

The realities of conflict

*An exploration by ex-prisoners
for the benefit of young people*

compiled by

Michael Hall

on behalf of

Farset Youth & Community Development Ltd.

Published June 2021 by
Island Publications / Farset Youth & Community Development Ltd.
466 Springfield Road, Belfast BT12 7DW

© Michael Hall/Farset 2021
mikehall.island@yahoo.co.uk
<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

Farset Youth & Community Development Ltd

wishes to thank those ex-prisoners who participated in the discussions
from which this publication was compiled,
as well as the young people for the questions they posed

This publication has received financial support from the
**NI Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitarism,
Criminality & Organised Crime**



Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

Introduction

Shortly after the interviews undertaken for this booklet had been concluded Northern Ireland witnessed some of the worst street disorder seen for many years. Most of those caught up in this disorder have been young people. In a recent newspaper article, one interviewee commented: “When you look at the ages of these guys there’s absolutely no doubt they don’t know why they’re burning stuff, throwing petrol bombs at police. That for me is the saddest part of the whole thing.” In another article it was pointed out that all these young people had been born *after* the Good Friday Agreement had seemingly brought an end to our conflict, so would not have had direct experience of the impact of violence on individuals, families and communities.

Farset Youth & Community Development Ltd, which had evolved from some of the original community organisations which had sprung up in response to the outbreak of the Troubles in the late sixties and early seventies, always had its primary focus on young people. And today, a major concern – the likelihood of young people engaging in violence – has now become a reality again.

In an effort to prevent young people from following such a path, Farset felt that the best people to try and dissuade them would be those who had actually engaged in the decades of conflict and could tell the young people directly the realities and consequences, not only of violence but of the inevitable imprisonment which would most likely follow. Accordingly, it was decided to bring together a number of ex-combatants and ex-prisoners to discuss the realities of conflict and imprisonment, and to relate how *they* had – when they were the same age as today’s young people – got caught up in it.

The stated remit of the project was “to produce a booklet by ex-prisoners which will be used as an engagement tool for young people, and which will endeavour to dispel whatever unrealistic or romantic notions are held by young people about the recent past, educating them on the realities of conflict, imprisonment and paramilitarism.”

G Solinas and Issac Andrews *Farset Youth & Community Development Ltd.*

The realities of conflict

- *Thank you all for agreeing to be here today, and for being willing to talk about your experiences of conflict and imprisonment. As you know, we are hoping that the young people we work with – and, indeed, other young people – will benefit from what you have to say. We are especially hoping that it helps to educate them to the realities and consequences – whether for themselves or for their communities – of engaging in violence. These are uncertain times, and sadly many of today’s young people have been voicing opinions which suggest that some of them would contemplate a return to violence and street disorder.*

Sadly many of today’s young people have been voicing opinions which suggest that some of them would contemplate a return to violence and street disorder.

The impact of the Troubles

- *To start us off, perhaps you would like to say a bit about what it was like growing up before the Troubles, and what happened when the Troubles erupted.*
- The community that I grew up in was an integrated one – Moyard estate at the top of the Springfield Road. And, to be honest, most of my childhood friends would have been Catholics. And one of the reasons for that was that most of the kids around me, who I kicked football around the streets with, happened to be Catholics. I had a good experience living in an integrated community and running about with Catholics. And then the Troubles kicked off almost overnight for me. I have a vivid memory of my mother in hysterics crying and screaming that her brother – my uncle – had been shot. And then there was a big discussion within the family about whether we should stay or leave. And that’s my childhood memory of it, I think I was around twelve years of age. So everything literally happened overnight, for that same evening we left our house and moved in with my grandmother on the West Circular Road. That was my introduction to the Troubles. And from there, if I’m being honest with myself, I would have been mimicking pretty much what everybody else was doing: and that would have been out on the street throwing stones, sometimes at the Army, sometimes rioting with Catholics from the other community. And,

as a young person, it was all very black and white for me: they are attacking me, so I'll attack them. And that was my early introduction to the conflict.

- Well, I was born in New Barnsley, then we moved to the Shankill, then we moved up the road to Highfield. I had a great childhood, playing football and running about up the mountain during school holidays. Or collecting bonfire wood and all that. The area was slightly mixed, it was probably about 90% Protestant. When the Troubles broke out, because it was an interface area, the barricades went up pretty quickly, to secure the area. And it was local people who were manning those barricades, local vigilantes. And, to be honest, for me and my mates it was just like we were all playing a game of soldiers. The local men were at the barricades and I would have been running around for them, going for cigarettes or bringing them down tea – stuff like that. I thought it was great craic, to be honest with you. Because our area was surrounded on three sides by Catholic/Republican areas we became very insular, and as the Troubles got worse the Catholics either left our area or were put out. And I have to stress that any Catholics in our area who were put out were *not* put out by local people, but by people from outside. So, then things just became more and more polarised, and *we* just didn't go to the other side of the road, and *they* didn't come over to our side of the road.

Things just became more and more polarised, and we just didn't go to the other side of the road, and they didn't come over to our side of the road.

- I would be younger than the rest of you here. I was born in the Woodvale area and my first real recollection of the Troubles was when I was about eight years of age and the British Army came in to the Woodvale. I remember being petrified when it all seemed to kick off. And the top of the street was burned out towards Disraeli Street, and people there were absolutely terrified – that was a thing that always stuck with me as a child. But there was also a togetherness as well, the community seemed to come out as one, with the local men doing vigilantes, and I grew up in that cocoon. The only time I ever came close to a Catholic was playing for the school against a Catholic school, and that match had actually been abandoned because of the fighting. Some of my friends went to Somerdale School; they had to have army escorts. In fact, one soldier was killed escorting children up to Somerdale School. It was just madness,

every day there just seemed to be a riot. You had Ardoyne facing us and we were being brought up with all these stories. . . and being told that Republicans just wanted us out of our country. And you were meeting mates who were a couple of years older and saying to one another: “Where’s so and so?” and being told, “Oh, he’s in jail.” It seemed that all your friends were disappearing into the prison system. There was a siege mentality within our areas. We believed we were under great pressure from Republicans; indeed, we were going to lose our areas. All those fears were kicking in, and as a kid you were listening to stories in your own house, and then going to your friends’ houses and maybe listening to more horrific stories. And that all seemed to snowball, and the community came together even more. Some lads decided to join the UVF, some decided to join the WDA [Woodvale Defence Association], and other people decided to join the security forces.

There was a siege mentality within our areas. We believed we were under great pressure from Republicans; indeed, we were going to lose our areas.

The transition to paramilitarism

- *How did things progress, from living in that situation, to you actually joining a paramilitary organisation?*
- For me it was a gradual process. From rioting, just throwing stones, and seeing yourself as a part of the community, defending it from being attacked. And then there were what were called the Tartan Gangs. And there was a Tartan Gang called The Ulster Boot Boys, which would have been from the Highfield and Springmartin estates. And some of us, at the age of thirteen, fourteen, got involved in the gang. And we seen ourselves as defenders of the Protestant community. And it was a very direct progression from the Tartan gang into the paramilitaries. I will tell you how it happened for me. Word came about: “There is a meeting tonight in Highfield Community Centre and we want you to be there, and it’s in your interest to be there.” So we all gathered and went to the Highfield community hut, and I can remember when we walked in there were three or four men sitting at a table with masks on. I can’t remember exactly, but there might also have been guns on the table. But the words which were spoke were: “It’s no longer sticks and stones, from this point on it’s bombs and bullets. And if you are not willing to be involved in that you can leave now.”

For me, you didn't want to say 'no' in front of your mates, so you stayed. And that was our induction into the Ulster Defence Association. And as the whole situation deteriorated, and the Troubles got worse, it was true what we had been told: that it wasn't sticks and stones any more, it was bombs and bullets.

For me, you didn't want to say 'no' in front of your mates, so you stayed.

Northern Ireland saw gun-battles and bombings almost on a daily basis. And everybody in the community was energised in some way or other, even my mother and father, and my aunts and uncles; we felt we were all part of one community. We believed that our community was under threat and we all had to do something to protect it.

- I was there too that night. And the entire outfit of the Ulster Boot Boys basically joined the UDA. We went into that meeting as the Ulster Boot Boys and we came out as the Junior UDA – it was just a natural progression from one to the other. When we had that meeting my father was the local UDA Commander so it would have been hard for me to say 'no'! We were all gung-ho, we were fifteen years of age and it was all pure excitement. We never suspected what might lie just around the corner.

- While I would have been involved in daily rioting, my own progression to a paramilitary organisation began about 1976. My mate's brother was in the leadership at that time in the Woodvale; he was a very charismatic and influential person, and he would have asked us to do wee things for the organisation. Now, he didn't force us but we respected him. I had other friends – some of whom were from UDA families – and I would listen to things they said and take it all in. My own mother and father would not have been political in any way. My father had been a prisoner of war, and he believed in the rule of law at all times. He never believed in paramilitaries – or our politicians – because he thought young lads were just being used as cannon-fodder. But it was never a discussion I could have with my father, because he died while I was in prison.

But, anyway, a few mates and I were sitting talking one night, and one of them says: "What do you think, what are we all going to do here?" And there was about twelve of us, and eight were talking about joining the UVF, and four wanted to join the UDA, or the WDA. But we all decided to go to the WDA. The fact was that you were getting involved in something, you felt

you were defending your community. I think a lot of it was down to the normal zest of youth. But for me the main motivation came about through just listening to other people and hearing about things that were taking place. About our people being burned out of nationalist areas and having to be rehoused in Protestant areas.

- I think what we are trying to do here is to be totally honest. Yes, at that age – the same age as the young people who will hopefully read this booklet – it *was* exciting, even fun; we were full of adrenalin, we were all gung-ho! But that’s where the danger lies. In our excitement, in our naivety, in our lack of questioning, we never thought of the consequences, we had *no notion* of where all this was leading us – not only for ourselves but for our families, our communities. But a cold dose of reality wasn’t all that far away. However, by then, for many of us it was too late. Some of our mates would soon be dead and all of us in this room ended up in prison.

But that’s where the danger lies. In our excitement, in our naivety, in our lack of questioning, we never thought of the consequences.

The realities of violence

- *Okay, so having got involved in the conflict, how, and when, was the reality of violent conflict brought home to you?*
- There were these big gun battles going on, between Ballymurphy, New Barnsley, Springmartin, Moyard, Highfield . . . and these gun battles could have gone on over a full weekend, non-stop, like something you would see in Beirut. And as Junior UDA we would have also been assigned to take away the spent cartridges and dump them down drains and stuff. But there were a couple of incidences that I remember well that brought the whole thing from feeling that you were playing ‘Commandos and Germans’ to the reality of what actually was happening. One occurred in Springmartin during one of these gun battles. As kids we would have been jumping from street to street; sometimes we were asked to evacuate people from the front of the houses on the Springfield Road and get them to the back of the estate, so that the gunmen could go in and use their houses. And during one of those gun battles us kids, as I said, would have been running about from street to

street, thinking it was all great fun, getting fired at. And one day the reality of all that came home to us when 17-year-old John Pedlow was shot dead. His mate Sammy McQuaid was also shot but survived. The bullet went through John and into Sammy. We seen the reality of it then; we were looking at them lying there, asking: “Are they dead? Are they alive?”

Then 17-year-old John Pedlow and Sammy McQuaid were shot. We seen the reality of it then; we were looking at them lying there, saying: “Are they dead? Are they alive?”

- One day I was in the city centre; I was in Woolworths at the time, and there was a muffled explosion. And then a lot of shouting: “Get out of the building! Get out of the building!” And Woolworths was just around the corner from the Abercorn Bar. I can remember vividly running out into Corn Market and that bomb had just went off in the Abercorn.† So people were coming out of that street in the midst of smoke and rubble, and there was a man running towards me with his clothes just ripped to shreds like the Incredible Hulk. And he had a big lump of wood sticking out of his head and he was running directly towards *me*, for whatever reason, and banging the other side of his head with his hand, and shouting: “Talk to me, talk to me!” And a woman pulled the wood out of his head and the blood just spurted out of his head like a fountain! And I remember my feet never touched the ground until I got back up the Shankill Road! And that was the reality that was brought home to me: that this wasn’t just a game, this was for real.

- I said earlier that at first I too thought it was all a big game. It didn’t affect me, until it came into my area. The day I took it serious was the IRA bombing of the Balmoral Furniture shop†† on the Shankill Road. We had been heading

† On 4 March 1972 an IRA bomb went off in the packed restaurant of the Abercorn Bar, killing two young Catholic women and injuring 70 people, a number of whom were horribly mutilated. The coroner described the incident as ‘pathological murder of the most depraved kind’.

†† On 11 December 1971 a no-warning IRA bomb exploded at the Balmoral Furniture Company premises on the Shankill Road, killing four civilians: two adults and two children, one of them two years old, the other seventeen months.

into town that day and we helped dig those kids' bodies out of the rubble. For me, I said: right, this is it! We were digging people out – men, women and children – and I said to myself: these people want to kill us, no matter what age we are, no matter what sex we are – simply because we are Protestants. I thought: we have to fight back here. And that's when I started to take it all more seriously.

- I was there that day as well. When we were digging those people out, in the midst of all the anger from people around, word came round that they'd got a Catholic nearby. I remember running from there to Fortingale Street, where there still used to be those old lamp-posts. And when I got there the crowd was kicking somebody up and down the street, and then they got a bit of tubing from a bicycle wheel, and they tried to hang him from one of the lamp-posts. But some local women intervened and managed to save the man.

- My mate got a hammering one time on the Shankill Road and we went over to the Mater Hospital. And there was two policemen there who had just been shot. And there was this big policeman crying his eyes out, while his colleague was just lying there not moving. So things like this were happening all the time. I run about with people, I started to get into a group of more older people and listened to them. And was I swayed by their thinking? Absolutely. Was I naive in certain ways? Certainly I was. Did I want to learn? Yes, I did. And I was also going into other friends' houses and listening to what they were saying. And my own mother, I have to say, she had no political background at all. But the time the Four Step Bar was blew up she knew someone caught up in that, who she had worked alongside in the Belfast City Hospital, and she was absolutely devastated. And the anger in her! "If I had a bomb I'd go down the Falls myself!" Now my mother wouldn't have known a bomb from a Paris bun! But it was a moment of real anger. And you could see the way it was all affecting people. So for me it was just a gradual process. And I think I was seventeen when I went into the organisation and things just took off from there.

I started to get into a group of more older people and listened to them. And was I swayed by their thinking? Absolutely. Was I naive in certain ways? Certainly I was.

- You didn't have a political thought at that time, you were doing what you

thought best as an individual; at that age you don't have a political thought, you have a one-track mind. When you go to prison for a long term, as we here have all done, then reality sets in, you have time to start to think for yourself. You start to challenge things, and say: hold on, that's not really how I see things now.

When you go to prison for a long term, as we here have all done, then reality sets in, you have time to start to think for yourself.

The truth about imprisonment

• *Can we now move on to the topic of imprisonment, and what it was like being in jail and losing your freedom and family. Many of today's young people have a romanticised notion of what the prison experience was like. They see images of prisoners playing pool and such, as if it was some sort of holiday camp.*

• I think every man has his own thoughts on that, but for anyone to say it was a holiday camp, that's nonsense. It's really only when you look back on it you realise that your family also done the time. While you were in there together, with your comrades, you tended to not realise the hardships your family were experiencing. I'll give you an example. I remember my mother coming up to see me in the Crumlin Road, with two sausages and a vegetable roll. She said, "Son, I was going to get you chops today but that was all the butcher had left." I didn't realise until later that that was all she could afford! You just didn't realise the hardships they were under.

• I know exactly what you mean. One of the first parcels I got in Crumlin Road jail was when my granny came up to visit me and left it in for me. I didn't know this at the time, until someone said "Go down and sign for your parcel". And among all these big brown bags I seen this wee bag – my granny had left me in a packet of Jaffa Cakes! And that was all *she* could afford.

• When you get in there you realise you're now in the real world. I remember when my Da first visited me he said: "You wanted to be a big lad? Well, you got your wish." As it went on, it was hard, there's no use saying it wasn't. I went back in a couple of times afterwards, but it was still hard!

I remember when my Da first visited me he said: "You wanted to be a big lad? Well, you got your wish." As it went on, it was hard, there's no use saying it wasn't.

- Every man has his own problems. Should it be your outside family falling apart, or inner problems, everybody has their own demons. All you can do is deal with what's in front of you. When I was in Crumlin Road gaol we felt nothing but frustration and anger. The Provies had tortured us, scalded us, wouldn't let us out, made our lives a misery. We had suffered 23-hour lock-up, we had one toilet, we had one sink and one shower. I went to see the BOVs [Board of Visitors] and I said, "Listen, this is a Victorian jail with Victorian attitudes. There's going to be a break-out of scabies or whatever, if you keep us all in the one place like this. If you don't do something this is going to break."

And the hardships were that bad it was inevitable that a riot would break out . . . and eventually it did and they moved us all to the Maze the next day. And that riot was just an explosion of pent-up frustrations. Every man has a pressure point, it has to come. My own personal experience in prison. . . everybody always remembers the good times. But the hardships well outnumber them. Anybody who says different is not being honest.

Everybody always remembers the good times. But the hardships well outnumber them. Anybody who says different is not being honest.

- The guy in the next cell to me was a big man in the organisation, and one morning I could hear him crying, the buzzing of the bell and him saying: "I need an MO [Medical Officer]." And you're like: flip me, you're walking about the place during the daytime as if you own the place, and now you're ringing the bell? People had a face for when the cell door was open, but when the door was closed they had their normal face, not a front.

- I think that's the problem for many young people. They see some of those things on TV and YouTube and hear old stories from former prisoners. But we tell the funny things that happened. We don't tell of the nights we lay in bed crying because your granny died, or your mummy was seriously ill, or your wife or girlfriend left you . . . you don't hear all of that, because nobody talks about that.

And we actually realised a lot of years ago that we were guilty of that; as ex-prisoners, we were putting a rose-coloured tint on the conflict. So we set up a programme to do something about it. At that time we actually got the loan of Crumlin Road gaol and we took the young lads into the cells. And the young

guy I had responsibility for was actually a young Catholic from the Markets. And he had heard all that nonsense about it being a great place. And I said: “So – you’ve heard all those stories then? Well, tell me this: are you married?” And he says, “I’m in a relationship. I have a partner; she’s eight months pregnant.” And I said to him: “See when she’s in having that child, see if there’s complications or anything – you’ll be looking at that wall. See whether that birth is good or bad – you’ll be looking at that wall. See if something goes wrong, God forbid, to either your partner or the child – you’ll be looking at that wall, you can do nothing about it.” People don’t tell you that side of prison. The strain it all places on our families. While we’re in prison our families are scrimping and saving just to get our parcels made up.

People don’t tell you that side of prison. The strain it all places on our families. While we’re in prison our families are scrimping and saving just to get our parcels made up.

Violence is not the way to protect your community

- *Do you have a message for young people today who think they have somehow missed out by not being involved in the conflict?*
- As was said, we realised that we ourselves were guilty of putting a rose-coloured tint on everything. But even when we tried to explain the reality to some young guys, one of them actually said to me: “That’s okay for youse, you got doing your bit – I didn’t.” I said, “Yes, well, if you want to help your community, by all means, but get *involved* in your community. Get yourself an education, get into local politics, or get into community work, or youth work, or something like that.” And we actually sought out bursaries for those young guys and we got them on courses. And that young guy that actually said that to me, he’s even teaching youth work now, he’s doing great stuff. In the seventies, I thought the only way to help my community was with a gun. But now I know that there are other ways of doing it. The conflict has moved on. We now need people who are educated, to be fighting for our community.
- *When you’re working with groups of young people do you find that attitude coming up – of them not having ‘done their bit’?*
- It depends on the group you’re working with, and the context of the work

you're doing with those young people. Yes, there are those who have the thought that they're missing out on something.

- One of the things which came home to me was when I was inside and looked around at all my 'comrades': there were none of them from a middle-class background. It was mostly childhood friends, or friends of childhood friends, ordinary working-class people. And I thought to myself: how come it's only people from working-class communities in here?
- If I was giving any message to young people, especially those from working-class communities, who think they are missing out on something, I would say to them: you need to take a step back and ask yourself – What is it you would be fighting for? What is it you would really want to be getting involved in? What is it you would be willing to sacrifice really? And that includes your family, that includes maybe taking lives, that includes giving up maybe the best years of your life. If you are fourteen or fifteen now and let's say you got involved in some new conflict and ended up taking somebody's life and ended up in prison doing life, that means you could serve twenty years of a prison sentence. What would that really mean for you? Is that a sacrifice that you would be willing to make? Because there wouldn't just be consequences for you, there would be consequences for your mother, for your girlfriend... Those are maybe the questions you want to ask yourself before you make a choice or a decision which you might later regret.†

† In 1982 a young Catholic man was murdered by UVF members, one of whom, Billy Giles, was sentenced to 15 years for the killing. In 1998, following his release, in an interview for the BBC series *Loyalists*, Giles told journalist Peter Taylor: "My whole mentality at that time would be preparing for war. Protestants were fearful of what was going to happen, that they were all going to be slaughtered.... The target was a Catholic man, guy the same age as myself... a workmate and a friend.... When it happened it felt like somebody had just put their hand down in through my head and just ripped the insides out of me. I was empty, I felt empty. You hear a bang and it's too late. It's too late then. You've went somewhere you've never been before and it's not a very nice place and you can't stop it, it's too late then. I lost something that day I don't think I'll ever get back." On 25 September 1998 Billy Giles hanged himself. In his suicide note he wrote: "I've decided to bring this to an end now. I'm tired. Please let our next generation live normal lives, tell them of our mistakes and admit to them our regrets."

- People like us certainly don't want to see *any* return to conflict, but all these problem issues now confronting this society must be handled carefully and sensitively. We must find a way to *non-violently manage* the problems confronting us, and *put our energies solely into talking our way through them*.

But I would also ask these young lads: what would you be joining? Would it be a loyalist paramilitary organisation? Who would you be going out to shoot? Who are you going to aim your gun at? The IRA is on ceasefire, the Catholic community are peaceful. The best way to fight for your community is through education, and getting involved in community initiatives.

- It is very worrying times, but I think young people are like what we were: gung-ho. At that age you don't really look into things and say: hold on a minute, *who* is saying this current situation is so wrong? *why* are they saying this is so wrong? But many people – including today's young people – just see a flag and they run for it. Us now, we can be more sceptical and look at things in more depth, with more cynicism. I suppose with age comes a bit of wisdom.

- People should do some serious thinking before they find themselves drifting back to what we had before. You'd be giving everything up. A lot of people are a long way along the peace train. A lot of people have seen a lot of prison, and their families and all too, and they know what is on the other side of the coin.

- Personally, I do not believe there is any need for violence any more, nor would there be any justification for it.

- I agree with that. I would advocate never, never again returning to violence. We should use every mechanism at our disposal, as working-class people, to work this out in some way, in a way that doesn't bring us back to violent conflict. I would never want that to happen again.

We should use every mechanism at our disposal, as working-class people, to work this out in some way, in a way that doesn't bring us back to violent conflict.

One of the ex-combatants has spent two decades engaged in community education, involving both adults and young people. He offered the following comments:

When I work with young people I often begin with the following statement: ‘You can be *informed* by the past but you don’t have to be *determined* by it.’ And the context of me having a conversation with young people would be around *perceptions*. The political parties have their perceptions. The dissident groupings have their perceptions. We *all* have our perceptions of what is happening around us. So I would ask the young people: what are *your* perceptions? what do *you* perceive to be the realities of the political situation today? And how would you *like* it to be? I would remind them that it was *my* perceptions of what was happening that made *me* do what I did, and I deeply regret it. And I would never want to see young people go through any of that. I would tell them that they need to seriously reflect on their perceptions right now. It’s too late when you’re locked up in a prison cell, when you *do* have the time to reflect on your actions, and how they impacted on you, your family, and the wider community.

The context of me having a conversation with young people would be around perceptions. I would remind them that it was my perceptions of what was happening that made me do what I did, and I deeply regret it.

I would say to the young people: okay, there’s a perception that you will defend your identity through the use of violence, but what does that actually mean for you, your family, your community? And if you *are* willing to engage in violence, are you also willing to accept all the consequences that come along with it? I would tell them: if that’s what you are committed to, then rest assured those are the *same actions we took* when we were your age, forty years ago, and generations before that. And what does it produce? It produces pretty much the same result every time: the community is left deeply divided, hundreds are in prison, and we’re walking over the graves of 3000-plus people....

And what does [violence] produce? It produces pretty much the same result every time: the community is left deeply divided, hundreds are in prison, and we’re walking over the graves of 3000-plus people.

But, okay, that’s one choice that you can make. Are there *other* choices? Is there another direction you could go? What might be another

possibility? Would you be willing to sit down with others and explore possible alternatives?

Many young people today base their perceptions on what they hear from social media. But I would ask them: do you ever stop to think that many of these texts are being sent out by nameless people and you don't really know *who* they are or what their agenda is? So are you prepared to question what is said on social media, to be sceptical about what you hear or read? A lot of people's reactions in our day were due to our *perceptions* of what was happening, not the facts. And the same can happen today even quicker because of social media.

So my engagement with young people would be all around their perceptions.

• • • • •

The group of ex-combatants had a final, collective message for young people:

The remit behind this pamphlet was that after sharing our experiences of conflict – in an open and honest manner – we would conclude with a clear and unambiguous message to all those young people who might hopefully read it.

Our message is simple:

- We never want to see young people going back to the way it was for us. We never want to see a return to the violence of the past, no matter what. And we are committed to doing our best to ensure it never happens again. Our present role is to educate young people in the follies of our mistakes, in the hope that they don't go down the route that we did.
- Many young people are of the opinion that they are defending their culture, their identity. That is certainly a noble aim, but we would ask them this: *can the manner in which you defend your identity actually serve to undermine it*, with untold consequences not only for your communities but even for your identity?

We never want to see young people going back to the way it was for us. We never want to see a return to the violence of the past, no matter what.

We would ask young people this: can the manner in which you defend your identity actually serve to undermine it?

- Although this pamphlet is concerned with having a conversation with young people, to us it is just the beginning of a *province-wide conversation*, one which needs to take place at every level of this society: in the Assembly, among dissident groupings, the churches, and all forms of civic society. And the first question we all need to address is: do we *really* want to go back to violent conflict again? And then, even more importantly, *how* do we prevent that from happening?
- We're also reminding people in positions of leadership that words are important, that the wrong words can serve to take us backwards. And what we would say to young people is: be prepared to challenge things, don't take everything you hear without asking yourself: is what is being said based on fact? And how can I go about finding out those facts?
- If there was a return to violence again to resolve our perceived problems, all it would achieve is many more years of conflict and suffering, with adults and young people being incarcerated and families suffering, with it *eventually leading to the same end*: people around the table talking.
- So our message to young people is *not* to get involved in conflict – get an education, get involved in local politics, and help to transform your communities through positive means.

• • • • •

Subsequent to the interviews conducted for this booklet with the Loyalist ex-combatants – and sadly confirming everything they were warning about – many young working-class Protestants were heavily involved in the recent street disorders. Hence, this pamphlet has been initially aimed at those young Protestants. However, it could be equally utilised with groups of young Catholics/Nationalists. Indeed, Farset's hope would be that eventually *joint* discussions could be facilitated with small groups of young people from both sides of the interface, to allow them to share their differing perceptions of one another.

Suggestions for Youth Workers

We felt it was worthwhile here to restate some of the questions which the ex-combatant quoted on page 16 suggests that you use with your youth group.

- We *all* have our perceptions of what is happening around us. So what are *your* perceptions? What do *you* perceive to be the realities of the political situation today? And how would you *like* it to be?
- The ex-combatants in this booklet stated that it was *their* perceptions of what was happening that made *them* do what they did, and they deeply regret it. Do you think there are lessons there for you?
- The ex-combatants stress how important it is to reflect on those perceptions *right now*, for it could be too late when you're locked up in a prison cell, when you *do* have plenty of time for reflection.
- There's a perception that you will defend your identity through the use of violence, but what does that *actually mean* for you, your family, your community, your identity?
- If you *are* willing to engage in violence, are you also willing to accept all the consequences that come along with it? Not only for you, but for your family and your community?
- And *what* do you think violent conflict ultimately produces, and *where* might it take this society?
- Are there *other* choices you can take? Is there another direction you could go? Would you be willing to sit down with others and explore possible alternatives?
- With regard to social media, do you ever stop to think that many of these texts are being sent out by nameless people and you don't really know *who* they are or what their agenda is?
- Are you prepared to *question* what is said on social media – and also on mainstream media – and be sceptical about what you hear or read?
- Do you have a desire to explore all these issues further? And do you know how, and where, to gain access to the information you seek?

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 **127** titles have been produced and **200,400** pamphlets have been distributed at a grassroots level. Many of the titles are available for (free) download from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>