

Community Dialogue

Report of dialogue in Belfast Unemployed Centre 28 Feb 02

Present: Anne Carr (Co-facilitator), Brian Lennon (Co-facilitator), Bernie Laverty, Gareth Higgins, John Hoey, Eileen Captain, Marion Kane, Beatrice Boyd, Gerry McDonnell, Barney O'Loughlin.

Apologies: Christine McDonnell, Theresa Cullen, Pat Campbell, Meta Auden.

1. Introductions: Brian asked people to introduce themselves briefly.

2. Background to Community Dialogue: Anne gave a short background to Community Dialogue.

3. Ground rules: Brian mentioned some ground rules which were accepted by all participants. Among these were:

- Confidentiality: nothing said can be attributed to any participant
- Respect for person is vital.

3. Decisions:

a. We decided to alter the time of the meeting from 6.00 to 6.30 and end at 8.30. We will continue to meet on the fourth Thursday of each month from with sandwiches supplied by Community Dialogue. **Note the new start time**

b. The next meeting will be on **Thursday 28 Mar 02 from 6.30 to 8.30 p.m.**

4. Dialogue:

We asked people what were the most pressing issues for them. Among the points made were:

- Constitutional change
 - The forthcoming census figures are likely to show an increase in the Catholic population. The media hype has increased Unionist fears.
 - A proportion of Catholics would choose to stay in the UK.
 - A successful referendum for a United Ireland could happen within 15 years.
 - At partition the nation was divided. This was the key cause of the conflict. We now need a new society without this source of division.
 - We should not get fixated on territory. A nation can have citizens in different territories.
 - Both sides say they are inclusive. But in fact what is missing is any attempt at courtship. I don't feel courted by Unionists and Republicans are not courting Unionists.
 - What would courting mean in our context? In part it would mean understanding each others' fears and trying to meet them. Some in Sinn Fein have opened up new avenues to Unionists but Unionists remain closed to Catholics.
 - Republicans have to sell the idea of a United Ireland to Unionists, and take on their fears. I see a United Ireland as inevitable but we need dialogue in order to move towards it. We need a United Ireland in order to have sovereignty, e.g. we need to be able to make decisions about going to war, or not doing so, so issues of neutrality are important. Republicans would be open to a 9 county Ulster, but this, as with other structures would have to be put to the people.
 - Does the South want a United Ireland?
 - Do Northern Nationalists want a United Ireland? Most would be happy if they could show they were Irish in Northern Ireland.

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- Why not ask Republicans to join us Unionists in a new UK?
- By joining the EEC in 1973 both the UK and the South gave up the idea of an independent nation state.
- We need to get away from a fixation with territory; a nation can have citizens who live in a different state.
- As someone living in the North I was always told we had to accept the decision of the majority about constitutional arrangements. Now when it looks like Catholics are going to be a majority the rules are changing. It's terrible if Loyalists won't accept democracy.

➤ Identity

- If people want to be British they are entitled to this and they will still have this right in a new Ireland.
- Many British people see their Britishness not being accommodated now because of the way the Agreement is being implemented.
- Republicans in 1921 were forced into a Northern Ireland against their will. Is there not something to be learnt from this so that British people are not forced into a United Ireland against their will?
- When the 1916 proclamation was issued all the children of the nation were Irish. Now some are British and some Irish.
- Nationalists feel unfree in Northern Ireland. We don't want British people to feel the same.
- People talk about everyone being Irish, but the term 'Irish' meant something different in 1916 or 1921 from what it means now. Then everyone was part of the UK. Now the island is partitioned.
- Many of us who are British do not see our British identity being accommodated now in Northern Ireland.
- The thing that really matters is process. Twenty years ago I saw myself as Irish. Now I see myself as British. I am self-determined: that's what self-determination means. The Agreement does not respect this process of self-determination. I changed from seeing myself as Irish because of Republican violence.
- In the sectarian context of Northern Ireland you can't choose your nationality. It's bred into you to be anti-Catholic or anti-Irish.
- People who are British are not all anti-Irish. I grew up being British. I celebrated St. Patrick's Day. But it was in the context of being British.
- There are two completely different ideas of being Irish: one is Irish within the context of the island. That can be a geographical idea, or a political idea. The other is being Irish within the context of the UK, just as there are English, Scottish and Welsh people within the UK.
- But the British State would see Irish people as being subservient.
- Initially the nation was colonised. Then it was divided. That is the key cause of all the problems. Dividing the nation has been the key cause of the divisions within the people. Only when partition is gone will we be able to move forward.
- Some of us who are neither Unionists nor Nationalists are excluded. Some of our disagreements are about a lack of knowledge about the past.
- In the 1950s there wasn't such bitterness between Protestants and Catholics but still Unionists would not let Catholics join the UUP. Now middle-class Unionists would keep their children from school if Martin McGuinness turned up.
- The Protestant working class were fooled by middle-class Unionists.
- If we could get away from the sectarianism we could get working-class unity.
- As a Unionist I look forward to a realignment of politics on a class basis.

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➤ Violence

- Republicans need to answer the question: how were they cherishing all the children of the nation equally? My father was seen as a legitimate target. How does this fit with cherishing people equally? There have been sporadic statements of regret.
- Republicans would say: there were two sets of protagonists in the war. It's an unfortunate reality of life that people go to war and people get killed. The victims were victims of failed policies of the past and until we get the politics right violence will be an option in the future.
- A lot of people think that the violence of the past did not satisfy the criteria for a just war. Was diplomacy exhausted in advance of going to war? A lot of us would not agree that the violence can be called a war.
- People say they are against violence and they condemn paramilitaries, but in the next breath they support the US attacking terrorists.
- But you can't blame the whole Catholic community for Republican violence. And remember, the Catholic community has suffered too.

➤ N. Belfast

- I campaigned for years for traffic calming measures without success. But within three weeks of the schools dispute they started work on them. This makes people say that violence pays.
- Violence does pay: it's a fact of life. For example delinquents can get better treatment than other kids.
- The hurt people feel over the schools issue makes it really hard to talk.
- How much of the Government's response is real. They put in CCTV at the top of Alliance. But who has access to the tapes? A lot of the proposals are pie in the sky. They promised a 40 foot peace wall.
- There's more fear now.
- Protestants think they're getting a raw deal in N. Belfast. In fact Ardoyne houses are older than those in Glenbryn. People are being fed myths.

End