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The
Community Foundation
for Northern Ireland

supporting people, strengthening communities, building peace

BUILDING THE PEACE - POLITICAL EX-PRISONERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Stormont Hotel - 2 March 2004

Conference Report

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1. Introduction

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland held this conference to enable the ex-prisoner groups currently accessing temporary funding via CFNI to showcase their work and address the issue of sustainability.

This conference was planned by a Policy Development Group facilitated by CFNI comprised of members of ex-prisoner groups from loyalist and republican backgrounds.

2. Theme

The challenge presented by the Conference to government was that the commitments made in the Good Friday Agreement had not been honoured.

"The Governments continue to recognise the importance of measures to facilitate the reintegration of prisoners into the community by providing support both prior to and after release, including assistance directed towards availing of employment opportunities, re-training and/or re-skilling, and further education."

Extract from the Good Friday Agreement, 1998

3. Key issues

Pete Shirlow from the University of Ulster outlined the scale and impact of the issue estimating that between 50,000 and 100,000 people were affected.

Workshops were held in the following areas:

- (1) The Contribution of the Social Economy
- (2) Youth
- (3) Peace Building - The Issues
- (4) Personal Development and Well-Being Issues
- (5) Community Participation and Development
- (6) Current Issues and Obstacles to Re-Integration

The key issues which emerged are -

- **Ex-prisoners and their families are suffering from a range of discriminatory obstacles to re-integration (see Appendix A - Impediments to the employment of ex-prisoners paper).**
- **The ground-breaking peace-building work undertaken by ex-prisoner groups has not been recognised or validated eg on interfaces, youth work.**
- **The British government needs to understand the conflict transformation process and support and resource the ex-prisoner groups who are taking the risks for peace within disadvantaged communities.**

Current Obstacles to re-integration

Ex-prisoners are:

- Ineligible for employment in many sectors including the Civil Service. This can even be extended to include children and relatives.
- Denied access to a range of employment because of the obligation to declare previous convictions and widespread exemptions.
- Unable to access PSV Licenses.
- Experiencing difficulty accessing finance for self-employment or mortgage facilities from Banks and Building Societies.
- Experiencing difficulties with accessing home insurance.
- Denied compensation by the Compensation Agency in relation to Criminal Injuries and Criminal Damage.

- Refused their normal old age pension entitlement, restricted by their inability to continue their National Insurance contributions.
- Facing restrictions on International Travel.
- Ineligible to adopt or foster children, as are their partners.

4. Reflections from the panel

The afternoon session heard a stimulating keynote speech on The Challenge of Peace-building for Ex-Prisoners and Ex-Combatants from Professor John Paul Lederach, Professor of International Peace-building, Joan B Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame.

‘When do we stop being ex-prisoners?’ was the starting point for the panel of speakers to address. The panel discussion and plenary was chaired by Fearghal McKinney (UTV).

The panel members were:

- Sir George Quigley
- Senator Mary White (Seanad Eireann)
- Shelagh Livingstone (previously Board of Prison Visitors)
- Brendan Mackin (President ICTU)
- Wilhelm Vorwoerd (Glencree Centre)
- Adrian Arbuthnot (Department of Employment and Learning)
- Mary Bunting (Equality Directorate, OFM/DFM)

Here are some of their reflections:

Senator Mary White, Seanad Eireann

The Irish government has a responsibility to embrace the issue of loyalist and republican politically motivated ex-prisoners to protect their rights and encourage their full participation in society.

This should include full equality of access to both public and private sector employment.

The political ex-prisoners are the ‘middle-management’ of the peace process. As a business woman and politician I recognise that without their invaluable work on the ground the peace process could falter to a halt.

Shelagh Livingstone - Member of Board of Visitors (1979 – 1990), has experience of visiting both Long Kesh and Maghaberry prisons regularly.

In my experience of meeting with the men in the jails I found that a lot of them were intelligent, caring men who had become involved in paramilitary groups because they saw that as the only way to improve life in their own communities.

In the jails the prisoners did a lot of discussing, reading and thinking and many came out with a deep commitment to working non-violently for their own communities.

I feel strongly that ex-prisoners should be supported in every possible way in the valuable work they are undertaking. They bring to this work a particularly relevant understanding of the needs and tensions that the people of their communities are struggling with.

Brendan Mackin, President of ICTU

I believe that the conference coming at this time is very appropriate. It has helped to defuse some of the frustration of ex-prisoners who felt they have been overlooked within the whole peace process. This day brings together ex-prisoners from all backgrounds and gives them an opportunity to have their say. Clearly there are similarities and differences in the experience of ex-prisoners. Some of the obstacles are the same, but republicans appear to be better integrated in their communities and to have an electoral voice. Loyalists don't have that level of integration and face political alienation.

Many of the ex-prisoners swapped one prison for another – too fearful to move outside their own communities they are still in a psychological prison.

On a practical level ex-prisoners and their families face discrimination – unable to access compensation if their cars are stolen or their houses damaged. Family members are barred from certain jobs. There are high levels of unemployment across the ex-prisoner population. A significant number of prisoners are now in the 40 plus age group and whatever skills they had may now be redundant. Even those with degrees still face age discrimination.

Many of the ex-prisoners are being forced into the black economy. With no access to sick pay or pensions, they are being exploited and they and their families are trapped within a poverty cycle. ICTU believe that something needs to be done urgently to address these issues.

The danger lies in the fact that frustration with the lack of movement can feed back into communities. If ex-prisoners become disillusioned and the positive role they have played slips away then this could undermine the peace that has been built and contribute to the further disintegration of working-class communities.

Wilhelm Verwoerd is the co-ordinator of the Ex-Combatants Programme at the Glencree Centre for Reconciliation, and is a former researcher within the South African Truth and Reconciliation Programme.

Growing up in apartheid South Africa I was exposed to the systematic criminalisation and even demonisation of political activists who opposed the system. Years later a prominent 'terrorist' became our President and many of his colleagues are now respected political, business, church, civic leaders. On the other hand there are former activists, many who sacrificed education for the sake of their political cause, who are struggling to find employment and are tempted to use their skills in ways that undermine the new democratic dispensation.

While there are obvious differences between the situation in South Africa and the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, I am convinced that the underlying principle remains the same: a sustainable political and social settlement requires the full inclusion in politics and society of political ex-prisoners. It is deeply worrying that on this island, and to some extent in South Africa, this principle is not currently receiving the urgent attention it requires.

5. Ex-prisoner groups perspective:

- An Eochair -Harry Donaghy
- CHARTER - Frankie Gallagher
- Coiste na n-Iarchimi - Mike Ritchie
- EPIC - Tom Roberts
- Teach Na Failte - Gerard Murray

(See Appendix B for speeches)

The Conference concluded with an update from Bill Pauley, Head of European Division, Department of Finance and Personnel on the possibility of a continuation of PEACE 11 funding or the emergence of a PEACE 111 programme.

Appendix A

Impediments to the Employment of Ex-Prisoners

1. In the course of our discussions within the Group* and with others we have identified a number of impediments to the employment of ex-prisoners.
2. It is still common practice for application forms to enquire about previous convictions, although some companies have now abandoned this except, for example, where contact with children is involved and there is a relevant conviction. Employers may be concerned that there is a security risk and that ex-prisoners may prove to be unsatisfactory and unable to cope with work disciplines, although the incidence of re-offending is minimal and there are excellent examples of ex-prisoners turning out to be amongst a company's best employees. Ex-prisoners can also experience difficulty in obtaining finance and insurance in start-up situations.
3. It is very much left to the discretion of each employer to place a value judgement on the relevance of an applicant's criminal record to the post applied for. This has led to inconsistency in the way that ex-offenders are treated, not only by different organisations but often by different interview panels within an organisation.
4. We recognise that employers have a legitimate concern and responsibility to care for their customers and employees. However, a criminal record should not automatically bar a person from obtaining a job except where the conviction is seen to be manifestly incompatible with the post in question.
5. There may be worries about ex-prisoners re-offending but research by the Home Office Research and Planning Unit shows that ex-prisoners who find employment are less likely to re-offend. Recidivism appears to be of the order of 1-2%.
6. There are also public policy issues. The education of many ex-prisoners stopped at age 14 and they have missed out on training opportunities. It is not known (because trainees are not obliged to disclose if they have spent time in prison) how many have been involved in New Deal, Job Skills and Bridge to Employment schemes but there is a feeling within the Group that many are still falling through the net and that a more proactive specially tailored approach may be required. Lack of education and skill is, of course, by no means typical of all ex-prisoners, but those with education and skills still encounter major barriers in gaining work experience and accessing entry to employment. We have benefited from advice from the T&EA which of course has experience of providing employment and training services to ex-prisoners.
7. The vetting process works against the employment of ex-prisoners in the public sector and by contractors and sub-contractors who work for this sector. It is also felt that the vetting process can impact unfairly on the families of ex-prisoners.

8. We also believe that ex-prisoners are unable to access compensation for bomb damage to their business and that there can be circumstances in which HGV and PSV licenses are denied to them.
9. The provisions of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (NI 1978) are relevant in the context of access to employment. The Order sets out the opportunity for most criminal records to become 'spent' after a specific period has passed except in the case of re-offending. The implication of this is that many ex-offenders do not have to declare criminal convictions when applying for jobs, but only after lengthy rehabilitation periods have been completed.
10. However, this legislation only covers sentences of up to 2 and 1/2 years, which means that the vast majority of politically motivated ex-prisoners will have to declare their convictions indefinitely. This places them at a severe disadvantage in terms of accessing the labour market and is a substantial factor in blocking the social inclusion of many ex-prisoners through employment.
11. Under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Exemptions Order (NI 1979) certain types of employment are classed as exempt, meaning that all convictions must be declared, including those that would otherwise be considered as 'spent'. Work that would be covered under this exemptions rule would include professions regulated by law and posts involving work with children or vulnerable adults.
12. Many posts in Northern Ireland, however, are classed as exempt using the classification of 'national security', including all civil service positions. In the light of the political developments and particularly taking into consideration the implementation of equality schemes within all public sector bodies (as a result of the Northern Ireland Act of 1998) the process of security vetting relating to these posts is in urgent need of review.
13. Taken together, the provisions of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Order and the Rehabilitation of Offenders Exemptions Order create a severe impediment to politically motivated ex-prisoners accessing many areas of employment.
14. There are also North / South issues which require examination, eg
 - There are acute labour shortages in the Republic which could be eased by tapping the labour resource represented by ex-prisoners. Some sectors such as construction and hospitality have consistently shown a significant level of cross-border mobility, while companies like Xerox are actively recruiting in Northern Ireland for their plant in Dundalk. Legislation and practices in the Republic may also require review.
 - It has been pointed out to us that US immigration laws might well prevent an employee recruited in either part of Ireland from undergoing training in the US with the parent American company, if the prohibition on entry to the US of people with convictions was rigidly enforced. The issue may also arise in other countries such as Canada and Australia.

* Footnote

The Group referred to in this paper was an ad-hoc group of people, from the world of business and trade unions, who were concerned to address the issues relating to the re-integration of political ex-prisoners. A series of meetings was initiated by this group bringing together people from business and trade union backgrounds with representatives of loyalist and republican ex-prisoners and representatives from some government departments. The meetings addressed re-integration of political ex-prisoners with a particular emphasis on employability issues.

Six meetings were held over a five-month period in 2000; chaired by Sir George Quigley.

This paper on 'Impediments to the Employment of Ex-Prisoners' was drafted by that Group and presented to government in 2000, with a recommendation that a Taskforce be established, to include representatives of relevant government departments and ex-prisoners themselves to come up with solutions to these issues. No response was forthcoming from government at that time and the issues remain unresolved.

Appendix B

- **An Eochair - Harry Donaghy speech**

As Official Republicans we were the first group to declare a cease-fire in the present conflict. Like all cease-fires, it was not perfect. We believed at the time that a general ceasefire and political compromise were the only rational outcomes to our age-old conflict and we have worked for that end ever since. In spite of this we were as unprepared as everyone else, for the complexities of compromise, of the new terms "peace building", "peace process" and "conflict resolution" and how utterly things change when general ceasefires are declared.

For a long time previous to the Belfast Agreement, we naively believed that with the onset of peace we could better expound our views to a more receptive audience. We were blissfully unaware of what we now term, "political sectarianism". We were a classic case of "Naive Realism" (Ross and Ward 1996)

1. We see the world pretty much as it really is. Our perceptions are relatively unbiased by self-interest or ideology and are not coloured by powerful emotions or experience. The unique or special experiences that we have had help us to see more clearly and more deeply into the truth of the world before us.
2. Other people who are fair and intelligent will generally come to share our views on the nature of reality to the extent that they are provided with the right kind of information and assess it in an open-minded and thoughtful manner
3. When people fail to come to the same conclusions that we have, it is the result of at least one of the following reasons.
 - (a) They have not received the right information.
 - (b) They have not made the effort to analyse the information properly.
 - (c) They are influenced by self-interest, ideology, or other distorting personal biases.

Our view was that once the true economic aspects of society were explained and debated thoroughly, the majority of people in Northern Ireland would cease their outdated and delinquent forms of British and Irish nationalism, become a united working class and follow the red brick road to socialism. We thought this could be achieved in a reasonable amount of time what would happen in the meantime we had not given much thought to. It is now evident that one of the greatest setbacks to compromise is that major political change and upheaval leads to confusion and tends to cause each community to close ranks in the safety of "our own people" against the "other crowd".

Those to the forefront of peace-building have recognised and realised, that no side can get what it wants without the other side's cooperation. Peace building is not built on the premise that communities 'like each other'; but that they need each other in order to advance their own community

interests. This is not to say that other types of peace- building, including those based on virtuous religious beliefs, do not have a role to play also.

A prerequisite for peace-building must be the acceptance by all involved, the British and Irish identities are of equal validity, the will of the majority is respected and that political violence is a thing of the past.

This naturally takes us to the very relevant three points of a recent "Community Dialogue Discussion Paper"

1. What do you want,
2. Why do you want it.
3. What can you live with, given that others disagree.

The misconception by the majority of mainstream parties "That all our troubles would end if only Nationalist could be convinced to behave like Unionists and vice versa". This must lead us to question the old certainties of a United Ireland and a United Kingdom e.g.

- (a) What is the feasibility of a Totally Independent United Ireland in the new and more Integrated Europe?
- (b) How can Northern Ireland be as "British as Finchley" in a United Kingdom that is becoming more Devolved and Regionalised?

The two governments must adopt a more honest and transparent attitude to these conflicting hypotheses, so that realistic peace building can flourish. We must all begin to consider scenarios that in the past were unthinkable.

In order for genuine and lasting peace to flourish, it is imperative that sectarianism be continuously challenged throughout all levels of our society.

When we formed An Eochair as an Ex-Prisoners Support Group we realised that the ultimate welfare of our members, their families and especially their children, would be best served by helping to build true peace through ongoing constructive dialogue.

In order to bring those on the margins of society to where they can play a meaningful role, it is imperative to create the necessary structures to that end. These structures could not be built without dialogue and compromise between communities, ultimately leading to the commencement of confronting our own sectarian attitudes. We realise this is no easy task, as sectarianism has been embedded in our every day lives. If only we could at least reach the realisation that the greatest injustice we would be responsible for, is to pass on our inherited sectarian attitudes to the next generation.

During the years since our cease-fire we made real attempts at negotiating compromise across the sectarian divide. Beginning in the early 1970s, discussions took place both in Long Kesh and outside with Loyalist paramilitaries and others. These endeavours bore some political benefits and more importantly saved lives on the ground. These contacts have continued intermittently from then until the present day.

A wide range of people would recognise that we are neither Nationalist nor Unionist in outlook. We believe we are in a position to play a distinctive role in cross community peace-building. Having no Party Political baggage we can go where it is not politically feasible for others yet to go.

- **CHARTER- Frankie Gallagher speech**

In 1998 it was agreed that both the Government of Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Ireland would put in place mechanisms to provide for an accelerated programme for the release of prisoners, including transferred prisoners, convicted of scheduled offences in Northern Ireland or in the case of those sentenced outside Northern Ireland, similar offences. Any such arrangements would protect the rights of individual prisoners under national and international law.

The first thing that we all must not forget is that in the 1994 and 1995 ceasefires all protagonists had for a long time come to the conclusion that this war could not be won but also all could claim that it had not been lost, so therefore, it was incumbent on all sides to bring an end to violence. End the futile lose of life and embark upon an exclusively peaceful road to settle political differences.

It was with this in mind that that the two governments acknowledged the need to put in the necessary mechanisms and resources to embark fully upon the road of conflict transformation and resolution. All publicly acknowledged that it had to be a fully inclusive process in the knowledge that communities were at different stages of development, and therefore may need different types of resources at different times. It was a process that had an open time line.

The political instability in Northern Ireland since the accelerated release of prisoners has increased in working class Loyalist communities. It is our belief that this is a direct result of weak political direction and leadership, weak community infrastructure (many areas have no infrastructure at all) and a dangerous neglect of social investment into the development of local people in these areas, leaving communities with very few options, volatile and open to exploitation.

This situation has been compounded by the fact that in Irish Republican communities, they have, through greater and longer sustained levels of social and economic investment, been able to develop stronger community infrastructure, develop leadership skills through which they have developed a stronger political leadership and direction and created options that make violent conflict counterproductive.

These two dynamics have created a dangerous situation, which has left the Unionist and Loyalist communities feeling marginalised and isolated with no benefit and more

importantly no sense of parity. It has given the impression that there were winners and losers and that the Unionist and Loyalist communities were the losers. The truth is though, that there were no winners, we all had to lose a bit for everyone to win in the long term.

Due to these serious imbalances of social and economic investment in the two communities, Loyalist communities are left languishing in a situation where they are unable, not refusing, but unable to play a meaningful role in future peace-building process and prosperity of their people. This situation is a major barrier to peace and must be addressed; especially if we are going to build a civic society where communities act civilly to one another and where human rights, equity and equality are the order of the day.

Never before has the need been greater for a co-ordinated and strategic approach to the positive development and regeneration of Loyalism, especially if we are to build a peace that is sustainable long into the future.

CHARTER (Community Having A Response To Economic Regeneration), has dedicated itself to championing the cause of peace-building through working at local levels, in wards that are in the top 20% of the most socially and economically deprived in Northern Ireland. CHARTER is a networking group with members from all over Northern Ireland who are all involved in community development.

Working relationships in Networks take years to establish; to make CHARTER an effective lobbying force may take up to five years hard work.

It was agreed that the organisation would adopt a new strategy with more appropriate focus on social, economic and political development. The network would work on the basis of five principles:

1. Interpret policy and legislation
2. Provide access to training
3. Inform Funding agencies of the aims and the programmes of CHARTER
4. Develop a process that would enhance communication between member groups.
5. Consider the resources available for economic opportunities locally and regionally

The sustaining of peace is the primary objective for CHARTER. This can only be achieved if the membership is able to see the tangible benefits of a peaceful society at local level and essentially this is what they do not see to date. A programme of education is vital in order to build confidence and accurately inform individuals across the province. Co-ordination of this learning is essential for uniform learning, agreement and positive response.

CHARTER seeks to work with members from all over Northern Ireland to focus attention on the development of communities; equip every-one involved with the appropriate skills to do so; reflect on the nature of a new type of environment and ultimately contribute to the building of civic, rather than ethnic, leadership in places where the probability of a resurgence of violence is high.

The irony for all those attending the most comprehensive conference to date for ex-prisoner groups and the wider community, is that while we all present our views and options of how we hope to create a peaceful future our political leaders only a mile away are closing the doors on each other.

It is quite clear that the Governments have not fulfilled their obligation to the Loyalist communities and by failing to do so have added to a serious situation in a conflict transformation process.

This situation must be addressed if our communities are to have the capacity and confidence to stop our communities falling into criminality and be able to live in a civil, civic and peaceful society.

- **Coiste na n-Iarchimí - Mike Ritchie speech**

I am director of Coiste na n-Iarchimí, the national network of republican ex-prisoners.

We have a positive story to tell about our work.

"Re-integration" of ex-prisoners into their communities is done! And we have created a positive force for change, community and ex-prisoner empowerment.

We have developed a network comprising 65 staff, providing direct services to 2,000 people annually. We positively touch the lives of over 10,000 people a year whether:

- they leave their children in our creche in Clones (known locally as Long Krèche!!); or
- they build their fitness in the ATA gym in Derry; or
- they avail of a Coiste organised political tour throughout the island; or
- they are students who speak to us for our insight into the history of republicanism or our role in peace building; or
- they have an aromatherapy session in Tar Anall, Belfast; or
- they participate in our network's youth programmes

The transition to politics by republican ex-prisoners is complete. They are proud of their involvement in armed struggle during the conflict and are committed to political advancement in support of the peace process now.

In relation to funding, all groups are considering how to sustain their projects beyond Peace II. They are interacting with statutory bodies to explore mainstreaming potential; our projects are taking their place in the community sector and arguing their case. They have become driving forces in their communities seeking to empower and enhance people's lives. This continues the contribution which ex-prisoners have always made to local community development.

We encourage commitment to peace-building. All groups and ex-prisoners are committed to this as an intrinsic part of the process of national reconciliation. We

engage in dialogue and break down misconceptions. Ex-prisoners are, in fact the "middle managers of the peace process in local communities". An example of our approach is the inclusive proposals for the future of the jail at Long Kesh. Our Peace Campus idea – which incorporates a museum on part of the site at which all stakeholders can tell their story – is an indication of the confidence of the republican ex-prisoner community.

Notwithstanding this positive contribution, we are still waiting for full citizenship in legal terms. The effect of the "criminal" record in a wide variety of life from employment through to adoption needs to be addressed. There is a responsibility on both governments across Ireland to fulfil the Good Friday Agreement commitment in this regard.

But this doesn't stop ex-prisoners from being involved in promoting justice, peace and community empowerment. National reconciliation is the objective through dialogue and politics. It is an objective to which ex-prisoners are determined to make their contribution.

Ex-prisoners refuse to be passive.

They are agents of change not objects of transition.

- **EPIC – Tom Roberts speech**

It is now six years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed and all of us are acutely aware of the difficulties that have thwarted its full implementation. The in phrase at the moment is "acts of completion". However in relation to addressing issues relating to politically motivated ex-prisoners and their families the question "When do we begin?" seems more appropriate.

Both the British and Irish Governments have failed to address the legislative barriers that prevent former prisoners resuming full citizenship. The situation has become even more absurd since the Good Friday Agreement. We have ex-prisoners serving the public in District Councils, the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and elected to Westminster; an ex-prisoner is considered suitable to head a Northern Ireland Government department, yet other ex-prisoners are deemed, under current legislation, unsuitable to drive a taxi.

Employment is only one area where discrimination against former prisoners exists. The Compensation Agency, under the current legislation, denies former prisoners compensation in respect of Criminal Injuries and Criminal Damage. The following are just two examples of the discriminatory practices that exist:

- An ex-prisoner whose best avenue for employment was in the road haulage industry applied for a Road Freight Operator's Licence and was refused because he was considered not to be of 'good repute' because of his 'conviction'.

- EPIC's new premises in Craven Street, Shankill Road were seriously damaged by an arson attack carried out by a paramilitary organisation (UFF). Despite being awarded a Chief Constable's Certificate in respect of this, the Compensation Agency refused compensation on the grounds that one of the trustees of the building is an ex-prisoner. This particular ex-prisoner is a public representative and an MLA - another illustration of the ludicrous situation that exists in relation to ex-prisoners!

Other examples of institutional barriers are:

- Pension Restrictions
- Ineligibility for employment in many sectors including the Civil Service. In relation to the security forces this can even be extended to include children and relatives.
- Difficulties in respect of loans from Banks and Building Societies
- Restrictions on International Travel
- Accessing PSV Licenses
- Ineligibility of ex-prisoners and their partners to adopt or foster children

EPIC, since its inception in 1995, have consistently worked on addressing the issues that prevent politically motivated ex-prisoners resuming full citizenship. Unfortunately, the major barriers requiring legislative change still remain and show no sign of being seriously addressed.

In recent months governments and some political parties have been calling for the disbandment of paramilitary groupings. If the peace were consolidated to the point where paramilitary groupings no longer felt the need to exist this call could be taken seriously. Those of us who work at the cutting edge of conflict transformation know that the reality is somewhat different. With the political institutions down, the tensions on the interfaces and the resulting instability, communities will feel the need to retain the capacity to defend themselves for the foreseeable future. One could even argue that if the retention of paramilitaries, albeit in a mode of non-aggression, contributes to stability within communities it would be no bad thing. However, we should all aspire to a society where paramilitarism is consigned to history but at the same time approach the issue with a sense of pragmatism and realism.

Former paramilitary activists should be given the opportunity to play full and meaningful roles in all aspects of society, free from the prohibitive discrimination that presently exists. It is ironic that those most vociferous in calling for the disbandment of paramilitary groupings are also the most vociferous in their opposition to the legislative change necessary to facilitate this transformation.

It has been estimated that upwards of fifteen thousand Loyalists have been imprisoned over the course of the conflict. If their immediate and extended families are taken into account then it is evident that a considerable section of our society is affected by the

discriminatory practices that currently exist. Clearly, this situation needs addressed if we are serious in building a just and peaceful future for all of our people.

There is a widespread perception within the ex-prisoner population that their legitimate concerns are no longer being taken seriously. Many former prisoners who made a positive contribution to the peace process have the view that they have outlived their usefulness. Indeed, the wider population in working class loyalist districts, from where the majority of ex-prisoners originate, have the view that the Good Friday Agreement has had no significant impact on the quality of their lives. It is now viewed as a middle class agreement.

It is imperative that government address the legitimate concerns of ex-prisoners and their communities of origin if widespread disenfranchisement is to be avoided. Let's have an "act of completion" in respect of this.

- **Teach Na Failte - Gerard Murray speech**

First let me say that we in Teach Na Failte are pleased at the convening of today's conference. It can surely only be to the good for us all to take stock of where we are and where we are going.

10 years into a peace process we seem no nearer to so-called acts of completion. Regardless of the wider political situation ex-Political Prisoners still find them selves discriminated against. The range of discriminations against ex-prisoners is clear. But when will they be removed? The peace process was about ending conflict and creating a new beginning.

How can that be when the past, our own political past hangs over us like a dead weight affecting the whole ex-prisoner population?

We all need to build an inclusive society that respects diversity and difference- celebrates our cultures and works for the benefit of all. That can not happen when a sizeable section of the population- who have made in the past ten years a massive positive contribution to Peace-building- feel that they are left out of the loop.

Politically motivated prisoners usually come from areas of high social need where whole communities suffer exclusion, unemployment and the effects of political conflict. These have a negative impact on released prisoners who are faced with multiple barriers to reintegration. Research has shown that

- 61% of released prisoners were unemployed
- 75% had no educational qualifications
- 97% imprisonment had disrupted the development of work based skills
- 87% imprisonment had disrupted their personal development
- 97% imprisonment had increased their concerns over personal security
- 88% stated no help was available to them from government or other agencies, during or after their imprisonment
- 55% had spent more than one term in prison
- 75% stated that family had been the victims of armed attacks

Now we in Teach Na Failte fully accept the consequences of our past actions. We did the time. We don't see our selves as helpless victims. We believe however that those

of us desperately willing to make a positive contribution to our society should at least start out on a level playing pitch.

Our own republican socialist prisoners suffered discrimination in jail from republicans and others. The legacy of the distrust has taken a long time to heal. Past conflicts cause deep wounds. We have had to face up to that within Teach Na Failte. We had to recognise that there could be no reaching out to others until we faced up to the legacies of our own existence.

Frankly this has not been an easy journey. For many of us it has been a bitter and painful experience. Nevertheless that journey has been necessary. Without that experience we would not be here today at this conference.

Teach Na Failte may have started late in the process and we have been trying to catch up big time with the bewildering array of funding applications processes etc. They certainly have been blocks to progress.

Sometimes assumptions are made that Teach Na Failte can speak for "others" i.e. the INLA. It cannot nor does it. It really is unfair particularly for the media and opportunist politicians to bracket ex-prisoner groups with armed groups.

In choosing to work in Teach Na Failte we are committed to

'Helping to heal past divisions amongst and between ex-prisoners and lobbying for the social economic and political interests of those same ex-prisoners. Teach Na Failte sees the importance of involving the wider family structures of the ex-prisoner population in the process of reconciliation, healing and Peace-building.'

As ex-INLA prisoners we have insights and experiences that are unique to our constituency. We have been pursuing a vigorous programme of politicisation and have developed a network of conflict resolution skills based ex-prisoners. These Ex-prisoners can give advice, the value of their experience and insights to the INLA but can not dictate or speak for them. We are not the INLA by proxy. But this we can say. The INLA have listened to us and are listening to us.

Regardless of the rights or wrongs of the past the vast amount of knowledge skill experience insights and sensitivities of the ex-prisoner population can be put to the service of our society. I hope all of us here today are not just Conference junkies-paid by someone else to go to many conferences-see the same people, eat the food, say the same polite things and go back to our respective ghettos and do nothing.

If today's conference is to have lasting value then it should help ease the barriers to re-integration, and allow all of us working in partnership with each other whether in the voluntary community or state sector to make a difference to the land we love.

Thank you.