

Part of the problem

– the role played by the media

plus

Selected Articles

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Part of the problem: *the role played by the media*

*(Although this section was written some years ago
I believe the points made are still valid)*

(1) Questionable ethics

Let me start this critique with a few examples.

Example 1

When inter-communal violence erupted in West Belfast on 14th August 1969, fear gripped other parts of the city, including the Docklands area, which had a long history of deadly sectarian violence (most notably in 1864, 1886, 1921-22, 1934, 1935). A foreign TV team were clearly aware of this violent history for they encamped themselves in the Docklands area waiting for events to unfold. However, as local historian Denis Smyth told me, a unique situation had developed there. People from both communities had indeed come out onto the streets and were eying one another suspiciously. But on Friday 15th a local policeman took the initiative and set up a meeting with representatives from both sides. That meeting revealed that *each side* had assumed that the *other* community was preparing to launch an assault, and had gathered *for self-defence not attack*. Throughout that terrible night (when violence was engulfing West Belfast) and indeed for the remaining weeks of that summer and autumn, joint peace patrols kept the Docklands area calm. However, this development was not only a matter of great surprise to the TV team, but a great disappointment. They made it clear that such a peaceful situation wasn't 'news'; they wanted to report 'real' news – such as the violence which had erupted in West Belfast. Local people assured them that here was a *real* story, a real scoop: here at last, in a city gone mad, sanity had prevailed and inter-communal co-operation had prevented sectarian violence. But no, the TV crew packed their bags and hurried off to the West of the city – for some 'real' news. As Denis Smyth wrote later, during the height of the Troubles:

How much might Northern Ireland's turmoil have been eased, even a little, if the media had cared enough to report on the positive side of our lives, shown

to others far from the confines of Sailortown that there was another way, that we *could* all pull back from the approaching storm? This myopic attitude by the media was to be repeated many times throughout the years ahead, and indeed it is still prevalent today. By its fixation with images of violence, and its total disregard for the positive strivings of ordinary people who were, and are still, trying to avert communal conflict, the media must stand accused of its share of blame for the present tragic situation in Northern Ireland.

Example 2

Once, while I was organising a group of children for a summer scheme in Holland, a Dutch TV crew asked if they could come to Belfast to make a brief item about two children participating in the scheme – a Catholic girl and a Protestant boy. We insisted that the parents must give their full consent to all questions asked of the children, and this was accepted. However, the week before the crew’s arrival the young uncle of the Catholic girl was shot dead during a gun-battle with the British Army in Divis Flats. When the TV team learned of this they seemed quite excited, and, somewhat concerned, we insisted that they do nothing to upset the child. How naive we were! Not long into the filming the interviewer began probing the girl’s feelings about her uncle’s death... and then probed further. As the girl got visibly more upset and her anguished mother paced up and down at the back of the room, we endeavoured to indicate that the team should desist, but were dismissed with evasive hand gestures, while the cameraman, completely oblivious to our entreaties, zoomed in on the face of the young girl, who was endeavouring to hold back her tears. Only when the frantic mother stormed out of the room threatening to “get ‘the boys’ to turf them out” did we regain some measure of control over events. But it was a salutary lesson, and clear evidence that when the media decide they have unearthed a good human-interest angle, nothing is allowed to get in their way, certainly not the feelings of those most closely involved.

Example 3

Following dangerous and disputed allegations made by a television programme regarding a community project located in Conway Mill on the Falls Road, loyalists made bomb threats to the workers there. Many community workers were angered by

what the media had done, and in a letter to me shortly afterwards Father Des Wilson said:

We have been betrayed by the BBC and the rest of them so often that we make resolution after resolution never to have anything to do with them again. And time and again we break that resolution. I think we would do well to boycott the whole lot of them. . . . We don't need them – because we don't need misinterpretation. Better for us to explain what we are doing to a hundred people than have it misrepresented to a million.

Example 4

In 2007 the UPRG [Ulster Political Research Group], on behalf of the UDA, launched a 'Conflict Transformation Initiative', which was an attempt to channel energies in loyalist areas into community development work. The UPRG arranged for Farset Youth & Community Development Project – a well-respected cross-community organisation – to administer the project. While the project would involve some UDA members most of the workers would *not* be from that organisation. Things began well until Margaret Ritchie, SDLP minister, blocked funds for the initiative, demanding that the UDA decommission first, and casting aspersions regarding the workers who would be employed. A local television crew arrived up at Farset and were facilitated in interviewing those with responsibility for the project, including the core workers. After they had spent a full day interviewing, Farset's Chairman, Barney McCaughey, asked the crew if they knew the date the programme would be aired. He told me that he could tell by the way they looked at one another that something was amiss. They informed him that there wasn't going to be a programme after all – because they had found 'nothing wrong?'; indeed, it was, as one of them said to him, 'an excellent project'. Well why then, Barney asked them, don't they do a programme to that effect? It would greatly assist Farset in its work. But no – and not to our great surprise – a programme containing no controversy was of little interest to the media.

I could give other examples, but the above should be sufficient to highlight the issues involved.

(2) Compounding the grief

Since 1993 I have been involved in facilitating small-group discussions – as ‘Farset Community Think Tanks Project’ – and each separate series of discussions is summarised in its own 32-36-page pamphlet. The Think Tanks 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. *[for further information see pages 20-21]*

In those discussions which involved people who had lost loved ones as a result of the Troubles frequent reference was often made to the role played by the media.

For example, the media’s habit of using footage of past murders is something which can cause a great deal of upset:

You may be walking into the living room and are caught unawares. And when you see your son on TV lying dead you reach for the tablet bottle again. You just feel numb all over – no-one knows just what goes through you at that moment. It is like a bad dream. [And you are instantly reminded that your son will never] walk through that door ever again; no kiss on the cheek, no ‘How are you, Mum?’

The intrusion of the media into a family’s grief, something which countless families have had to endure throughout the last thirty years, can be unbearable.

Around that time there was a lot of reporters in around the house, and I remember my uncle threw out these ones this particular morning, and we were going: go on, go on! I don’t like reporters, I don’t like journalists, personally I think they’re all snakes. The papers wrote a lot of lies about what happened. . . . And I’ll give you another example of media intrusion, the fact that. . . I don’t know what programme it was, but it actually showed Daddy lying dead in the car – it was horrific to see that.

In another case, in which republican gunmen burst into a house, killed a woman’s partner, fatally injured her teenage son and severely wounded her youngest child (at that time the youngest child to be shot during the Troubles), she told me:

The media tortured me. They were outside my house while I was still up at the hospital, my son wasn’t even dead, and they were offering people money to go into the house and look for photographs. They really tormented me.

And then afterwards they rang me up and were offering me money to tell my story and I said: it's *my* story, it's nothing to do with youse! The way they go about it is ridiculous.

During the period that I was conducting a series of discussions with a group of women, whose loved ones had all been murdered by republicans, a local man, with an alleged republican past, was gunned down by other republicans. But knowing from personal experience the inaccurate stories the media could concoct about a deceased person, the women – remarkably – expressed complete empathy with the man's family:

I never slept the whole night; and it didn't matter to me what community he came from – a life is a life and that life had been taken.

According to the weekend papers he is meant to have killed three people – but it could be totally nonsense. Certainly the man's image is smeared now anyway, whether it was true or false.

The media can say or write whatever they want about a dead person, and I think that is very wrong. They can say whatever they want, and there's not a thing you can do about it.

No matter who he was, he was somebody's son.

Those families whose deceased loved ones had been combatants often found themselves being portrayed just as negatively – a form of guilt by association. Such as with the families of the IRA unit killed by the SAS at Loughgall:

We were constantly presented in the media as 'IRA relatives' – it was like using a dirty word to describe us. They wouldn't see us simply as bereaved relatives – that didn't suit many people, we had to be presented as something more than that, something evil.

Throughout the last thirty years whole families have been criminalised. And that happened on both sides of the community and both sides of the border. Once you had any taint of Republican connections, the whole state system began to kick in against you. And other people were so intimidated they were afraid to be associated with you, it was terrible the amount of fear that the state could impose – and the media were part of it.

That image, which the media in particular have largely been responsible for creating about us, follows us everywhere. If we have a public meeting, or if there is media attention on a certain aspect of the incident, or about the present

lobbying campaign in which we are involved, the words used by the media – ‘relatives of eight IRA men’ – automatically creates this negative image.

The media don’t actually look at *our* hurt or *our* needs. Take the time we met Adam Ingram: once it got out that we were meeting him as a victims’ group, the angle that was put out by the media was: but you’re not victims, you’re the family members of IRA men, how can you call yourselves ‘victims’?

And in any of the interviews we were asked to give, none of the journalists ever asked about *us*, all their questions followed the same line: do you realise what he was out doing that night? It didn’t matter what *our* feelings were, they weren’t interested in that. In fact, our meeting with Ingram was actually supposed to be about how we had been treated as people who had been left behind after their loved ones had been killed. Now, no other victims’ group would have been treated like that; the media wouldn’t have insisted upon going into the background of the deceased or what they were doing. So, in terms of our grieving and our needs, we can’t get past this image they have created around us.

Many of those who participated in the various discussions talked disparagingly about the insensitive approach adopted by authors and journalists in relation to the reporting of violent deaths, which often compounded the hurt already felt by families.

They weren’t very accurate about my husband; they’d the wrong age down, the wrong number of children. They’d just lifted a chunk out of the paper, and repeated what the killers said about their reason for murdering him. Yet, if the authors had come to the family we’d have told them that that was totally untrue. But he’s dead now, so they can just write whatever they want.

I have a big issue with journalists in general, the way they deal with these cases; I don’t think they realise the impact it has on families even after a long period of time. For instance, there was a programme on television not so long ago about my father’s death, and they had a reconstruction of the murder. Now, we didn’t know there was to be a reconstruction in the programme and we were sitting watching it, and here was this man with a gun, and then you saw this figure lying on the ground, with close-ups of hands and things like that. And I was sitting with my mother and sister and we were all in a state of shock, even for days afterwards. Having spoken to other people who have similar experiences it seems to be a standard reaction

when it comes to things like reconstructions. We've seen lots of things in the newspaper, but somehow it personalised it having a person there pretending to be my father and then to have him lying on the ground.

Newspapers and television often repeat allegations made by the killers to justify their murders, even when there's no truth in it, but the media will spew it out and not ask the family for so much as a rebuttal. In my own case someone who was involved in my father's murder gave an interview to an author who was co-writing a book on the Loyalist organisation which carried out the killing. They took up nearly a whole chapter describing how they went about my father's murder, how they lay in wait, how this person or that person was athletic and leapt over this. . . and fired shots, and then made this SAS-type getaway. . . generally putting themselves into the 'hero' mode. Which was all rubbish; it doesn't take highly trained or very brave men – and certainly not the number apparently involved in the murder – to attack an innocent and unarmed 52-year-old man walking out of work with his hands in his pockets. Anyway, he [the gunman] not only gave details on how they carried out the murder and how they planned it, but, to try and justify it, also made allegations against my father which were totally false. Now, I had to go out and buy that book to find out what these two authors – supposedly highly respectable journalists – were writing. It was a hell of a shock when I read what they'd written, and not one word of it was true. Yet the authors of that book never approached our family at any stage to verify what this person had said. It had also been serialised in a Sunday newspaper before it came out and the newspaper didn't bother to contact the family either. Nobody ever offers us – the families – the opportunity to refute anything that has been said about our loved ones. That book left a really bad taste in my mouth. People reading it don't get any balance, they don't even get one line stuck in the inside back cover saying that this family has refuted what was said. So what the killers allege is almost given respectability.

This state of affairs still continues, as was relayed to me by family members of men arrested on the word of two brothers who had turned 'supergrass':

The parents of the two brothers are lovely people, and we made it clear to them that we felt no animosity towards them for what their sons had done. In fact, the only hassle they got was from the media. A photographer rapped the parents' door one time, and then moved back, waiting for someone to

open it. As soon as Mrs S_____ appeared he snapped a photo of her. Then they did a story about her two sons. As far as we were concerned, the media had no real consideration for people's feelings or emotions – all they were interested in was getting a 'story'.

The way the media handled things added to the hurt and anxiety. The stories they put out. You could see the bewilderment and hurt in the faces of all the family members. They felt – or at least they imagined – that people were asking: is it all true what they're saying about these ones? And you could especially see the hurt and pain on the faces of the children.

(3) Inhibiting change

The media often plays an inhibiting role when it comes to efforts to move our situation forward, especially at a grassroots level. Most community-based efforts commence in a tentative, hesitant way, highly vulnerable to misinterpretation and over-exposure. But when journalists get wind of a possible 'story' they jump in without hesitation, rarely asking themselves whether the spotlight they turn on the individuals involved might actually be detrimental to what these people are endeavouring to achieve. The journalists pose patently unanswerable and hypothetical questions – and usually with a demand for a 'yes or no' answer – and what was meant to unfold gradually, bringing people along inch by inch, is suddenly exposed to the glare of publicity with the result that possible supporters distance themselves from whatever was being attempted. This media exposure, compounded by the manner in which it is often conducted, can raise deep suspicions at a grassroots level – “Is this project going to weaken our Unionism (or Republicanism)?” – with the result that the effort flounders and yet another attempt to reach across the divide has to be retracted, another window of opportunity is slammed shut.

What do the media believe they achieve when they so readily risk destroying embryonic moves before these have a chance to percolate into the community consciousness? Is their vision limited to a three-minute slot on the evening news? Are they afraid that if they don't leap in, some competitor will grab the opportunity instead?

Despite the self-indulgent congratulations those in the media are so frequently in the habit of bestowing upon one another, many at grassroots level view them with great distrust. A Shankill Road community worker told me:

The Orange Order don't trust the media in the slightest. They believe their agenda is to demonise them. Take the Twaddell situation. Since 12 July 2012

there have been over 500 peaceful parades up to Twaddell – *500 peaceful* parades! But whenever an item about Twaddell comes on the TV what footage do they show? The riots of 2012! That’s all they want to focus on.

One of the most-watched television shows in Northern Ireland invites selected members of the public to participate in a discussion on current issues. My concern, however, is that it frequently gives a platform to those individuals who aren’t overly concerned about moving this society forward, and their often negative attitudes and statements create problems for those involved in cross-community efforts.

To me, the format of the show does not really allow for genuine dialogue or level-headed debate to develop – but rather monologues (often quite aggressive) and controversy. Community workers, in both communities, have told me how detrimental much of the material which is aired has been to their grassroots efforts. While *they* are endeavouring to focus on the positive, in an effort to promote reconciliation, those efforts are frequently undermined by the negative views expressed on the show – emanating from individuals seemingly brought on to represent the views of ‘both communities’. Unfortunately, more often than not these ‘representatives’ are coming from the extreme end of the spectrum, and their comments can prove damaging to whatever tentative cross-community efforts are going on quietly in the background.

Do journalists have any responsibility for what happens in their society? Indeed, have they a role to play in the overall ‘peace process’? On current evidence it would seem not. The media act as if they are somehow remote from the situation, floating somehow disembodied above it all. No-one is asking them to forgo the right to freedom of the press, but can that freedom not be exercised with intelligence and care, and with some degree of foresight as to the likely ramifications of their intrusions?

Have those in the media ever sat down and subjected their motivations to serious scrutiny? Are they concerned at all with assisting this society move forwards, or is their primary goal simply just to chase news stories, regardless of the methods used or the likely impact?

Following one particularly bad period of violence here an audience of people from Northern Ireland was flown to London to take part in a studio discussion, but it degenerated into a heated slanging match. One of the participants told me afterwards that he overheard a member of the TV crew express his concern at the way things were developing to one of the producers, and this producer responded: “Paddies at each other’s throats – sure it makes for good television.”

(4) What can be done?

Along with others working in the community sector, I would just like the media to pause, and reflect on a number of questions:

(1) What good do they think can come from constantly reinforcing the negative? More pointedly, what dangers could it create?

(2) Might the right to ‘freedom to report’ at the same time be *inhibiting the freedom* of people at the grassroots to tease out new ideas and approaches? And why this need to jump at issues immediately; why can’t things be allowed to develop first, free from the glare of publicity? Perhaps the reward might be an even better story in the longer term.

(3) In relation to the quotes I gave earlier from victims and their families, are the methods sometimes used really necessary, or even justifiable?

(4) What is the *end purpose* of their reporting? Is it just to search out ‘news’ and ‘scoops’, or should it not also be to help this society advance?

(5) Many people working at the grassroots are trying their best in difficult situations, but they are unskilled at dealing with the media, possessing little of the shrewd ability of politicians to side-step direct questions, and this allows some reporters to ridicule them or ensnare them by focusing on inconsistencies in what they are saying, rather than granting them some leeway or even – can you imagine it! – assisting them to move forward.

[The patronising and dismissive attitudes can even become personal. I recall, at the beginning of the Troubles, being at a meeting during which journalist Mary Holland expressed her disgust at the way other journalists, whilst in the bar in the *Europa*, ridiculed and mimicked – both in speech and demeanour – the local people they had interviewed that day.]

(6) Why can’t journalists do a series of programmes looking in depth at some of the positive initiatives and projects which are working away patiently at the grassroots?

Selected Articles

I possess a dozen box-files of writings, letters, funding applications and assorted ephemera, and I thought I would delve into a few of them to bulk out this pamphlet.

1

In the mid-1980s I was a member of the Rathcoole Self-Help Group. The Group, largely composed of young people – but with some adult supporters – set out to articulate the needs of local disillusioned youth, endeavouring to provide them with outlets for their pent-up energies, including through music [Newtownabbey Musicians Workshop] and art [Rathcoole Arts Workshop]. A regular magazine was produced and an advice centre was set up which dealt with benefit problems and housing issues. While pursuing the various strands of their outreach the group members were frequently critical of Unionist politicians, who they felt were ignoring the social and economic problems besetting Protestant working-class communities such as Rathcoole, and more concerned with securing an acquiescent Protestant/Unionist electorate.

To ‘stir’ things up somewhat, in 1985 the Group decided to form a political party to contest the forthcoming local government elections. It was called ‘The All Night Party’ and its banner across the entrance to Rathcoole estate read: NO MORE SHITE! VOTE ALL NIGHT! Our election manifesto ‘promised’ to demolish Stormont and rebuild it as a disco in Rathcoole; to tilt the earth’s axis so as to give Rathcoole more sunshine – and other such perfectly legitimate aims! Our candidate, ‘Hagar the Horrible’, went about canvassing dressed as a Viking. [His helmet had horns; admittedly this was before historians ruined everything when they announced that Viking helmets didn’t actually have horns!]

Not surprisingly, local Unionist politicians were aghast at all this, and one DUP member wrote to the local Newtownabbey Times to demand that the Group “be horsewhipped out of the area.” More maliciously, the DUP claimed that the Group members were all Cathal Gouldingites! Well, once local Loyalist paramilitaries were informed that Cathal Goulding was a former chief-of-staff of the IRA, things grew tense. I had to intervene in the situation, and my response has been detailed in Island Pamphlet no. 137 (along with a copy of Hagar the Horrible’s election poster).

To support the Group I wrote the following letter to the newspaper:

Social Worker praises Self Help Group, *Newtownabbey Times*, 15 March, 1985

“ SIR – Following the recent DUP attack in your paper on the Rathcoole Self-Help Group, coupled with the Housing Executive’s threat to evict them from their premises, I wish to express my support for the Group.

I have been the NSPCC social worker for Newtownabbey for the past four years, though I must state that the views expressed in this letter are entirely my own.

I have been involved with the Self-Help Group even before they moved into their present premises, offering at their centre a social work counselling service to parents with child-related problems.

In return, I have been able to refer many of the benefit and housing problems that come to my attention to the capable hands of the group’s advice workers. This has been invaluable to me, as it has allowed me more time to devote to helping those families with more difficult problems.

As for the DUP criticism that the Self-Help Group are anti-establishment, I, for one, am glad to see them challenge the establishment. Years of social work have left me with a depressing picture of how the ordinary people of this province are treated like second-class citizens by the establishment.

It amazes me anyway that the DUP critic, of all people, should be so paranoid about others being anti-establishment, for if he knew his local history properly he would realise that the only way his own Protestant community of Ulster protected their interests was by being anti-establishment – from the Apprentice Boys who bolted the gates of Derry in the face of government troops, to the 1974 UWC strike.

As for his claim that the ‘fun’ candidate in the coming local government elections. ‘Hagar the Horrible’, is a calculated insult to the accredited politicians and electorate, surely the DUP critic should be aware by now that most young people consider it is the politicians who are the insult to the populace. People elect politicians to better their society, but our politicians seem to prove year after year that they are totally incapable of ever agreeing anything with one another.




The Self-Help Group have also been criticised because of the boisterous activities of some of the young people they are involved with. However, the Group are doing more for the frustrated and alienated youth of Rathcoole and surrounding estates than any other group or body.

It’s easy to criticise when you aren’t doing anything yourself. Through my social work in Newtownabbey and Belfast over the past few years, I can sense a gradual build-up of frustration and disillusionment among our youth that some day could explode province-wide, an explosion that will have nothing sectarian about it, but will be aimed

at a system they have lost all respect for. Given such a possibility, the establishment should be glad the Self-Help Group is trying at least to channel this youthful energy.

Finally, I feel that no matter how some political parties or establishment bodies try to discredit the Self-Help Group, the ordinary people of Rathcoole realise that any attack on the Group is also an attack on their own interests.”

Note: Following the publication of this letter, a quite irate DUP spokesperson phoned my boss at NSPCC to vociferously complain about me. But that is another story . . .

HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

HAGAR

(SILLY TO VOTE FOR ANYONE ELSE)

MANIFESTO

- (1) Sign on the dole once a year
- (2) Rebuild Stormont in Rathcoole and make it an all night disco
- (3) Build more corners for kids to hang around
- (4) Give the unemployed free bicycles so they can get on their bikes and look for work
- (5) Tilt the world's axis tp give Rathcoole more sun shine
- (6) Hold the next Olympics in Rathcoole
- (7) Change Derryhill to Londonderryhill---our only concession to sectarianism and a certain vote catcher
- (8) Community policemen to hold hands
- (9) All public representatives to wear fancy dres(dressing up as a councillor desn't count)


These grandiose schemes will be paid for by savings on the money wasted by the present council

HAGAR PROMISES\$


Like all politicians I will not keep my promises but I will keep one
" TO HAVE AN ALL NIGHT PARTY THE NIGHT OF THE ELECTIONS IN THE DIAMOND RATHCOOLE"

A vote for the Unionists will be a vote for Thatcher, a vote for poverty, bad housing unemployment and greed, not to mention corruption and mispending of your money.
A vote for HAGAR is harmless, a bit of fun and given the calibre of the other candidates, the only vote that makes sense

GO FORWARD WITH HAGAR FOR A BETTER COOLE!



THE ALL NIGHT PARTY ANTI CORRUPTION PARTY



HAGAR No. 1

2

When I first got involved in community action, I initially avoided any contact with paramilitary organisations. However, an important individual I worked closely with was Turf Lodge community activist Joe Camplisson, a very genuine home-grown conflict resolution practitioner. Camplisson based much of his work on the writings of Australian academic John Burton, who asserted that situations of identity-related conflict could ultimately only be resolved by engaging with the extremes.

Although I had been born into the 'Protestant' working-class community of East Belfast, my upbringing had been secular and socialist. I was present at the Burntollet ambush, but when the Civil Rights phase was brushed aside by the resurgence of physical force Irish Republicanism and the violence intensified, I soon began to view all paramilitary organisations – Republican and Loyalist – simply as plagues upon the backs of ordinary people. However, after reading poems written by UDA spokesperson Sammy Duddy, in some of which he lamented the tragic divide which had arisen between working-class Catholics and Protestants, I resolved to set aside my misgivings and make contact.

In 1984 I made my way to the East Belfast headquarters of the UDA where I met its Chairman Andy Tyrie. I told him straightaway that my overriding concern was for our children's future, and that, as far as I could see, his people, the Republican movement and our politicians, were all making a bloody mess of this country. During follow-up discussions I was often at pains to criticise many of the articles which appeared in the UDA's magazine Ulster, which I considered – as with its Republican counterpart An Phoblacht/Republican News – simply a glorification of 'war news', and often blatantly sectarian. Tyrie had a surprising response: "Well, why don't you write some articles for us instead?"

And so I did. In my articles I called for serious efforts to fight the cancer of sectarianism. I appealed for a genuine cross-community dialogue to emerge. I slated the politicians and the 'patriots' (from whatever side) for dividing us, and failing us. I explored aspects of our shared history and heritage. I defended Ballymurphy community activist Fr. Des Wilson against Loyalist hostility. . . .

Some people expressed surprise at such sentiments being promoted in a militant loyalist magazine and, indeed, some of its readers even complained directly to Tyrie. But to his credit Tyrie defended the articles, explaining that he was trying to encourage new thinking and open up a much-needed debate.

Some articles were history-themed, such as the one here, and were attempts to get readers to look beyond the straightjacket of Irish/Ulster history.

Reflections (on the Spanish Revolution of 1936), *Ulster*, November 1986

“ Another year in the life of Northern Ireland is drawing to an end, a year full of the usual marches, anniversaries and celebrations – both Protestant and Catholic, Loyalist and Republican. I can’t honestly say that I myself gained much from witnessing these assorted remembrances of things past, neither did I feel any inspiration or hope from seeing the old tribal battles constantly resurrected.

Yet having said this, 1986 does have one anniversary that has always inspired me even though it relates to an event *outside* Ireland. For 1986 is the 50th anniversary of the Spanish Revolution. Most people only know of it, or remember it, as the ‘Spanish Civil War’, for even while that civil war was being fought, and in the subsequent years, most people outside Spain were kept in ignorance of the fact that when the ordinary people of Spain rose up to fight Franco’s rebellion, they not only embarked upon civil war but put into practice the most far-reaching social transformation Europe has ever seen.

While the Spanish Republican government, in the face of the Fascist threat, was hesitating to arm the people, the people themselves seized substantial quantities of weapons and successfully prevented the Nationalist forces under Franco from winning an outright victory. The armed workers defeated the military uprising in most of industrial Spain, and, at a time when the Republican government remained powerless, the people themselves went on the offensive against the rebels. This was the start of the civil war but it was also the start of [a largely anarcho-syndicalist] revolution, for the people now took over the running of much of the Republican zone themselves.

As one eyewitness recorded:

Very quickly more than 60% of the land was collectively cultivated by the peasants themselves, without landlords, without bosses and without instituting capitalist competition to spur production. In almost all the industries, factories, mills, workshops, transportation services and utilities the rank-and-file workers, their revolutionary committees and their syndicates reorganised and administered production, distribution and public services without capitalists, high-salaried managers or the authority of the State. Even more, the various agrarian and industrial collectives co-ordinated their efforts through free association in whole regions, created new wealth, increased production, built more schools and better public services. The instituted not bourgeois formal democracy but genuine grassroots functional libertarian democracy where each individual participated directly in the revolutionary reorganisation of social life.

They replaced the war between men, ‘survival of the fittest’, by the universal practice of mutual aid, and replaced rivalry by the principle of solidarity. This experience, in which eight million people directly or indirectly participated, opened a new way of life to those who sought an alternative to anti-social capitalism on the one hand, and totalitarian state bogus-socialism on the other.

Another writer said:

It was no small achievement to feed and restore the economic life of Barcelona, a city of 1,200,000 (the most populous in Spain). The food unions, together with the hotel and restaurant workers, opened communal dining-halls in each neighbourhood. The food committee fed up to 120,000 people a day in open restaurants on presentation of a union card. The big food wholesale establishments were collectivised. The unions organised themselves into a Food Workers Industrial Union (the most important – bakers, butchers, dairy workers). The union, in general membership meetings, fixed their own wages. The workers became their own bosses. The system embraced all of Catalonia and five hundred workers co-ordinated the operations.

To the politicians, however, this had all come as a terrible shock. ALL the political parties in the Republican camp – Liberals, moderate Socialists, Republicans, Communists, etc. were all united in one aim – to halt and reverse this great experiment of the masses. And halt and reverse it they did – by deceit, manipulation, and finally by brute force. As another account described:

The attack began in Aragon on a grand scale and with hitherto unknown methods. The harvest was approaching. Rifles in hand, treasury guards under Communist orders stopped trucks loaded with provisions on the highways and brought them to their offices. Later open attacks began, under the command of [Communist military officer Enrique] Lister with troops withdrawn from the front. The final result was that 30% of the collectives were destroyed.

When the politicians crushed the achievements of the people, they also destroyed their will to fight on – why fight for something that has already been taken away from you by your own government – and Franco was eventually to win the civil war.

Yet the legacy remains of what the ordinary people are capable of if given the opportunity. So forgive me if I find such an episode of far more inspirational value than be asked to remember King Billy prancing around on his white steed 300 years ago,

or to get caught up emotionally with an elitist bunch of Irish Nationalists who wished to wallow in their ‘blood sacrifice’ amid the streets of Dublin in 1916.

Maybe we will yet see the day when such historically-divisive events can be relegated to the past where they belong, and the ordinary people of Ulster, Protestant and Catholic, begin to take control of their own destiny and build a society worthy of our children. ”

Note: The following month my article commemorated the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, when Workers’ Councils quickly became “the living organs of a rising democracy.”

3

The following was my contribution to a book presented to Ballymurphy priest Father Desmond Wilson celebrating his life and innovative community initiatives:

Father Des Wilson (unknown date)

“ I can’t recall how many years ago it was that I first met Father Wilson, nor could I even begin to estimate the number of occasions I have visited him at Springhill Community House. Sometimes those visits were just a matter of ‘keeping in touch’, other times they would take place in the wake of yet more tragic events on the streets of Belfast, and we would put our heads together to see if there was anything – *anything* – we could do to help move things in a more constructive, purposeful direction. Most times there wasn’t, and Des and I would inevitably end up bemoaning the powerlessness experienced by ordinary people in the face of all that was transpiring around them.

Not that all our encounters were on such a serious level, however. I have helped retrieve cats from trees outside his house in Donegal, have even carried rocks to build a flower-bed there, and most recently I succumbed to generous-hearted Noelle’s urging to start cultivating Kombucha. I don’t know if it has made me or my family any healthier, but we have four bowls of it fermenting outside in our shed!

Des and I have also regularly included one another on the ‘tourist’ trail. When Des has had groups of visitors over who, as well as their ‘tour’ of Ballymurphy, asked if they could be shown around the Shankill, he would invariably phone me up. Likewise, when Loyalists had visitors over who wished to see Nationalist areas, I would get requests such as: “Mike, would you mind taking this lot up to see yer mate Des and those renegades up the Falls?” Des and I and others could write a book about all the inter-community contact there has been over the years, and how that contact

has invariably been manipulated or thwarted by those in our political and professional establishments. Perhaps some day soon we'll get that book written.

In the course of my political/social/cultural activities with 'both' communities – although I dislike that term, as I consider our 'two' communities to be the *same* community – on a number of occasions I've had to defend Des against Loyalist criticism, with often surprising results. One leading Loyalist was condemning Des's perceived Nationalist sympathies to me and I responded: "Irrespective of whatever you think about his sympathies, I'll tell you one thing – Father Wilson has more 'sympathy' for ordinary working-class Protestants than any of their own 'fur-coat brigade' Unionist politicians have." To which the Loyalist, with an affirmative nod, quietly replied: "I reckon you're right there."

Anyway, this piece is getting far too serious. One of the reasons I like visiting Des is not just the chance we get to debate and argue, but because he is also humorous and warm-hearted. I've spent many enjoyable hours in his company (as also in the company of Noelle and all the others at Springhill Community House and Conway Mill), and I hope there will be many more such hours to come. ”

4

*I was asked by the editor of the **North Belfast Independent** to write a series of articles.*

Opening Up Debate, *North Belfast Independent*, April 1996

“ For this issue the Editor has suggested I explain something about my series of *Island Pamphlets*. I decided to publish these for three basic reasons.

First of all, I had been involved in community activities since 1968, on a number of levels – political, socio-economic, cultural, historical and cross-community – and was frequently concerned by the lack of awareness that existed at the grassroots about many of the positive things which were happening at community level – debates, conferences, etc.

Secondly, the reality of our *shared* heritage and culture lay obscured within a plethora of heavy academic tomes and was not being made accessible to a community readership.

Thirdly, having studied many periods of major social change in European history, I realised there was one element that was present in most of them, but glaringly absent in our own situation: the existence of a widespread grassroots debate – whether that took the form of energetic café discussions, or intensive pamphleteering, or

whatever.† Certainly there were numerous Republican and Loyalist publications, but they seemed mainly concerned with trotting out exhortations to the faithful.

Hence I decided to initiate a series of documents, which would (hopefully) be concise, accessible, readable and inexpensive, and, more importantly, could perhaps provide a way of stimulating a wider community debate.

My efforts to gain direct funding for what I am engaged in have been singularly unsuccessful. Over the past few years I have applied for assistance to Belfast City Council, The Arts Council, Cultural Traditions Group, The Ireland Funds, The International Fund for Ireland, The Foundation for Sport and the Arts, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, The Irish American Cultural Institute . . . all to no avail. I am invariably told that, as an ‘individual’ – i.e. someone with no ‘committee’ around him – I fall outside the normal funding criteria. Did no-one ever tell these people that the ‘normal’ first line of social change is not committees, but the ‘individuals’ who comprise them? It must be acknowledged, however, that while half of the pamphlets had to be produced at my own expense, others were commissioned by community organisations who *were* able to obtain the necessary funding from some of these organisations, allowing me to distribute many copies free of charge.

The topics covered are varied and I am always open to new suggestions. Recently I joined forces with Springfield Inter-Community Development Project to initiate the ‘Community Think Tanks’ project and two pamphlets documenting the deliberations of the Shankill Think Tank are already contributing significantly to the community debate. Within the next month a pamphlet detailing the deliberations of a Think Tank based within Belfast’s Nationalist working class will be published, and hopefully this will lead to others.”

Note: At the time of writing this article I had produced 14 pamphlet titles. However, in October 1998 I finally received funding under the European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (administered through the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council and the International Fund for Ireland), and this funding allowed me to devote myself full-time to the project. When that funding eventually ended, I worked with Harry Donaghy’s Fellowship of Messines Project to produce further titles. To date, I have produced 137 different titles and distributed 202,500 (free) copies across the community network in Northern Ireland (and, indeed, beyond). All the titles are listed on my University of Ulster webpage, and many of them can be downloaded free from there. <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/islandpublications>

† Such as the radical pamphleteering which emerged during the French Revolution, the vibrant discussions in the Spanish working-class community centres (*Casas del Pueblo*) during the 1930s, or the café debates which flowered during Czechoslovakia’s ‘Prague Spring’ in 1968.

Asking the *Real* Questions, *North Belfast Independent*, January 1996

“ “The world of *isms*,” Raoul Vaneigem once wrote, “is never anything but a world drained of reality. There are more truths in twenty-four hours of a man’s life than in all the philosophies.” After decades of bloodshed and grief is it not time that the ordinary people of this society asked themselves what our own two *isms* – Unionism and Republicanism – have really got to offer them. Whether these two *isms* have all that much to say about the quality of their daily lives, those ‘twenty-four hours’?

Some years ago I asked a member of Sinn Féin what form he thought a new United Ireland would take. Would it include workers’ control? Would parents be able to wrest ownership of the education system from the grip of the Churches? Would ordinary citizens have a meaningful say in the running of their areas, in the type of jobs brought into those areas, and just who did those jobs? Would we see the gradual evolution of a genuine participatory democracy at the grassroots? He looked at me blankly and replied: “These are all irrelevant questions. We’ll worry about all that when the Brits are kicked out!”

Irrelevant? I hardly think so. For ordinary people these should be the *real* questions. Not whether the Union Jack or the Tricolour flies over the City Hall. There cannot be many ordinary Catholics who seriously believe that a green flag flying over the city centre will bring any fundamental change to their everyday lives. Certainly, there might be a few days of euphoria, accompanied by the usual cavalcades with banners fluttering proudly in the wind. But undoubtedly this outburst of nationalistic pride would soon dissipate, and ordinary Catholics would go back to being what they have always been – disempowered working-class (or unemployed-class) citizens.

The same goes for working-class Protestants. They repeatedly claim that their voice is never listened to by their British ‘partners’ in this Union, that their support for Unionism has never been reciprocated by any real concern for the quality of their everyday lives. Well, then, why do they bother supporting Unionism so vehemently? Why do they not look for something that *does* treat them with respect. And if they cannot find it, who do they not try and create it?

Is our fixation with Republicanism and Unionism merely to do with protecting our separate cultural identities? If so, we need to ask whether it even does this. History has shown that Nationalism does not necessarily safeguard cultural identity and diversity. As an editorial in *A Belfast Magazine* (1988) commented:

Political nationalism is in practice a consumer rather than a preserver of traditions. Nationalism is a ‘modernising’ force which melts down

traditions in order to merge distinctive local communities into a nation. Irish nationalism did more in a few decades to cause a rupture with traditional ways of immemorial antiquity than English administration had done in all the notorious 800 years.

Look what happened to the Irish language. When de Valera requested that a standardised Gaelic grammar be produced, the new southern élite chose to largely ignore the Ulster Gaelic of Donegal, despite the warning from eminent Irish scholar T. F. O’Rahilly that

... the pressing problem of the hour is to keep alive and vigorous every one of the last few dialects of Irish that have survived. Little good would a manufactured ‘literary’ language be if once the stream of living Irish is allowed to dry up.

But then Irish ‘nationalism’ is happy to be contradictory. Die-hard northern nationalists might claim that the Protestant Ulstermen – who actually *live* on this island – cannot be considered *true* Irishmen until they relinquish their ‘Britishness’, yet more pragmatic southerners are quite content to see a whole bunch of these ‘Britishers’ make up ‘their’ football team. Fair play to the Republic’s football supporters – at least they know what is important to them *as of now*: they want to score goals, not political points.

And as for Ulstermen wanting their ‘British’ identity protected; well, they have probably given more thought to what a ‘British way of life’ is than the British themselves.

If our two *isms* are not necessarily protecting our diverse identities, and at the same time are not offering the prospect of fundamental social and political change at the grassroots, why then are ordinary people so staunchly aligned behind them? Is it simply that our two communities are afraid of each other? Afraid that one side will win a ‘victory’ over the other? One group of disempowered working-class people fearing that another group of disempowered working-class people will win a ‘victory’? How those with the real power in their hands must smile at all this.

Is it not time ordinary people cried out: ‘A plague on both your houses!’ and got down to building a quite different type of society here? Has the time not come when the real question should not be whether you are prepared to kill or die for Unionism or Republicanism, but whether we all have the capability and the willingness to fundamentally change this society for the better? ”

Let the *Real* Talks begin, *North Belfast Independent*, March 1996

“ For some time now we have heard repeated demands for ‘all-party talks’ to commence, and finally a date has been set, though whether all parties will actually be in attendance looks doubtful. Yet what I find hardest to comprehend is the widespread belief that these ‘all-party talks’ will somehow result in an agreed solution to our long-standing conflict. I can understand people *hoping* that the talks will succeed. But such hope is surely at odds with the evidence of the past twenty-seven years, for many of the participants will be the *same* personalities who have *repeatedly* proven their utter inability to set this society onto a new course.

Does our intense desire to see an end to all the years of conflict blind us to the very real possibility that these talks could prove to be just another dead end, another way our divisions can be perpetuated? The present posturing by some of the main players provides a flavour of the obstacles that lie ahead, and creates the suspicion that these ‘talks’ will not really be concerned with constructing a durable peace, but with continuing the conflict in a new guise. Does anyone really believe that Sinn Féin and the Unionists are mentally preparing themselves to be magnanimous and accommodating (assuming that the former actually get there and that the latter bother to turn up)? No, it is more likely that they are girding their loins to do battle over the same worn-out Nationalist and Unionist dogmas that should have been put to rest a long time ago.

And what are ordinary people in both our communities supposed to do while these ‘all-party talks’ are going on (or stumbling along, or collapsing or whatever)? Sit quietly on the sidelines, waiting for a ‘solution’ to be thrashed out? If so, we’ll have a long wait ahead of us, that’s for sure. I don’t think we can *afford* to sit idly by, for if the talks disintegrate then the new beginning that our two communities yearn for could not only collapse before our eyes, but our society could stumble back into the nightmare we are still struggling to emerge from.

I believe that our two communities must begin their *own* talks, to run in parallel with the party-political ones, tackling every issue that comes up before the politicians, especially those issues which the politicians fudge or avoid. How? If the will was there, a forum for such an inter-community debate could easily be initiated. But inter-community dialogue can begin anywhere. There are numerous community groups throughout Northern Ireland with cross-community contacts. If these groups decided to put their normal activities temporarily to one side and just arranged to sit down and debate, who knows what could develop from it.

At a recent meeting of a [community Think Tank] discussion group on the Falls Road a teenager gave a thoughtful and cogent analysis of what life was like for young people in her area. When she was thanked for her contribution she responded: “This is the first time anyone has ever asked me for my opinion.” There is a wealth of ‘opinion’ out there in our communities which is ignored or manipulated by the powers-that-be. It is up to us to find a way of letting it be voiced.

We cannot rely on the politicians to come up with the answers; ultimately a truly durable solution can only emerge from the grassroots. ‘All-inclusive dialogue’ can only hope to succeed when it is the *right* people who are doing the talking, people with the *right* motivation, and feeling the necessary urgency. That rules out our failed batch of politicians and throws it back upon ourselves.”

5

I cannot remember which community publication this final piece was written for, nor did I take a note of the date it was penned.

The Interface: an unnatural division

“ I once read that when some Belfast residents were asked what images they would like to see painted on the newly erected ‘peace-line’ beside them, they replied: “The houses and the people on the other side.” I cannot verify whether this anecdote is true or not, but if it *is* true it epitomises the communal tragedy of Belfast’s ‘peace-line’ interfaces – two communities of working-class people, each by force of historical circumstances needing to feel secure from the other, yet knowing intuitively that the division between them is unnatural and regrettable. When the first barricades were hastily erected in August 1969, I had written the following piece:

As we enter the Falls area the sense of devastation is overwhelming. Burnt-out buildings are everywhere and rubble sprawls across the pavements onto the road. Over the Falls Road itself an oppressive and eerie silence lingers. At the top of each side street barricades of cars, vans, wire, boarding, paving slabs, bed frames – in fact anything sturdy – bar the way.

Through guarded entrance holes and gaps in the jumbled frameworks, anxious faces watch us pass, their eyes sleepless, their faces wary and

suspicious. We arrive at the Leeson Street barricade and vigilantes halt us. Quiet words of identity are exchanged and verified, and we are assisted though the narrow entrance. The backstreets are almost in darkness, the open doors throwing out light to illuminate the uneven pavements.

Wandering around the area we talk with local people. They give us excited, often garbled, stories, their faces still showing the alarm, their voices still retaining the tenseness. And hanging about us like a cloud is the uncertainty of what will happen next.

Teacups rattle in makeshift huts at the top of each street and small fires keep the sleepy watchers warm. Children gather around, throwing anything they can scavenge onto the fires, watching wide-eyed as the wood crackles and spits.

Residents lounge against the walls of their houses, some lucky enough to have a windowsill to sit on. At the barricade at the top of one street people stare out at the soldiers on duty just yards away. The soldiers stare back, endeavouring to seem friendly, yet wary and uncertain. Further up the road a police tender sits in the shadows, its occupants invisible to us.

As we make our way to the edge of the area one of the vigilantes points across the main road to the nearest Protestant barricade, indicating the spot where he claims his counterpart is apparently watching us. I stare over at the jumbled structure but can detect nothing, nothing animate amid the tangled mass of metal and boarding. I am just about to give up when a movement suddenly catches my attention and makes me start. I peer harder, and yes, finally I see the source – two eyes staring back at me from behind the narrowest of gaps in the intricate construction.

When I finally leave the area I squeeze through the nearest barricade and make my way down the Donegall Road. Protestant vigilantes watch me approach their own barricades and for a moment I feel apprehensive, intensely vulnerable in this no-man's-land. I am uncertain what I should do, when, unexpectedly, one of the vigilantes gives me a broad smile and shouts out a cheery 'goodnight!' I return his smile and my anxiety dissipates. All is not lost then, I muse, all is not lost. I feel elated, I feel my optimism returning. Surely, amid all this madness, all is not lost!

If I had imagined back then that 'peace-lines' – the modern equivalent of those original barricades – would still be dividing the working-class communities of

Belfast almost thirty years later, my optimism that evening might have been more quickly dispelled.

In the intervening years I have criss-crossed the ‘interface’ between Belfast’s ‘two communities’ almost on a weekly basis, still unable to accept that the people I move among represent anything other than *one* community, its members tragically estranged from one another. The conditions they live in, the problems that beset their lives, their hopes and fears, are identical. If there exists a genuine ‘divide’ surely it is between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in this society, and not between the working-class communities of Belfast.

And yet, any idealised image must give way at times to cold reality, and then the manufactured division comes into focus in all its force, and in all its manifestations – visible physical walls, invisible territorial boundaries, psychological barriers, and barriers of fear and mistrust, often the product of bitter experiences.

Many have written about these divisions, explored their origins and analysed their consequences. But surely it must be time to look *beyond* them, to focus on how, at this time of tentative optimism, we can transcend such barriers and finally remove the need for inter-communal ‘interfaces’.

Perhaps it might be useful here to draw on some personal experiences which have proven, to me at least, that the seemingly impenetrable barriers which divide our communities have *never* been as impenetrable as some would have us believe.

First of all, I have always always found that people on either side of the interface have a genuine desire to learn about each other. On one occasion, while walking along the Shankill Road, a local community activist stopped me. “Mike, we need more copies of the Think Tank pamphlet, can you drop some up?” I started to explain how few copies of the Shankill Think Tank pamphlet remained when he interrupted me. “No, not that one. I mean the Falls Think Tank pamphlet – there’s been a big demand for it.” Two weeks later, while visiting Turf Lodge Development Association I was told that they too were out of ‘the Think Tank pamphlet’. Somewhat more cautiously, I asked if they were referring to the Falls Think Tank document. “No, no, the Shankill one – people around here really liked it.”

A cynic might remark that simply expressing an interest in one another from a distance is all very well, but what about direct contact? Well, to detail the many instances of direct contact would require considerable space, but a few of the ones known to me might give some idea of their extent.

Once, when the members of the Newtownabbey Musicians Workshop were seeking a venue for their gigs and had drawn a blank, I brought a group of them to see Father Des Wilson. In his usual warm and welcoming way – though looking

somewhat bemused by the punk hairstyles and sartorial extravagance – he agreed to their request to use Conway Mill. He did, however, add one rider: “If you do hold your gigs there, you won’t be offended if I don’t attend them all, will you – I’m not sure that you play my kind of music.” In the event, a more suitable venue materialised soon afterwards, but when the Rathcoole Arts Workshop, which was closely linked to the Musicians Workshop, organised a travelling exhibition of local art and sculpture, their first venue outside Newtownabbey was agreed unanimously – Conway Mill on the Falls Road.

On another occasion, shortly after I began working with some Loyalists on a community play dealing with the political, social and cultural estrangement experienced by the Protestant working class, it became evident that we would not unearth sufficient actors within the Protestant community to complete the cast. One of my co-authors then said to me: “Any chance of you making the number up from your contacts on the ‘other side’?” When I made enquiries, some members of Ballymurphy People’s Theatre readily offered their services. Ultimately logistical problems prevented us from ever performing the play. That was unfortunate, because it would certainly have been a unique collaboration.

I could relate many such experiences, as could many other community activists. But the lesson is clear – the barrier is not, and *has never been*, as insurmountable as people often assume. Like the story of the emperor’s new clothes, the way we *look* at things is an important part of our everyday reality. The walls *can* be brought down, the interfaces *can* be transcended, the barriers – physical or psychological – *can* be removed. We only have to begin to *look beyond them*.

The work needed to do this will engage us all, individually and collectively. Since the ceasefires more and more people have been taking their first tentative steps into one another’s territory, to join the stalwarts who have been taking such steps since the inception of our present ‘Troubles’. Many grassroots groups already have long-standing contacts ‘across the divide’. It is only a matter of time before members of the Shankill and Falls Think Tanks meet for their first joint discussion. Other community groups have the bridging of the divide as a primary objective.

The walls *will* come down, the interface *will* be transcended. It is only a matter of time. ”