cultural, political and socio-economic issues. Most of the pamphlets are edited accounts of discussions undertaken by small groups of individuals – the '**Community Think Tanks**' – which have embraced (on both a 'single identity' and a cross-community basis) Loyalists, Republicans, community activists, women's groups, victims, cross-border workers, ex-prisoners, young people, senior citizens and others. To date 104 titles have been produced and 190,400 pamphlets have been distributed at a grassroots level. Many of the titles are available for (free) download from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>.

Introduction

Marching bands (from the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community) have gained a new prominence in the past two years, from the moment a YouTube video of one band marching in circles outside a Catholic chapel ‘went viral’, to their current involvement in the nightly parades which make their way to the ‘Civil Rights Camp’ located on the Protestant side of the Twaddell/Ardoyne interface in North Belfast.

In the midst of this renewed media attention I was approached by a leading member of the Confederation of Ulster Bands. No lover of Irish Republicanism, he had nevertheless been impressed by a series of pamphlets in which I had allowed members of different Irish Republican organisations the opportunity to articulate and debate their interpretations of Republicanism. [*Island Pamphlets* Nos. 96–100*] ‘My dislike of Republicans hasn’t changed,’ he said, ‘but I certainly gained a far deeper insight into their thinking.’ He asked if I would be willing to do the same for the marching band sector – by giving a range of people (male and female) representing band culture (some of whom were also members of the Loyal Orders) an opportunity to not only ‘give our side of the story’ but to voice the deep unease which they – and, indeed, the wider Protestant working-class community – are currently experiencing.

I told him that the most recent pamphlets I had been working on were focused on the theme ‘Towards a shared future’. [Nos. 101–104*] ‘Perfect’, he said, ‘because at present, within the Protestant community in general, there is a widespread belief that the nationalist/republican vision of a “shared” future is one which does not include us.’ Such a perception, he added, boded ill for efforts to reach a lasting and equitable accommodation between Northern Ireland’s long-estranged communities.

This pamphlet is an edited account of the discussions which ensued. Nationalist residents’ groups and the Parades Commission might dispute the opinions voiced, but only through debate and dialogue can negative perceptions be challenged or changed. (Note: The discussions took place before the ‘Haass Talks’ had run their course. However, the participants were highly sceptical as to whether anything would emerge from these talks which would impact positively at the grassroots.)

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Ulster's marching bands

The Bands: a substantial sector in its own right

The participants were eager to describe just how extensively the marching band culture was embedded within Northern Ireland's Protestant communities.

- I think most nationalists and republicans assume that the only reason people in the Protestant community want to join marching bands is because of a 'Kick the Pope' mentality. Okay, you do get Prods who think like that, but for the vast majority of band members it's to do with their culture, their heritage, their sense of identity... and, at a very local level, their links with family and community.
- I also don't think people in Northern Ireland – and I don't just mean people in the Catholic community – realise the full extent of the band sector. There are some 650 bands within the Protestant community – and a smaller number within the Catholic community. Membership of each band can range from between twenty to eighty people, and if we take an average of forty-five members per band, that means about 30,000 people are actively involved. And if you include their family members – not to mention the thousands of spectators and supporters – you can see why the Ulster band scene is one of the largest voluntary movements in the UK.
- Some of our bands take part in cross-community parades in the Republic, particularly on St Patrick's Day. And there's bands from here go to Canada to perform. Others attend Great War commemorations at the Somme and elsewhere.
- It has been calculated that with all the money spent on uniforms, instruments, coach hire, catering, etc. – *not* including all the overnights in local hotels by visitors from Scotland, Canada and elsewhere – some £10M, maybe more, is being ploughed back into the local economy every year.
- Uniforms can cost up to £450 per person. And most uniforms are manufactured in Northern Ireland, so that helps to keep local tailors in business. Our band spent £14,000 last year on uniforms, and that's not as high as some other bands spend.
- Aye – my band spent £30,000.
- You can imagine how upset 'The Pride of the Raven Flute Band' were last Twelfth when nationalists threw paint all over their uniforms as they marched past!
- Flutes can cost from £70 to three grand; accordions from one and a half to five grand; silver/brass instruments from £800 to four grand; and drums £450 to two grand.

- The ‘Pride of Ardoyne’ got ten or twelve new drums there at £550 each.
- It cost us £5000 for new drums in January....
- A soprano accordion is £1000, and some are £2000. But a flute is only £200. That’s why flute bands have been more successful in staying on the road. The price of instruments for a silver band is astronomical. There’s no pipe bands in Belfast at all now; the ‘Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band’, for example, is based in Lisburn.
- And very little of this money comes from government grants or funding bodies. In fact, the band scene gets a paltry proportion of the funding given out for sport and leisure activities. Football gets far more than bands ever do. Over the last five years the IFA got nineteen times more funding, and the GAA twenty-two times. Most of the money is raised by the bands themselves. Family members all help to fund-raise.
- James Galway came from the ‘Onward Flute Band’ in York Street, that’s where he learnt the flute. His uncle taught the flute to the younger band members.
- Local bands help people in communities to bond. It is our equivalent of the GAA: everyone in the GAA is there to support their team, and we’re the same – we want to do all we can in support of our local band.
- You’re right; the band is there as a unifying thing for the local community. Like in Ardoyne or in Suffolk, the local community gels round the band, runs fund-raising events to support them.
- Bands are absolutely demonised, by the media and the rest. But we are like community organisations. We take kids off the streets, we teach them an instrument, we teach them discipline like the Boys’ Brigade, all that kind of stuff. In fact, bands have largely taken over that role. Same as it did with the Junior Orange Association. In 1969/70 the Association was very strong, right up to the 1980s – you had junior lodges everywhere. But they began to wane because the kids just wanted to be in bands; they weren’t interested in the lodges.
- I joined as a child – I had always been musical – and the more I got into it I really loved it. But it is also an expression of my culture, and I couldn’t separate the two. The camaraderie and the friendships people form over the years is also important – the bands are part and parcel of who we are.
- Some people have this notion that the band scene only really operates during the ‘marching season’. In fact, bands tend to practise eleven or even twelve months of the year. My own band practises three times a week. The practice the other night went on from 7 o’clock to 10 o’clock. And it’s kids coming in to learn how to play the flute or some other instrument. That’s keeping them off the streets for three nights a week,

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and they take their instruments home to practise so that's even more of their time positively occupied.

- Many bands participate in between 50 and 60 parades and outdoor performances annually, along with maybe 20 to 30 indoor events. For a while there I was playing with a band on a Monday night, learning part-music on a Tuesday night and teaching on a Wednesday night. It is quite a big commitment.

- Our bands cater for that group which is the hardest to cater for – teenage boys – although there are plenty of girls involved too. Not only do we take them off the streets, give them free music tuition, but we try to instil standards of good behaviour and help build up their self-confidence. And most bands have a strict anti-drugs approach. As someone said recently, in any other country in the world our band sector would be seen as a model for others. Instead, we're denigrated and belittled – it's almost as if being a member of a marching band is something to be ashamed of!

- It is acknowledged that some of the most disadvantaged people in Northern Ireland are young Protestant working-class males. They underachieve at school, and have low self-esteem and limited job prospects. Yet think of the thousands of young lads who are enthusiastic members of our bands, learning a musical instrument and developing their self-confidence. I read a report saying that an involvement in music can help academic achievement. Yet do the education authorities approach us, ask to work with us, seek to support our efforts? No chance – they keep their distance.

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- When you think of all the computer games there are to keep young people occupied, it's really heartening to see so many of our young people willing to put their time into something that much more useful.

- Quite often you get three generations involved in a band: children, parents and grandparents. And bands regularly go into old folks' homes to entertain the residents. That's an important way of building respect between the generations.

- Many bands raise a massive amount for local charities. Take 'The Pride of the Raven' – in the past twenty years they have donated over £87,000.

- And the musical standards are high. We have some of the best voluntary musicians in the world. Whether it's flute bands, accordion bands, pipe bands, or solo drumming, we constantly produce champions: Ulster, British, All-Ireland... At the 2009 World Pipe Band Championships in Scotland *half* the prizes went to Ulster competitors.

Marching bands: an historical tradition

The historical pedigree of bands was highlighted, as well as the efforts being made to focus more constructively on that legacy.

- We've had to change our whole outlook on bands. During the 1990s it became popular for bands from staunchly loyalist areas to wear black uniforms and carry flags which could be perceived as supporting present-day paramilitary organisations. Some bands did carry standards, commemorating events like the Battle of the Somme, while also carrying flags with no historical significance. It became apparent that there needed to be a process put in place to educate those involved in these bands. A group of us decided to form an association for this purpose. We became the Ulster Volunteer Force Regimental Bands Association. As people became more educated about their history, and their cultural and religious identity, the band scene began to change for the better, with uniforms and flags now having more historical – and often local – links to their Protestant heritage and culture. We got people to look at the whole history behind marching bands here, and their connections to different regiments – right back to Waterloo, on through the Home Rule Crisis and right up to the Ulster Defence Regiment.
- We took people to the 'Skins' Museum in Enniskillen [*celebrating the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards*], and to Fort Dunree in Co. Donegal. Our aim was to try and widen people's understanding of their history. We have invited speakers in to give our young band members talks on history. I myself had to educate myself by reading book after book, and going on a number of community-led history courses.
- I will admit that in the nineties, yes, we had bands walking down in black combat uniforms, and people wearing webbing and that stuff. But things *have* been changing.
- And all that effort is paying off. Take the 'Pride of Knockmore'. Just last year, they did a whole project on the history of the Lisburn Volunteers – one of the units which eventually combined under the leadership of Craig and Carson during the Home Rule Crisis – and now they are carrying a standard which recognises the local area's connection to the Home Rule period and Carson's Volunteers. Many bands are now making a conscious effort to design flags which could be acceptable – hopefully to *all* communities – as representing aspects of Ulster's past history rather than our recent conflict.
- Same with some UDA-linked bands. They changed some of their paramilitary banners to the Ulster Defence Union, which was part of the resistance to the 1893 Second Home Rule Bill. Many bands have made a real effort to change.
- I agree with doing that, but it's not happening across the board. Take for example

Joe Brolly the other day saying that the GAA is perfectly entitled to name their grounds after IRA men. So, while we're trying to get away from linking our bands to loyalist paramilitaries, there's young Catholics being told that it's okay to commemorate IRA men. If you're trying to move Loyalism and Republicanism forward on aspects of culture *both* communities need to be doing it at the same time. It's hypocritical for nationalists to complain about loyalists commemorating their dead when they are doing exactly that with their own.

- Aye, but didn't you realise that the IRA were all 'freedom fighters' while we were all just thugs and criminals!
- The fact is that many of our bands have a lot of history behind them, so why not build on that? If you look back to the Home Rule crisis, when people marched to Craigavon House, the bands were there. Take the 'Churchill Flute Band'. It is the longest-established marching band in Ireland, possibly the world, having been founded in 1835. During the First World War it became the 9th Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers Regimental Band and went over to Belgium and France with them. It was flute bands which marched the men from town to town along the Western Front. We are trying to educate our young people. We want them to know something about their history, including the history of their band. We want them to know why they should celebrate their culture, why they're celebrating the Twelfth of July – the civil and religious liberty that William fought for.
- In America bands marched people across the battlefields during the Civil War. Most bands come from a military background, often with a long history. That military connection is still going strong. We have young lads in our bands who have served in Afghanistan, or in Iraq and elsewhere.
- Belonging to a band to me is part of my sense of being an Ulsterman and British. And it's a community thing too. I have been in a band thirty-five years, my brother's the same. My son is in the band, my grandson is hoping to join the band – it's right through the area where you live.
- In the worst days of the Troubles, when we, as teenagers, joined the 'Blood & Thunder' bands†, yes, we did see them as 'Kick the Pope' bands, because we saw Catholics as the enemy, because of what the IRA were doing to our community. But I'll be quite honest, nineteen years after the ceasefires the wee lads in my band are mainly out to enjoy themselves and play music. They're there because they enjoy the music. And the band teaches them a musical instrument, instils discipline into them, and keeps them off the street. They say to me: 'I'm didn't join the band because I want to go out and kick the Pope or anything like that; I love the music, all my mates are

† 'Blood and Thunder': the thunder refers to the thundering sound of the large bass drums, while the blood comes from frequently skinned knuckles caused by hitting the drums so hard.

in it, I've made new friends since I came into the band.'

- When I joined a band in 1972 – the 'York Street Defenders' – I played the cymbals. I joined because I loved seeing the bands. To be honest, you weren't so much interested in seeing Orangemen walking on the Twelfth – you wanted to see the bands.

- That's still the case. It is still the bands which are the main attraction.

- A few years ago I was at a community meeting in East Belfast and one woman asked the following question of those present: 'If there weren't any bands in Orange parades, would you bother to watch them?' And three-quarters of those present said 'No'. One woman said, 'We struggle all year to make ends meet, and watching the bands is the only bit of holiday time we get.'

- Our schools never really educated us about Ulster history or culture, it was always focused on English history. I had to make an effort to educate myself about my own history. Whereas in the Catholic/nationalist/republican community they seem to know their history – the Easter Rising and all that.

- In June there we got a request to take part in a TV documentary being done by Ross Kemp, and we asked for volunteers to be spokespeople if he asked questions. The young ones run a mile – they were scared of being asked what the Twelfth was all about. The senior members of the band sat down later and discussed this problem and we decided to ask different speakers to come in and give 20-minute talks to the band members on history and culture. They never did it in school.

- It's not just the young ones: you need to talk about older ones too. I have been to the Somme five times. The first time I went, there were other people in my group saying: 'What the 'eff' are we being taken to the Somme for!' And these weren't kids – these were guys who had done jail. People don't know their history.

- We got the Battle of Hastings and the Wars of the Roses – not our own history!

- Ulster has given so much to Britain, with its regiments, its sacrifices in two world wars... and not just Britain but America where many of the founding fathers were Ulster-Scots.

- Bands are an integral part of who we are as a people. They're part of our identity.

- There are certain people, though, who don't accept us for who we are. Many republicans and nationalists absolutely *hate* the fact that there's a 'Pride of Ardoyne Flute Band', there's a 'Whiterock [Flute Band]', an 'Upper Falls [Flute Band]' ... they

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absolutely hate it. They hate the fact that there's Protestants live in Ardoyne. They try to say: 'No, you don't live in Ardoyne, you live in Glenbryn.' All the Protestants and Loyalists who live in Ardoyne are proud to come from Ardoyne. All the bandsmen are proud to be from Ardoyne. And Republicans try to tell you: 'Oh, you're not from Ardoyne, because you're a Protestant.' 'GARC' is supposed to stand for 'Greater Ardoyne Residents Collective', but it doesn't seemingly take in the Protestant part of Ardoyne, it somehow manages to jump right over us and take in Summerdale and Ligoniel. They just deny our existence.

The Parades Commission: an anti-bands agenda?

Much of the anger expressed during the discussions was directed against the Parades Commission, the body set up by government to adjudicate on contentious parades. Its 'determinations' can impose legally-binding restrictions on routes, bands, flags, standards, and the number of participants.

Note: Some of the participants in the discussions were speaking not only as band members but as parade organisers and officials of the Loyal Orders.

- The Parades Commission came into being in 1997. I met Allister Graham who was the first Chairman of it, and all he wanted to talk about were the bands, the bands. I brought uniforms to show him, I tried to talk about how much it cost to parade, I told him about the standards the bands carry, explained everything to him. But then every time there is a new set of commissioners you have to start all over again. And it is abundantly clear that the Parades Commission have it in for the bands. They keep moving the goalposts *against* the bands. At one point they wanted us to deposit a registration of every single band member in Northern Ireland with the courts. It didn't go ahead because they were told that there was no way we would go down that path. Then, at the start you only had to give one week's notice for any parade, then it was fourteen days, then it was twenty-one days, and now it is twenty-eight.

- It is impossible to understand the logic used by the Parades Commission in their 'determinations' – except as an anti-band agenda. The Parades Commission will actually tell you that your behaviour [on the previous parade] was exemplary, the band exemplary, the report from the monitors – exemplary. They will admit that any violent incidents came from republicans, not from the parade. They tell you that you have been outstanding – but that they've decided to take the band off you anyway! And why? I believe it is because they feel they have to give *something* each time to appease the representations

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made by GARC, CARA (Crumlin Ardoyne Residents' Association) and Sinn Féin. And often they didn't even contact me to tell me that these representations had been made. Their remit is to contact me and tell me that 'there is opposition to your parade' – that's the way it works. They then ask, 'Do you want to meet these groups?' That's what's meant to happen. But the last parade I put in for they never contacted me; I was told later: 'We lost your number.' Yet they were able to phone me to tell me they were taking a band off us! You're in a 'no-win' situation with the Parades Commission. If you *don't* sit down with the residents' group and there's no talks, then you get punished. If you *do* sit down with residents and they walk out in a huff, you get punished. If you showed good behaviour on your previous parade – you still get punished! The whole thing is loaded against the bands.

- Also, our bands are wearing proper band uniforms, they spend thousands of pounds on their instruments, and have put an amazing amount of effort over the years into having band members march in a disciplined manner. But despite all that effort the Parades Commission continually nit-pick about the smallest detail. Yet you get republican bands wearing T-shirts, combat belts, combat trousers, berets, and sporting IRA imagery – like crossed AK47s – on their drums, and for some reason the Parades Commission seems to have no problems with that.

- It gets even more illogical. Whenever there is one of our parades they contact nationalist groups and ask if they have any objections. But whenever there is a nationalist parade – like the one in Clifton Street – they never contact *us*. Why not?

- When you do go into a meeting with these residents' groups the Parades Commission places no onus on them to try to find an agreement with us. Instead, they put the onus *on us* to reach an agreement with the residents. But what if the residents show clearly that they are being deliberately intransigent? Even when the Parades Commission acknowledge that it is *them being intransigent with us*, they still *penalise us*: they will take the band off us, punish the band. Now, they won't ban *me* from walking down as the parade organiser, they tell us to remove one or more of the bands. They're deliberately targeting the bands. They're trying to put a separation between the lodges and the bands. I think their objective is to split the unionist community.

- Is it any wonder that people in the Protestant community just feel totally alienated from the likes of the Parades Commission? And look at the mess they made of things this Twelfth! Despite all the things bands going up past Ardoyne have had to put up with over the years – being hit with bottles and bricks; the sectarian insults – they have made a genuine effort to comply with every new determination. Even last Twelfth [2012] when they were told to have their return parade over by 4pm – meaning that they couldn't attend the religious service in the 'Field' – fourteen men came back, carried their banners with respect and dignity, to ensure that they complied with the Parades Commission's determination. And what happened? It was

followed by serious riots on the nationalist side. Petrol bombs were thrown at the PSNI and the police responded with water cannons. Cars were hijacked and set on fire; a republican gunman fired a volley of shots at the police. And yet what reward did the lodges get this year for being non-violent last year? Their return parade was completely banned! Nationalist/republican violence had paid off big time! So I can fully understand why violence erupted on our side on the Twelfth night. People had the mindset that republicans had proven over the last three or four years that violence paid, so why shouldn't we try it? After all, it is only too obvious that we are never going to be rewarded for keeping to the legal determinations and remaining non-violent, so why bother any more?

- It wasn't just the totally illogical nature of the Parades Commission's determination to ban the march and reward republican violence, but the clear message that was being sent out: that the Protestant community did not have equal civil rights. That's what gave the impetus to the setting up of the 'Civil Rights Camp' at the top of Twaddell Avenue. And why hundreds of people march in protest *every* evening, and have vowed to maintain the camp until the Ligoniel lodges can complete the return parade denied them on the Twelfth.

- Did you notice that after the first few nights of people parading up to Twaddell the media stopped covering it – because it was peaceful! And yet, out of the blue, after 85 days of peaceful marches *within* a Protestant/loyalist area, the Parades Commission determined that the bands weren't allowed to march or play music any more. They deliberately wanted to up the ante.

- And look what has followed from the Parades Commission's decision – the PSNI are arresting people wholesale for breaking the law! There was a disabled man arrested today... he's a bandsman and an Orangeman. He is in Maghaberry now. There's pensioners being manhandled and arrested by the police at these parades.

- My uncle is a 63-year-old disabled man. He's now in Dundonald, tagged by the PSNI, banned from all of Belfast, he's not allowed back to his own home. He's not allowed over to see his mother, who is 92 years of age; if he wants to see her he has to get in contact with the PSNI and she has to go over to Dundonald to see him. And you know what for? Waving an umbrella in front of a PSNI camera! See the guy that was up before him [in court]? He's up for attempted murder of a man, who he stabbed in the head. *He* didn't get tagged, he's still allowed in his own home and the judge even allowed him his passport to go to Spain for a stag weekend!

- There's two men arrested today. Ten PSNI Land Rovers for a pensioner who uses a walking stick. They near kicked his door in only he opened it. They arrested him. His nine-year-old grandson ran out and shouted, 'You're not arresting my Granda!', and two PSNI officers drew their batons and ordered him to get back into the house. Another incident: two women from Twaddell wanted to walk down the loyalist

Woodvale Road. The PSNI said it was an illegal parade! Another: five men from the Portadown District Lodge walked over to get their photograph taken and have a cup of tea [with those at the Civil Rights Camp], and the PSNI were straight over to them, cameras in the faces, and announced on the megaphone that it was an illegal parade and they would be arrested for taking part!

- It's a complete demonisation of our community.
- It's not just Belfast. 'Ballymacconnelly Sons of Conquerors Flute Band' in Rasharkin have a band parade which every year gets the goalposts moved against it. Eventually they will only have a wee street to walk up and down. But a well-known republican from West Belfast can go up there and direct an operation against that parade, and I mean an operation. He even orders the PSNI about. There was a girl from the Confederation of Ulster Bands acting as a monitor and taking photographs, trying to show what our bands were having to put up with – like people spitting at them. Both sides are allowed monitors, but this republican directed the PSNI to remove her. And they did. That showed me that we don't have an impartial police force. Our respect for the police is going out the window.
- You have no redress with the Parades Commission. They keep saying their door is open – but it's not: their door is closed. Stephen Nolan tried to get them to come onto the radio and explain their determinations, but they wouldn't. The Parades Commission has no credibility. It is part of the whole set-up through which we are being demonised.

'No Talk, No Walk' – a false position?

All the discussants believed that the oft-repeated offer by residents' groups to engage in dialogue was tactical rather than sincere.

- You keep hearing this republican/nationalist mantra that we 'must talk to local residents', 'this could be sorted out through dialogue'. The public are being hoodwinked by such lies, for *we have been sitting down with residents for years!*
- For ten years we have been meeting people in Ardoyne from CARA and no matter how many times we explain to them about the history of bands, about the history of the parade, it's a waste of time – they just don't want *anyone* walking down past them in a band uniform.
- The Apprentice Boys in Ligoniel got an accordion band who actually do cross-

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community stuff and play in old people's homes and everything, and are not sectarian in any way, yet the Parades Commission in their wisdom says: you're not allowed that band down there, they're a 'loyalist' band. An accordion band? I mean, it's not as if we're asking to take down a massive 'Blood & Thunder' band or play music, you're just asking for a band to be *walking* down there. But nothing – even a cross-community band – is acceptable to people with closed eyes and closed minds.

- I'll tell you something which happened some years ago – which to me reveals clearly the agenda of these so-called residents' groups. Tommy Cheevers had agreed to go into talks with Gerard Rice and his cohorts to discuss their opposition to the Apprentice Boys feeder parade along the Ormeau Road every August. And finding himself getting nowhere with all their objections, Tommy finally said, 'I'll tell you what. We will walk down with *no* bands, *no* flags, *no* banners, not even wearing collarettes – just ourselves, as Protestants, no trappings whatsoever.' And they still said 'no'! Now, there were a couple of Civil Rights observers at the meeting, and they said to Rice and co.: 'Hold on, you can't just stop people walking down a public highway like that.' And Rice and co. near shit themselves! Cheevers eventually abandoned all efforts to go down the Ormeau Road.

Tommy finally said, 'I'll tell you what. We will walk down with no bands, no flags, no banners, not even wearing collarettes – just ourselves, as Protestants, no trappings whatsoever.' And they still said 'no'!

- Even when we walk down and don't play music we are still spat upon, stuff threw into your ranks, people shouting: 'We'll get you when you're out of uniform!' They're going into shops in the city centre when they have found out where people work; they found people in G F Wilsons on the Springfield Road and they've put threats against them [via social media] because they are members of a band.
- Bottles filled with paint was threw at the bands on the Newtownards Road, uniforms were ruined, banners were ruined, a wee girl ended up in intensive care with a fractured skull and a broken jaw. That wasn't reported in the media. And we're still told that we must 'talk to these people'.
- Suffolk [estate] is a small, isolated Protestant community, a very proud community. Our band is thirty years old in September there, and it has been an uphill struggle the whole way. There's only 320 houses in Suffolk, and trying to keep a marching band on the road has been really difficult. As you all know a band costs 16 to 18 grand every year, and that's before you even get into paying for buses – that's for replacing instruments, uniforms and everything else. Anyway, some years ago we were told that the nationalist community wanted to 'talk' to us about our band parade. The general

feeling of the band was: ‘Why should we? Our band parade doesn’t go outside our own area, so what has it got to do with them? They don’t come and consult us when they bring the Bobby Sands Memorial parade down past us every year?’ But finally, one young lad said, ‘Why don’t we meet them?’ So we did. And they said, ‘The reason we have a problem with your parade is because of the Orange Order and all the sashes and that stuff.’ And we said: ‘What are you talking about? There’s no Orangemen at our parade; it’s mostly a band competition.’ They hadn’t a clue. Then one time they sent word down: ‘See them chip vans you have up there: have they got a trading licence?’ And I got back to them and says, ‘Are you having a laugh!’ After us bringing over 3000 people into and out of our community, with not a cross word said, the only complaint they can think up is: ‘Does them chip vans have traders’ licences!’ We ended up not having any more talks with them, which put them into a major huff. The Parades Commission held us up as a model of good practice for parades and yet our parade is still labelled as ‘contentious’. How do you work that out?

- When people go into talks with republicans and nationalists you find that they have a wish-list the size of your arm. And no matter what you might agree to, if it still doesn’t suit them they bring something else in, then something more. Now, I don’t want to come to meetings like this and cry doom and gloom, but I am hearing more and more from people that sitting down and having dialogue with republicans is not working – whether on bands, culture, heritage, even community development.
- One time we had been sitting down for four months with CARA, yet Gerry Kelly made a statement that there were no talks whatever. Now, the Parades Commission put an independent chair in there to stand over what is being said. The same as they do on the Springfield Road for the Whiterock parade. They get minutes for every meeting. So let people see those minutes and they’ll have proof of whether or not we have been engaged in discussions.
- The Parades Commission say we must meet the Ardoyne residents and yet when we ask them *who* is it we must meet they can’t tell you. Both CARA and GARC claim to represent the residents of Ardoyne. Yet senior Sinn Féin men have got a dig on the gub in there, and senior IRA men have been told to take themselves off from the front of the shops. And recently a member of CARA had a fist-fight in the middle of the street with a member of GARC. So *who* controls Ardoyne? Who do we speak to?
- I wrote GARC a thing on Twitter. I told them that I was a resident of Ardoyne, and asked if I could be part of GARC. No chance! I actually told one of their main spokespersons on the radio (*Nolan Show*) that I would come and meet him: he could decide the place and time. But even though Nolan himself tried to get him to give a positive response to my offer he avoided it. They don’t want to meet us. Their motto is: ‘no talk, no walk’, but they’re not sincere about it – it’s only to fool the public.

- Anyway, they are not honourable people. The Apprentice Boys and the Black gave up their return parades past Ardoyne *twenty years ago*, following an agreement with the residents' group. There are still five parades into town but no return parades. We gave up those five return parades on the understanding that the main Twelfth feeder parade – both into town *and the return* – would not be interfered with. And they agreed to that. But one residents' group was replaced by another ... and then another... and the current ones won't honour that initial agreement and now threaten riots if there is any hint of a return parade on the Twelfth.

- Republicans need to be asked: if a Protestant walks past them at ten o'clock in the morning, and then at three o'clock in the afternoon, why do they throw bricks at them in the afternoon but not in the morning? Are they tolerant at ten o'clock but intolerant at 3 o'clock? Anyway, it's not about tolerance. I don't want to be tolerated, I want to be accepted for what I am. That's the question needs to be asked.

The Apprentice Boys gave up five return parades on the understanding that the main Twelfth parade would not be interfered with. The residents agreed [but the current residents' groups] won't honour that agreement.

Self-inflicted wounds?

Did the bands feel that they were partly responsible for their negative image?

- Can I ask some pointed questions here? You are all telling me that that the problem lies largely with either republican protesters or the Parades Commission. But have the actions of some bands – both recently and in the past – not served to reinforce the negative image? What about the incident outside St. Patrick's last Twelfth?†

- Let's look at what happened there. The Orange Order stopped at the City Hall for a wreath-laying ceremony, so of course the whole parade backs up. It was accidental that the 'Conway' found itself outside St. Patrick's; they never planned to stop there. And normal practice when bands are halted is for them to walk in a circle to entertain the crowds until they can proceed. And the band can't be held responsible for the behaviour of the spectators. But I won't deny that the whole thing did look bad.

- Look, there's not one of us in this room doesn't regret what happened. But the media ignored the fact that a bandsman was pulled out of a car that morning near Carrick Hill, hit with hammers and had his car set on fire. The same day a pensioner was bricked coming back from East Belfast by republicans in Short Strand. To me those sectarian attacks, where people were actually hospitalised, were worse than a band playing a tune outside a chapel. But what goes all over the world? The band.

† Shankill Road-based 'Young Conway Volunteers Flute Band' was filmed marching in circles outside St. Patrick's Catholic Church, and playing a tune to which onlookers sang sectarian lyrics.

- What gets me is that *our* bands are told that they shouldn't be playing *anything other* than hymn music – or no music at all – near Catholic church property, out of respect. Yet there doesn't seem to be any objection to the 'O'Neill & Allsopp Memorial Flute Band' using St Kevin's Hall – which is part of St. Patrick's Parish – to play republican tunes and glorify the IRA every month. You can see them on YouTube; and in one video you can see a big republican banner strung across the stage. Is that not double standards? Is the music *they* play on church property respectful? And what does their church say to them about doing that? Have they complained? I very much doubt it.
- In Suffolk [estate] the annual Bobby Sands Memorial parade comes past the only Protestant place of worship we have left in our community. As soon as they get to the corner of the church there's a mad drumroll, shouts of 'Up the Ra!' and away they go!
- On the subject of present-day Republican bands: they haven't changed one iota – they have rifles and gunmen on the front of their bass drums. And this is something the Parades Commission has said to unionist bands: you cannot walk because you've got unacceptable images on your bass drum or your banners ... and they stopped some bands from marching. But when it comes to the 'Volunteer Sean McIlvenna Republican Flute Band', the 'O'Neill & Allsopp Memorial Flute Band', the 'Carrick Hill Martyrs Flute Band' – they're allowed to do whatever they want, but yet we wouldn't get away with it. Never mind the Parades Commission, you wouldn't get walking with the Orange Order, the Black [Preceptory] or the Apprentice Boys if your band was named after a volunteer – they wouldn't accept you.
- Okay, but people will still focus on these negative incidents. Many nationalists still talk about the parade going past Sean Graham's bookies on the Ormeau Road when marchers made five-fingered gestures.†
- That wasn't the bands did that. It was members of a lodge, one woman in particular. And she was prancing about as she did it! Can I be honest with you: *everybody*, bandspeople and lodge members, were horrified when they saw the pictures on TV. But, unfortunately, because of what was done, we all got tarred with that brush.
- Nobody knew who she was. And not only that, she shouldn't have been walking in the middle of a male lodge in the first place. That sometimes happens in Scotland, but it doesn't happen here. So nobody knew why she was even there.
- See that same incident: what about the man standing on the Ormeau Road with a fishing rod, flicking the hook back and forth at the marchers – he caught some people on their faces. That was never mentioned on the media. Nobody sees the other side to it – or, more correctly, nobody *wants* to see the other side of it.

† In February 1992 five people were murdered when UFF gunmen attacked Sean Graham's bookmakers shop on the Ormeau Road. During an Orange Order march that July some Orangemen held aloft five fingers as a taunt to residents. It was a public-relations disaster for the Order.

- The media has an agenda which is anti-bands. We were interviewed by *Spotlight* a few weeks after the incident outside St Patrick's. The crew followed us round the old folks' homes where we were playing and filmed us doing cross-community work. It obviously wasn't what they were expecting, because they never showed the programme. They probably wanted us to come out with a load of anti-Catholic stuff.
- There was a nationalist guy wrote a book *Blood & Thunder*, about the 'Castledearg Young Loyalists Flute Band'. And he said that the year he spent with them was a complete revelation to him. He says that only five minutes of that whole year involved confrontation – whenever nationalists tried to attack the parade in Castledearg.
- Most people aren't aware that *despite* what happened on the Twelfth there's been *two parades* down past Ardoyne: the Apprentice Boys and the Black walked down in August. No dialogue, nothing; the residents never spoke to us, we never spoke to them. They had a peaceful protest, and we had a peaceful parade. And the media have largely ignored it: it's not newsworthy enough – because nothing happened.
- Let's be honest – Sinn Féin caused all this. Gerry Adams make the comment: 'Did you think these residents' groups came about by accident?' † Bloody sure they didn't! That was years of deliberate strategy by the republican movement. But it has backfired massively on Sinn Féin. They have lost control of areas like Ardoyne, and are trying to re-establish some of their credibility by attacking loyalist bands and Loyalist culture.
- The reality is that the media are not interested in our side of the story. Or else they magnify stupid wee incidents out of all proportion. Take that bandsman who went for a pee beside St. Matthews on the Newtownards Road. There is nobody in this room who isn't going to say that he was stupid – he shouldn't have went near it. But that is beamed around the word: LOYALIST BANDSMAN URINATES ON CHAPEL! Now, there's 10,000 bandsmen and marchers who *didn't* act like that, but when you try to point that out to the media, they are not interested. Even some nationalists have admitted to me that the bandsmen continually get shafted by the media.
- There are over 3800 parades each year yet only a handful are contentious – the vast majority are peaceful. And the contentious ones all involve the Loyal Orders. Most people call our bands 'loyalist' bands. I prefer to call them 'unionist bands' because when people hear the term 'loyalist' they think it means that *all* our bands are connected to loyalist paramilitary organisations. But they aren't. Nationalists also

† According to the *Irish Times* (05.03.97), RTÉ's *Prime Time* programme quoted Gerry Adams as telling Sinn Féin members in Athboy: "Ask any activist in the north, 'Did Drumcree happen by accident?' and he will tell you, 'no'... Three years of work on the lower Ormeau Road, Portadown and parts of Fermanagh and Newry, Armagh and in Bellaghy and up in Derry... Three years of work went into creating that situation and fair play to those people who put the work in. They are the type of scene changes that we have to focus on and develop and exploit."

think that people join bands because they don't like Catholics, and this is one way of getting at Catholics. That perception too is totally wrong. When you're in a band parade you're in your own community, you don't go outside it to insult or antagonise any other community. We don't even want to walk past interface areas; in fact, the *only* time we find ourselves walking past interfaces is whenever we're accompanying a Loyal Order parade to get from one location to another.

- We take our accordion band to old people's [care] homes, and we do cross-community work, and even still we didn't get walking down past Ardoyne. They just didn't want a bandsperson about the place. A lot of the time with these residents' groups it's not the Orange Order they don't want, it's the bands. They just don't want to hear us near them.

- Before the Twelfth you had the 'Tour of the North' parade which was heavily stewarded by community stewards from the North and West Belfast Parades & Cultural Forum, the Orange Order and the PSNI, when it went down Donegall Street. Because nationalist so-called protesters didn't like the fact that it was peaceful they made their way along Carrick Hill to attack the parade on the Peter's Hill side of it. You seen the TV footage of Gerry Kelly jumping in front of a PSNI Land Rover. They ran right out onto North Street, past the PSNI, to

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attack a band at the very back of the parade. Now, what did that band do? Was playing music its big sin? People keep saying that *we* are entrenched, that we're still stuck in 1690; I'm sorry, but it is people in the nationalist community who are entrenched, and they should sit round a table with us and actually find out what the bands are all about.

- Bands going down past Ardoyne over the last forty years have been petrol-bombed and had bricks and bottles thrown at them. Yet despite all those attacks, despite all the sectarian hate directed at them, you won't have seen a loyalist band breaking ranks and attacking nationalists – even in self-defence. That's where the discipline comes into it.

- Those nationalists and republicans who try to prevent Orangemen and bandsmen walk through 'their' areas claim that their actions are a product of the past experiences of the Catholic community. They talk about the bad memories they have of how their community was subjected to displays of Orange triumphalism in the past, and such like. I will be the first to admit that that happened. But if we were to accept their logic then surely the Protestant community has an *equal* right to bring thousands of people onto Massey Avenue [in East Belfast] to stop Gerry Kelly and other former IRA men

getting to Stormont – because of the hurt the IRA inflicted on *our* community throughout the Troubles. The fact is that *we* don't do that: we have accepted that we all must move on, no matter how much it might stick in our throats. But nationalists and republicans don't want to move on. They want to continue the battles of the past.

- Maybe we *should* blockade Stormont!

We have accepted that we all must move on, no matter how much it might stick in our throats. But nationalists and republicans don't want to move on. They want to continue the battles of the past.

No level playing field?

Occasionally current events intruded into the discussions.

- Take that TV programme the other night about the UVF in which the presenter also tried to vilify Winston Irvine. There have even been demands that he be removed from the Policing Board. The reality is that 'Winkie' is doing his best to be a grounded working-class representative and move people along the political path – *in exactly the same way the Shinners claim they are doing*, and yet the media and others are out to criminalise him. It's a blatant case of double standards. Look at the facts: Senior IRA men have stated that Gerry Adams was a commander in the IRA and that he ordered the murder of Jean McConville. Now, if I phoned the PSNI tonight and claimed that so-and-so was my commander in the UFF and that he ordered the killing of somebody we would be arrested right away. But Adams has never been questioned. You have Martin McGuinness admitting that he was commander of the IRA in Londonderry on Bloody Sunday, and that he had a machine-gun that day – yet he too is not brought in for questioning. You have Gerry Kelly saying he was proud of being in the IRA, and Jim McVeigh saying he is 'proud of the volunteers'... the list is endless. But are all these people vilified and hounded by the media? Not a bit of it... well, apart from Adams recently. When republicans move into politics they are applauded. But Loyalists? No, we're judged incapable of leaving our past behind. And every one knows that Winkie has been doing his best to calm down the situation on the streets. The biggest irony is that the person who is going to be questioning Winkie as to whether he can remain on the Policing Board is an IRA ex-prisoner!
- The BBC and UTV had Gerry Kelly on the other day promoting his book about the Maze Escape, during which prison staff were injured: one died, twenty were injured. He's on *The Nolan Show* reading passages out of his book. Now, the money raised from that book is going to help the Hyde Park bomber, who is in jail at the minute – so the BBC actually had an IRA man on promoting a book to raise money for another IRA man! To me that is totally ridiculous. Are they going to have a UFF man on, a

UVF man on, somebody who was maybe in the Shankill Butchers and wrote a book; are they going to have them on to tee-hee and laugh about it?

- You also seen Kelly on TV defending his right to commemorate his fallen comrades, and many Prods condemned him. But the UDA has lost comrades; the UVF has lost comrades. So I don't deny him that right. I know the Shankill Bomb was tragic, as were countless other atrocities, but at the end of the day we can't expect them to forget their comrades. Because I won't forget *my* comrades. All I'm asking is a level playing field – but it doesn't exist, not by a long shot.
- Our Unionist politicians don't have the balls to take on Sinn Féin. Nelson McCausland was photographed a few years ago at an Eleventh Night party standing beside a loyalist ex-prisoner. Sinn Féin kicked up a whole stink about it, saying he had 'breached his ministerial code'. Yet a week later Gerry Kelly, Martin McGuinness and Carál Ní Chuilín were standing at an IRA commemoration beside masked men, listening to speakers saying that the IRA volunteers were wonderful. And what stink did the DUP raise? None!
- Take Margaret McClenaghan's funeral. The flag of a proscribed organisation [*Cumann na mBan*], showing a gun, was draped on the coffin, and Sinn Féin MLAs and councillors flanking it. What message does that send out to our community?
- But yet if Unionist politicians were seen standing at UDA or UVF commemorations, saying them guys were heroes, Republicans would go absolutely nuts!
- It wouldn't happen anyway: Unionists would run a mile from loyalist commemorations. They used us when it suited them, then disowned us. They don't want to get their hands dirty. And people forget about Peter Robinson marching in his red beret, or Paisley's 'Third Force' and 'Ulster Resistance' – and waving firearms certificates on the hillside! [1981]

The 'other' community

What about relationships with the Catholic/nationalist community in general?

- All sides enjoyed the Twelfth at one time. I remember my Catholic neighbours collecting wood for the bonfires, and they would have come on the Eleventh Night. But once the Troubles started that was the end of it.
- Many Catholics would still watch the parades. I have spotted Catholic people I know standing on the Lisburn Road, and I always nod to them in greeting.
- Many Catholics probably think that most bandsmen are anti-Catholic. But they're not like that at all. I'll give you a good example. Many bandsmen on the Shankill also love football. And the Drogheda and Linfield supporters in the Setanta Cup get on

really well. Whenever Drogheda was playing Linfield at Windsor Park they brought them up to the Shankill, into the Mountainview. And they had to go out and get extra chairs and tables, because there was that big a crowd of Linfield supporters came to welcome them to the Shankill.

- I have watched republican parades and I listen to their music. Their bands are not as good as ours, musically, but their tunes aren't a million miles away from ours. Even that tune *Take it down from the mast Irish traitor* is not far off *The Billy Boys*. They play *The Fields of Athenry*; we play *The Fields of Athenry*.

- If you go into the tunes the bands play... there will always be an Irish background to every tune. The original tune to *The Sash* was *Irish Molly O*.

- Both sides play a lot of the same tunes but the words are different.

- Bands in some country areas would share things like drums. Bands from an Ancient Order of Hibernians or Irish National Foresters background, not bands which would have guns painted across their bass drums. There would be an arrangement whereby the Lambeg drum would belong to both of them; that's why it would have a cockerel on the front and not King Billy or one of the Saints! I know that in the Maghera area there was that kind of exchange of instruments, because I remember that issue coming up with the Confederation of Ulster Bands.

- In the 1950s the 'St Peter's Brass & Reed Band' from the Falls Road used to lend some of its instruments to the 'Templemore Avenue Brass Band' for the Twelfth.

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- The problem has always been that if you grew up in a household where your father was a Loyalist bigot, or a Republican bigot, that's the only thing you learnt until you educated yourself. Hopefully many people are coming away from all that.

- In the last ten to fifteen years band parades have become a thing inside your own areas. A band would organise a parade and invite other bands along to it. They stay within their own areas. They don't ask to go past interface areas and cause problems. Now, we would have them Friday, Saturday nights, there's maybe about 200 band parades throughout the summer across Northern Ireland. And some of them might involve 60 bands, but it's all them competing against each other, to make themselves better. No Loyal Orders involved. We don't miss it if we are not out with the Orange Order, the Black or the Apprentice Boys – the way we always used to be – we still have our own band parades. And we actually enjoy our band parade and our competitions ten times more than we do when walking with the Loyal Orders. Because you're not

under the same intense pressure. If we're walking down past Ardoyne with the Apprentice Boys Club, we have instilled into ourselves that we have to keep our eyes focused in front, we're not allowed to talk, you can't do this or that, because you're going to be perceived as insulting somebody. But that's not why I joined a band. I joined a band to play music, to enjoy the camaraderie.

- Most people who don't know what's going on up here [Twaddell Avenue] think that we want to complete our Twelfth parade out of some desire to be triumphalist. It's nothing to do with that. The original Orange Hall in Ligoniel had to be abandoned when the area became Catholic and republican. In fact, republicans shot two Orangemen coming out of a meeting, killing one of them. So it then moved round to the Crumlin Road. And that too was burned down. This has all been inflicted on us by Irish republicans – the very same people who will tell everyone that their goal is to 'Unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'! That's why the Ligoniel means so much to the bandsmen in the 'Pride of Ardoyne', and to the lodge in Ardoyne: they're from there, and everything to do with where they used to practise in the Orange Hall was all taken away by Irish Republicans. They just now feel that enough is enough.

- Memories are still raw. I went to Ligoniel care home and there were these old people sitting there. And one wee woman said. 'Play *The Sash*, and play it loud!' And she said, 'I could tell you stories about what happened to my family...' Now, she must have been 87 or 88 and you want to have heard her: she went back through the years and talked about what happened to Protestant people up in Ligoniel.

- More than twenty years ago I was one of those who would have stopped the whole parade if I thought there was a funeral or wedding going on at St. Patrick's. I recall one time doing the bass drum for the 'Blue Star Accordion' and I saw a hearse in the distance. So I stopped drumming and halted. The band captain asked what was happening and I said, 'There's a funeral down there, we have to give respect.' And he – and the rest of the band – were in total agreement with me. So we waited.

- I was at a cross-community meeting one time and this republican seemed to really like what I was saying. Until he found out I was a member of the 'Shankill Protestant Boys' – and it was as if I had the plague! I said to him: 'What type of mindset have you got? We can talk together as human beings trying to move things forward, but as soon as somebody tells you that I'm in a flute band, in your eyes I suddenly become transformed into a bigoted loyalist scumbag!'

- See the only time a loyalist bandsman, or an Apprentice Boy or Black even *thinks* about Catholics or nationalists or republicans is for the two minutes when you're walking past them, hoping that you don't get hit on the head with a brick. See when you're away from that interface, nobody cares. You're out with your friends, with your family, you go for your dinner afterwards, have a few beers, go back to your local Orange Hall or band club and you have a night of entertainment. Absolutely no

interest in Catholics or nationalists or republicans. But they actually think you do – they think we are constantly talking about them, scheming about them.

- We were trying to get people away from the sense that this community was under siege. And we were slowly succeeding. The problem is that since last December and the City Hall [Union flag] vote the ‘under siege’ mentality has come back again big time. It’s okay for Peter Robinson last week to ask loyalists to get away from that mindset, but people *do* genuinely feel under siege.

A growing disillusionment

For all participants any feel-good factor generated by the Good Friday Agreement has long since evaporated.

- In September 2012 Unionism was in a very comfortable place. You had the massive success of the Covenant Parade, where all shades of Unionism came together and paraded to Stormont. Five hours it took for them to walk past, and Unionism felt confident in itself. The Union flag vote was supposed to be taken in April 2013; Sinn Féin brought it forward to the first council meeting in December – the closest they could get to the end of 2012 – and the vote was carried for the Union flag to come down. They *knew* what that was going to do to the Unionist community. They wanted to dent all the euphoria over the Covenant commemorations. They were popping champagne corks in Belfast City Hall: photographs over the social media sites showing them doing this, so they knew what they were doing. It was done on purpose.

- My personal view of Irish Republicans is that they are driven not so much by a love of Irish culture but by a hatred of British culture. They deliberately goad the PUL community; that’s why the flag was taken down. They will just keep going until they get what they want. See this notion of a ‘shared future’? That’s only for ‘forty shades of green’; my community will never count in that.

- People keep talking about this ‘shared future.’ There’s a shared future as long as you don’t put the Union flag up, or put a band uniform on, or play a flute, or be in the Orange. Now, to me that’s not a shared future. I’m still prepared to attend cross-community meetings, but over the last eighteen months my whole outlook on everything has been changing. I voted for peace, and I said to myself: keep these kids out of trouble, don’t let them go to jail, we can build something better here. But now? I don’t feel so positive about the future now.

- I can honestly say that all that has been happening these last few years is making the average Protestant bitter.

- It’s fifteen years since the Good Friday Agreement and nationalists *still* have it in for our bands. I had thought that the Agreement was supposed to take us all into a

new future, where expressions of culture and heritage were protected. I never imagined that fifteen years on nationalists would still be out trying to block Orange marches. The promises made in the Good Friday Agreement were either all false, or have been reneged on. And see what the PSNI are doing at the moment – putting pensioners away for waving the Union flag – I am being honest with you, I feel like saying: to Hell with it, let's go back to war – if that's what they really want!

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- We all naively assumed that when the Good Friday Agreement said it would protect cultural expression it meant *our* culture as well. But apparently only Green things can be called 'culture', anything Orange is really just sectarianism. We're not supposed to have any culture of our own.
- The bands belong to ordinary working-class Protestants. Unlike in the nationalist community where Sinn Féin will fight for their community's needs at every opportunity, and will take their case to the highest levels of government, *who* within political Unionism cares about the bands? None of them wants to fight our cause. We have been left to fight our own corner. That's why we cling to the bands so much: they're all that we have left. We always let our Unionist leaders talk for us, and where did it get us? Where did it get our culture and heritage? All it did do was set most of these politicians up very nicely, with massive incomes and grand houses.
- No matter who we vote for we still don't get any real leadership. We have sat down with our politicians and got nowhere; they continually shaft us. We have sat down with republicans at cross-community meetings and they say all these accommodating things – and then *they too* go and shaft us. I am 35 years at this game. I have seen comrades jailed, killed. I voted for peace, my family all voted for peace, because I want to see a better life for my grandkids. But what has happened this last few years... our heritage is under threat as never before. People say there are other more important things, like the economy or jobs, but *this* is the issue I believe is the most vital: our country, our culture, our Britishness and our flag – and I am prepared to die for that.
- But in exactly what ways do you think your Britishness is under threat?
- I read some of your recent pamphlets and people have already given you an answer to that question. It's all a drip, drip process. Queen's University no longer plays the National Anthem on graduation days. The Crown's coat of arms has been removed from most courts in Northern Ireland. The Shinners opposed the erection of 'Welcome to Northern Ireland' signs along the border. The list of items Sinn Féin councillors demanded be removed from Limavady council offices ranged from a 'Charles and Di' commemorative mug to a statue of local Orangeman William

Massey. In Newry they voted to name a children's play-park after Raymond McCreesh, whose gun was linked to the Kingsmills massacre. They even refuse to accept that Londonderry is part of the United Kingdom†. Then the removal of the Union flag from Belfast City Hall. The Shinnners actually made a video of council staff taking the flag down. The next day three Sinn Féin councillors walked around the City Hall making a list of everything which represented Unionism or Britishness. It was clearly a 'to do' list of what they could take down next. They want symbols of Britishness *out* and symbols of present-day Irish nationalism *in*.

- It's a constant assault on our culture. And for working-class loyalist people the only thing we have left is our culture, for we've no jobs any more....
- Talking about the 'flag protests' ... [Peter] Robinson recently called for no city centre disruption this Christmas by flag protesters. That's a bit rich given that his party's 40,000 leaflets had instigated the whole thing in the first place.
- That lit the flame in the unionist community about the Union flag. How many people have walked past that City Hall – to be quite honest, myself included – and wouldn't have noticed it wasn't on top of the City Hall!
- I never even knew it flew up there all year.
- They inflamed the situation so they did, and stirred the people up so much – and then, as they have done so many times in the past – they disowned them!
- The 'Civil Rights Camp' at Twaddell is now into its 109th day, and there continues to be a peaceful protest. Yet in that same period there's been over 100 bomb alerts by republicans, two men shot dead, 27 punishment shootings, and masked men went into a club in Ardoyne with guns and read out a statement threatening to shoot people. But where is media attention focused? On Irish republicans? No – on us!
- We have been increasingly pushed back into a corner. And it's fast coming to the stage where people will feel they have no option but to fight back – and unfortunately that's what it's coming to.
- I believe that the 'peace process', such as it is, is ready to fall apart, and my fear is that we're fast drifting back to war. Dissident republicans have recently been leaving pipe bombs in loyalist areas, and there's people from a UDA and UVF background talking about taking the war back to them.
- Conflict is something that goes in circles. The Provies got what they wanted through conflict – maybe now it's coming our turn?

† A reference to Derry/Londonderry's bid to be 'UK City of Culture' in 2013. Sinn Féin party leader on Derry city council, Maeve McLaughlin, had said, 'While we are a city of culture there has to be a recognition that we're not part of the UK.... [There are] tens of thousands of nationalists and republicans in this city and region who do not recognise themselves as part of the UK.'

- Our band culture is the last obstacle standing in the way of militant Irish Republicanism. In 1969 and 1970 nationalists got the Ulster Special Constabulary disbanded, then the Ulster Defence Regiment, and they now have a stranglehold over the PSNI and the Parades Commission. Our bands are their last obstacle.
- We could sit and talk forever with nationalists and republicans, but to what end? They have an agenda as to how they see the future, and it doesn't include us, except as quiet and subservient Prods who will one day wake up and realise that we were Irish all along. Personally, I feel that talks are a waste of time.
- And are we going to wait until there's loads of kids put in jail, and older people too? Pensioners put away? At the end of the day, we've tried all these channels. Republicans talk about a 'shared space', but there is no shared space, only *their* space! It's finished. I would be quite prepared to say: okay, let's go and create chaos – whatever it takes to get our voices heard.

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A dangerous moment

All the participants to the discussions were genuinely concerned that Northern Ireland was entering a very dangerous period.

- We lack proper leadership. The way things are drifting at present we are going to get more and more people lifted and put in jail. And what for? I'd rather get put in jail for taking up a gun rather than for just standing in my own area, with the police laughing at us.
- I am worried that people are drifting back to a 'war mentality'. But nobody can see any other road. Once the siege mentality is there that's what direction it could take.
- Yes, I think they are going to push the Protestant community too far.
- Can I ask a question: when you say 'they', who do you mean? Outsiders could easily get the impression that you all feel that the entire Catholic community is against you. But in my everyday dealings with people in the Catholic community very, very few express *any* desire to do down the Protestant community or take away their heritage.
- We would accept that. A group of people came over to the Shankill while the service was going on to commemorate the Shankill bomb, and laid a wreath in the Memorial Garden. And it said: 'From the good people of Ardoyne'. We know that there are plenty of residents in Ardoyne who have no problem with our parades and would be quite happy for them to go through. They are more upset by their own ones – not to

mention a load of outsiders coming in – causing mayhem in their own area. But no matter what proposals the DUP or UUP come out of the Haass Talks† with there are certain republicans who just don't want to accept us for who we are. And it's blatant bigotry. They try to dress it up as a political stance against 'reactionary loyalism'. It's nothing of the sort: it's just anti-Protestant sectarianism, as simple as that. And no matter what is said by Haass those people will still oppose everything about us.

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- You were talking earlier about creating chaos – even a return to war? But how will that protect your heritage and culture?
- But what can we do? We don't have options.
- There are *always* options.
- Here we stand; we can do no other.
- But sometimes the very manner in which you try to defend something can be counter-productive, and can actually damage it. The 2011 Census revealed that the percentage of people in Northern Ireland who define themselves as either 'Protestant' or 'Catholic' is very close to 50:50; I think there's only 3% difference. In reality, then, the *logical* way to ensure the continuation of the Union is not to focus on the Protestant community – given that the vast majority of Protestants will always vote for the Union – but to bring on board the Catholic community and make them feel the Union is for them too, that they and their culture will be accorded equal expression.
- But it's a well-known fact that very few people in the Catholic community want a United Ireland.
- Yes, but Protestants/loyalists can impact on that by their actions. In the 2011 Census the number of people here who declared their identity as 'Northern Irish', as opposed to 'British' or 'Irish', was 20% – rising to 29% in the Omagh area. Recent polls, however, taken *since* the flag protests commenced, show that the number of Catholics who identify themselves as 'Northern Irish' has dropped dramatically. That shows that if the pursuit of a particular identity is pursued in a negative way, it can actually undermine the very thing it is trying to protect.
- Look, there's not one person in this room who wants to go back to war, but if the dissidents keep shooting people, and planting bombs, it is inevitable that something is going to happen. They put a bomb beside the route of our Apprentice Boys parade

† American envoy Richard Haass had been invited by the First and Deputy First Ministers to engage local parties in dialogue to resolve differences over flags, parades and the legacy of the Past.

last Easter Monday. Now, the Army diffused it. They said it was a viable device, then they said it wasn't, then they said it was – and we still don't know. What would have happened as our Apprentice Boys were walking down there and that had've went off? See if I was to get killed my wee lad would go out to shot anybody, not because he is a bigot, but because somebody murdered his father. That's what the problem is; the dissidents are going to do something at one of these parades, because they don't care, even about their own communities. They shot a fella dead because he moved up from Dublin into one of their areas – they just don't care!

- That incident was all dampened down in the media, but if Protestants had've put a bomb at a Hibernian parade it would have gone round the world, we'd have been demonised in every nation.
- We have a couple of lads in our band who are serving in Afghanistan; they got a threat there last week from dissidents, the police notified them. This is just going back and back. Someone is eventually going to make a wrong move military-wise....
- They nearly killed a Protestant pensioner when they threw a pipe bomb at police. That's how close it is. There are shootings, bomb scares and massive traffic disruption all the time. They're going to get a massive bomb in somewhere and people are going to get killed. Senior loyalists are stopping wee lads from going out and doing things now, but it is a real effort to convince them not to react. They can't hold that line for ever: what's going to happen if another policeman or a Protestant gets murdered?
- What you seem to be saying, then, is that the dissidents hold the initiative? That they can set the agenda and loyalism has no option but to respond in kind?
- Look, let's be honest here. Until recently the paramilitaries were dying. Not that long ago if people had been told that they could walk away from the UDA, walk away from the UVF, they'd have walked away in their droves. But I can honestly say that the organisations are getting more recruits now than they've ever been getting. This flag issue, the Twaddell thing, is dragging the young ones in. I don't want to see young lads going to jail but I am really worried about the future.
- In 1994, whenever the ceasefires were called, I and others went all over the Province – with the bands and all – to get our people behind the ceasefires. And now the very same people I spoke to then are asking me: was it worth it?
- Yes, I can remember us all going to these meetings about the proposed 'benefits' of the peace process: the Union would be more secure, we would get our prisoners out, we would have our culture and heritage protected, there was going to be a shared future for everybody. Now I get asked: *what* shared future? What did people do life for? What did people get murdered for?
- Republicans have shown that they have no remorse over their so-called 'armed struggle'. There's no way that any republican – or any loyalist – doesn't know that

murdering innocent people in a bar – or whatever else – is wrong; it’s a human instinct to know that that can’t be right. But Irish republicans have this belief that nothing – absolutely nothing! – that they did was wrong. Sure, they can say it was a ‘mistake’, or it was ‘regrettable’, but they won’t acknowledge that it was *wrong* to engage in such actions. They just can’t, and that’s all we see.

- What do you think will come out of the Haass Talks?
- Absolutely nothing.
- I asked Haass on the radio, ‘Are there representatives from the UVF and UDA there?’ And he said ‘no’. And I said: ‘Why not? You’re wanting to bring loyalists and republicans into the process, but you’ve only got republicans there. You might have the DUP there, but what about the loyalist paramilitaries?’
- The DUP and the UUP don’t really speak for the working-class loyalist people. They live in their big houses in their nice quiet areas.
- Even some of our own so-called ‘community representatives’ have said negative things about the bands.
- It shouldn’t just be politicians at these type of talks. Every strand of Unionism and loyalism should be there. The ones there at the moment are not talking on my behalf.
- If Haass doesn’t bring the working-class people with him – unionist *and* nationalist – he is not going to get anywhere. He risks entrenching people even more. If the hopes placed on him prove worthless don’t be surprised if things go back. Conflict goes in cycles and maybe that’s the way this place is going. And it is all to do with Sinn Féin wanting to make this place less and less British.
- When the DUP come out of these talks, I will be asking them three questions: what about the flag; what about Drumcree; and are we getting up the Crumlin Road?
- But are those your *main* questions, given the massive socio-economic disadvantage in Protestant working-class areas, and the non-existent prospects for young people?
- Don’t get me wrong: I have worked at community level for years to try and improve housing, youth employment, local amenities... yes, all those things are part of it, but *at this moment* it is my identity, heritage and culture which are the most important issues.
- The unionist community is more and more fragmented, and the bands are the only thing which is holding the Protestant working-class community together at the present moment. That’s why we are being attacked. Communities gel round the bands, because the bands see them as representing them.
- Republicans – and the likes of the NIO and the Parades Commission – are attacking the bands because the bands are a strong, stand-alone body; they are the strength

within the Protestant community. The bands are the last bastion of working-class loyalism. It is not just a family thing, it bonds our communities. It is divide and conquer; they saw the Protestant community getting stronger around the Covenant commemorations and decided they had to do something about it.

- The bands started to get themselves together, started behaving themselves, started getting good instruments, good uniforms, stopped fighting with each other, we all learned from past mistakes. I can honestly say that for the vast majority of the bands in Ulster their main desire is to play their music, celebrate their culture, their heritage... nothing else. But at the minute what's going on is turning these people, and the people who are following them, making them bitter.

I can honestly say that for the vast majority of the bands their main desire is to play their music, celebrate their culture, their heritage... nothing else. But at the minute what's going on is turning these people, making them bitter.

- What worries me is that a lot of young Protestants are now seeing shootings, bomb scares, the city centre being brought to a standstill, on a regular basis – not to mention gunmen going into clubs in Ardoyne. But those are the same type of things which were happening all around *me* when I first got involved all those years ago. I thought that this was all over, there was supposed to be peace.

- Five years ago when I walked the streets canvassing for the DUP the unionist people were a pretty confident people. Because you know what we were getting asked at every door we wrapped? ‘Will you be getting water meters put in; what about our housing repairs, what about?’ There were no questions about flags or things like that. Five years ago we were confident. But see now, we’re angry. We have gone from being a confident community to an angry one.

- The big question is: how long do we sit back and allow this situation to go on?

- What saddens me is that all the work we have put in over recent years into making the band scene more professional, more disciplined, with more acceptable banners... and the opportunities it provides for our disadvantaged young people to enhance their self-esteem and learn a musical instrument... is now at risk of being undone.

- We *want* our kids to grow up in a peaceful Northern Ireland. Fifteen years when I got into the bands, yes, there *was* a ‘Kick the Pope’ mentality. But an awful lot of work has gone into greatly reducing the sectarian aspect. It is now a cultural movement: like the GAA or Irish dancing is to the Nationalist community. Our bands – and the young people in them – are part of our future; but if this new generation is demonised the way we were demonised as young people the Troubles are just going to start up again.

- Most people in government don’t seem to realise the potential there is for the band

scene to move away from being a ‘problem’ – in their eyes – to becoming part of the process through which relationships between our communities could *actually be improved*. There was a good example the other day at the Columbanus event in Belfast City Hall, at which the Sinn Féin Lord Mayor, the President of Ireland, and Dr Paisley were the chief quests. As part of the event there was a joint concert put on by kids from two schools: a Catholic school and a Protestant school – and their instruments included flutes and a Lambeg drum. It was brilliant. Those kids were sitting up on the stage, playing their music side by side. *That’s* what is possible.

- I’ll give you another example. When Orange Lodges go to the Somme now they hold services not just at Thiepval to honour the soldiers of the 36th (Ulster) Division, but at Guillemont to honour the soldiers of the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions. Wreaths are laid at Guillemont on behalf of the Loyal Orange Institution. And the band of the Royal Irish Regiment will play *The Soldier’s Song!* [*Amhrán na bhFiann*, the Irish national anthem.] And the Irish Tricolour is flown at Guillemont. Many people in the Protestant community have no difficulty now in commemorating our *shared* history – in both its British and its Irish aspects – but many Irish Republicans don’t have the same spirit of generosity. They have closed minds: they detest anything British. And until that changes, I can’t see how this society can move towards the ‘shared future’ you have been asking us about.
- If there is to be a shared future, it must be a genuine shared future, and the bands and our culture must be part of it. We are *not going to go away* – and nationalists and republicans mustn’t delude themselves about that – but we *are* willing to engage with them on what a shared future should look like – as long as there is a level playing field. A shared future cannot just be about embracing ‘forty shades of green’ – it has to include *all* of us.
- We are not sitting here as diehard loyalist bigots – as many would like to paint us – we are sitting here as people concerned about our heritage and our civil and religious liberty – but who are also saying: yes, there *can* be a shared future. But that future must include our kids and our bands and everything else.
- I would love to see a time come when we could go out and enjoy our culture, and people from the Catholic community could feel comfortable about it and could come out and enjoy it too.
- To be honest, many of us don’t really believe that all this talk about a shared future is genuine. The reality is that for years we have sat down with nationalists and republicans, and all we got from them was what we had done to their community, not: how can we help to move both communities on? Victimhood seems to be one-sided, and the same with this notion of a shared future. And until that changes we will remain highly sceptical.