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Coiste na nIarchimí

JANUARY - MARCH 2007 VOLUME 9 ISSUE 1



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## Learning from the republican experience

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# Learning from the republican experience

**In a year that has already witnessed historic events - and it's still only April - this visit was another first; republican former prisoners strolling through West Belfast on a sunny, spring afternoon in conversation with senior police officers**

**O**n Monday 2 April Coiste staff members met with four visitors who had just arrived that morning from England. The group included two Muslim community representatives, AbdurRahmaan Anderson who works for the prison service and is trustee of Brixton Mosque, and Toaha Qureshi chair of Stockwell Green Community Services and trustee of Stockwell Mosque. They were accompanied by two senior police officers from the Metropolitan Police (Lambeth Borough), Martin Bridger, Chief Superintendent and Mark Rowland, Strategic Performance Manager.

The group was on a visit to Belfast to discover lessons about how communities can be alienated from a police service and they were eager to learn about the experiences of former republican prisoners.

Having shown them a little of the Falls Road we then sat down in Tar Anall for a two-hour discussion on our experiences of policing.

Following the meeting Martin Bridger commented,

"As Metropolitan Police Borough Commander for Lambeth I'm committed to working alongside all sections of our community to build a strong partnership that properly reflects our community's needs and allows that community to shape ways to prevent violence.

Having previously worked in the Police Ombudsman's office in Belfast I was keen to see how

diverse groups in Belfast are now coming together to find lasting solutions to protect all within their communities from harm. We were very grateful for the time and insights offered by Laurence, Dominic and Rosena which will inform and help progress our partnership work here in Lambeth."

In a year that has already witnessed historic events - and it's still only April - this visit was another first; republican former prisoners strolling through West Belfast on a sunny, spring afternoon in conversation with senior police officers.

Elsewhere, others were getting on with the work of revamping the Assembly. New Ministers have been named. Two of them, Conor Murphy and Gerry Kelly are former political prisoners, as is Martin McGuinness, the incoming Deputy First Minister.

Of the 25 other members of Sinn Féin elected to the Assembly 10 of them are also former prisoners - Martina Anderson, Raymond McCartney (Chair of Coiste), Fra McCann, Alex Maskey, Jennifer McCann, Gerry Adams, Francie Brolly, Paul Butler, Caral Ní Chuilín (Treasurer of Coiste and formerly Coordinator of Tar Anall) and Barry McElDuff.

Besides elected members, numerous other former republican prisoners play important advisory and support positions in the Assembly including Jackie McMullan, former staff member of Coiste and currently advisor to the (designated) Minister for Education, Caitriona Ruane (see

Pages 10-13 for interview with Jackie). Leaving aside former prisoners who are now prominent in the political institutions countless others have played an invaluable role helping bring about the historic developments we are now witnessing.

Despite these realities and the significant achievements and ground-breaking political developments of recent times legal and discriminatory barriers still affect former political prisoners on account of them having a conviction. These range from accessing employment to availing of services that everyone else takes for granted.

And this at a time when we have the unique situation where the First Minister in the Assembly and the Deputy First Minister are both former prisoners - Ian Paisley served time in Crumlin Road Prison Belfast though later benefited from an amnesty. The situation would be hilarious if it wasn't so serious.

Coiste has campaigned over many years to gain full citizenship for former political prisoners. There has been much lobbying and deliberation on the issue and significant consensus arrived at. However, as yet there has been no visible result.

If long time opponents can reach agreement on a new way forward for the North of Ireland and its people surely it is now time for the British and Irish governments to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

Laurence McKeown



Dominic Adams, Rosie McCorley, Rosena Brown and Laurence McKeown pictured with Yvonne Murphy of the Linen Hall Library

## An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice compilation editions

**I**n 1989 the first issue of An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice was published by republican prisoners. The magazine was written and edited in its entirety within the jails and printed and distributed on the outside by Sinn Féin's POW Department. Intended to be a quarterly it was never published more than three times in any one year but over the course of its ten year history a total of 26 editions was printed.

The magazine contained a very diverse content, including political analysis, short stories, poetry, art work, satire, an update on prison campaigns, and much more. Sensitive or controversial issues such as homosexuality and gay prisoners, and relationships between prisoners and their partners on the outside were never shied away from.

Coiste na nIarchimí is currently involved in publishing a collected works of the material from the 26 editions and on Wednesday 7 February presented Yvonne Murphy, Librarian of the Political Collection at the Linen Hall Library Belfast, with copies of the first two volumes containing political articles relating to the conflict in Ireland. Later publications will focus on other content - editorials, creative writings, a history of prison campaigns etc.

*'The state is not sustained by force alone ... The media, the education system, the churchmen and politicians all play their part in guarding against the dissemination of revolutionary ideas ... Thus, the gaols have been the arena for a different struggle - the struggle through education. Time and a common purpose have enabled us to study the nature of the world in which we live and to educate ourselves to become better able to bring about change in the Ireland of today ... We hope our Captive Voice will be heard by all those who share our vision of freedom in a socialist Republic.'*

An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice was published over a ten year period - the last edition being published just a few months before the closure of Long Kesh in 2000 - and stands as an historical record of the development within the prisons and the manner in which prisoners debated difficult subjects and engaged with contemporary issues.

Copies of the first two volumes of the collected works entitled, 'Political Issues in Ireland' are available from Coiste na nIarchimí, 10 Beechmount Avenue, Belfast. Price £3 per volume or both volumes for £5 plus p&p.

The editorial of the first edition >>>  
of the magazine read;

**C**oiste, through its vibrant Political Tourism Initiative, has been hosting many education groups from around the world and indeed closer to home over a number of years. Recently there has been a change in funding for the development of the project and along with that a change and expansion of staff. Traditionally the project had two staff members based in Belfast, Caoimhin Mac Giolla Mhin and Ciara Adams, but thanks to new funding from the Community Foundation the project now boasts a staff of five dedicated workers who are spread throughout the North.

In Belfast, Gráinne, Padraic and Seán are based in Coiste's main office; in Derry, Ruairí is based in Tar Abhaile offices; and in South Armagh, in the scenic surroundings of the Tí Chulainn Centre of Mullach Bán, is Ciara. The commencement of this project marks a very exciting time for Coiste's Political Tourism Initiative. Not only are the new staff members tasked with contributing to the development of Political Tourism in their respective areas but they also get the opportunity to contribute to increasing the levels of skills within the ex-prisoner community. This project is primarily a training focused project, aimed at building the capacity of the ex-prisoner community to develop a professional Irish Political Tourism product. The training project will be developed in two stages with the first stage seeing the Trainee Development Officers and five other ex-prisoners completing the NVQ Level III in Tourist Guiding. The Development Officers will also be tasked with

working alongside linguists to develop a multi-lingual 'Welcome Guide' and CD for future tour-guides to train with. The second phase of the training programme will see each of the outreach areas rolling out an entire package of tourism related courses. These will include an NIOCN accredited Political Tourism course, designed and delivered by Coiste's Political Tourism staff, Emergency First Aid and Customer Care training, web design training and marketing, and merchandise training to name but a few.

We hope this targeted training programme will produce a significant pool of tour guides throughout

# »» Irish

placed to build on Caoimhin's success. The Republican Ex-Prisoner Walking Tours are also still ongoing in West Belfast, as are the larger group tours which can be tailored to suit specific interests. We can incorporate Belfast (including the Shankill), Derry, South Armagh and further afield into our group tours. Optional extras on these group tours include; meetings with ex-prisoners, DVD's, meals, accommodation and transport. If you are

## **GRÁINNE MASKEY** Training Co-ordinator

I come from a republican ex-prisoner family background and I am really happy to now have the opportunity to work for the interests of the ex-prisoner community, particularly in such an environment where we also get the opportunity to educate both domestic and international visitors about republican history and current issues.

Since leaving university I have worked in a community based environment and I have had extensive experience of

## »» MEET THE FIVE STAFF FOR THE IRISH POLIT



**Gráinne Maskey**



**Pádraic McCotter**



**Ciara Reel**

the North to respond to the growing demand for political tourism. Throughout the lifetime of the project the Trainee Development Officers will also be working to develop and market the tourism product in their specific areas. The project has been lucky to start off on a very positive footing and we are well

interested in becoming a Political Tourist Guide or have any queries about booking a tour or a place on our training programme, then please do not hesitate to get in touch with me on 028 9020 0770 or by e-mail at [grainne@coiste.com](mailto:grainne@coiste.com).

*Gráinne Maskey*  
Training Co-ordinator

working in both the training and tourism sectors. Through my role as Tourism Training Co-ordinator in Fáilte Feirste Thiar I have become passionate about contributing to the development of local tourism. Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and people have a natural interest in areas of former political unrest. I am looking forward to the

# Political Tours

challenge of harnessing this potential and not only getting our republican message heard by various audiences but increasing the skills levels and helping to create employment opportunities within the republican ex-prisoner community.

**PÁDRAIC MCCOTTER**  
Trainee Development Officer - Belfast

As a former republican prisoner I have been doing political tours for Coiste for 3 years. Before that, as a member of Belfast National Graves, I was taking tours of

potential that is there.

**CIARA REEL**  
Trainee Development Officer - South Armagh

I have worked with several community groups over the years helping to foster good community relations within the South Armagh area. I have experience of organising talks, debates and educational events for the area's youth with leading figures from within the community. Within South Armagh I hope the Coiste Project will highlight the potential of this small area, not only its

well-established Coiste Tours in Belfast.

**RUAIRÍ O'HEARA**  
Trainee Development Officer - Derry

I began working with the Foyle language centre in 1996 as an activity co-ordinator for foreign students. There I began to deliver historical and political tours of the Bogside and Free Derry area and organise cultural and educational trips to Donegal's Gaeltacht areas. I also worked with the famous Paddy Wagon tours, bringing large groups of back packers

Hunger Strikes. It has now been transformed into a modern, vibrant estate of major political interest to international and local people. I am now happy to be working with Coiste Irish political tours. Through my position with Coiste I hope to help connect all the political tourism projects throughout Ireland and create tourism-training programmes for ex-prisoners and their families. This will generate much needed employment for Republican ex prisoners whilst allowing Irish people to tell the story of how the conflict with Britain has affected their communities.

**SEAN Mac BRADAIGH**  
Administrator

I have been working with the Coiste political tours project for about three years. Initially I became involved as a tour guide and was drawn to the project because I see it as an essential educational tool for our local community and international guests. My family have, over the generations, felt the effects of British occupation with my Grandfather, Mother and Father and many of my extended family having been imprisoned for IRA activity and political activism which meant that raids and arrests were a common thing for me growing up. Therefore it was quite natural for me to become involved in political and community activism. I believe that the most important aspect of the tours is their ability to make people look at Irish history critically and not accept the mainstream (often biased) interpretation. I know that the tours can educate and open eyes as to the causes of conflict in Ireland and can also further internationalise the struggle of the Irish people. I am looking forward to working with Coiste and with others in our community to see the Irish political tours project achieve its full potential. Go n-éirí linn.

## POLITICAL TOURS INITIATIVE



Ruairí O'Heara

Sean Mac Bradaigh

Republican graves in Milltown Cemetery. I have a keen interest in Irish history and politics and this complements my post as a tour guide. Because of the number of tourists coming to Belfast I think it is important that Republicans give their view of the conflict and with my post as Trainee Development Officer I believe I am in an excellent position to fulfil the

political history but also its cultural history which was forgotten about through a negative media spin; that it may break down the barriers placed around it and allow people make up their own mind. I believe my role within Coiste is to build up the tourism project in South Armagh and also provide a link to offer different things to the already

from around the world to the Bogside and Creggan areas, organising political tours, and facilitating talks by political activists and political ex-prisoners. I then went on to help set up and manage Free Derry Tours. The 'Free Derry' area has been directly involved in many of the key events of the troubles including Bloody Sunday, the Battle of the Bogside and the

# Living with Diversity

**The perspectives Laurence shared were for many people powerful as they had no concept of what happened during the hunger strikes and the context of Northern Ireland during that time. His talk challenged many myths.**

**'L**iving with Diversity' is an experiential learning programme designed for those who have an interest in developing leadership of common citizenship which speaks of open debate, pluralism and equity, and which breaks 'silence' about the unpalatable implications of contested space. The programme creates opportunities for individuals to address personal, community and societal issues relating to the Northern Ireland context. The programme is accredited through the Open College Network at level 3 with 9 credits.

#### **THE PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAMME IS TO:**

- equip educationalists with skills, knowledge and values to support the improvement of community relations in their contexts.
- provide an opportunity for personal development while exploring issues and concepts such as inequality, interdependence, diversity and reconciliation.
- explore a range of approaches and medias that contribute to the development of a shared society.
- reflect on themes that are relevant in a Northern Ireland context e.g. healing, democracy, citizenship, political discussion, conflict, awareness of prejudice and discrimination.

The programme has run several times in the last 10 years. More recently the



Laurence pictured with Nicola during the tour of Long Kesh

programme has been delivered in partnership with the YMCA Ireland twice. This partnership secured participants from the informal and formal education sector along with PSNI personnel which supported multi agency learning.

The programme focuses on the concept of remembering, posing questions to us in relation to what we remember; focusing on our selective histories. To this end, we invited Laurence from Coiste to speak on his experiences of the conflict and his perspectives on remembering, forgiveness and healing. He spoke honestly and for many members in the group they struggled to 'hear' fully what was being said as their selective histories were being challenged. The perspectives Laurence shared were for many people powerful as they had no concept of what happened during the hunger

strikes and the context of Northern Ireland during that time. His talk challenged many myths.

As a result of talking to Laurence he mentioned the Maze/Long Kesh as a place to visit. As soon as I heard this I contacted OFMDFM and got dates to visit.

Laurence agreed to accompany us.

The visit itself was amazing; the learning and the ability to picture the prison when it was being used was easy to capture. It brought alive a huge chunk of our history. The whole experience with Laurence has been so worthwhile from a learning point.

His approach and the space developed created opportunities for prejudices to be challenged and knowledge to be gained and some shift in attitudes. Individuals had new lenses to reflect on the society here.

**Nicola Lynagh**

## » KINGS COLLEGE LONDON

Since 2002 the 'Northern Ireland Troubles' has been one of the most heavily subscribed courses taught in the History department at King's College London. Taught by Dr Ian McBride, originally from Armagh, the course examines the political, social and cultural dimensions of the Troubles in an attempt to understand the causes of the conflict and the failure of successive governments to find a peaceful solution to the problem. Topics include the partition of Ireland, discrimination under the Stormont regime, the Civil Rights Movement, the Provisional IRA and the emergence of the 'armed struggle', popular loyalism, and the development of the peace process. The students come from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds, and the department has been consistently ranked among the very highest in the UK for both research and teaching.

One innovation in recent years



Dr Ian McBride with Laurence McKeown and a number of students

has been a series of seminars with outside speakers, ranging from former Secretary of State for NI, Peter Brooke; former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble; and former republican prisoner Patrick Magee. In particular, students are keen to hear Republican perspectives on the conflict, since these are poorly represented in the academic literature. On 1 March Dr Laurence McKeown from Coiste na nIarchimí accepted an invite to discuss the role of prisoners in the conflict and their current role of helping to deal with the legacy of the conflict. Students were also keen to find out more about Laurence's personal

background, his involvement in the H-Block struggle and hunger strike, and to learn of recent developments in the peace process.

Dr Ian McBride had this to say of the event.

"I constantly have to remind myself that the students who take this class were born around 1987. They have no real memory of IRA bombs in England, or even the Good Friday Agreement, and they come to the subject with very few preconceptions. They have a greater understanding of the Republican Movement and a much more detached, analytical appreciation of the IRA's campaign than would have been possible ten or twenty years ago. This understanding has been deepened by Laurence's visit, and his willingness to provide them with such an open, stimulating and good-humoured account of his own past. One email I received afterwards described the session as "absolutely fascinating as well as very challenging. I thought it a great success."



Pictured at one of the many memorials remembering the Irish who died in the first World War

## » YOUTH PROJECT

In February, Coiste's PNB youth programme embarked on a project with 16 young republicans from Fermanagh, Derry, Monaghan, Dublin and Belfast. The young people visited Kilmainham Gaol, Arbour Hill and the GPO in Dublin. While there they engaged in discussions on the 1916 Rising and, in particular, the views of James Connolly in relation to the First World War. This was a precursor to a later trip to Messines in Belgium where the participants visited battle sites relating to the First

World War where Irish people died fighting for the British army. Discussions also took place there round the theme of Irishmen fighting for the British army whilst their fellow citizens were involved in an uprising against British rule in Ireland.

The participants will receive an accredited award from the Open College Network for their participation in the project.

Dominic Adams



# Tour of 1798

**The Rebellion of 1798 was heavily influenced by the American and French revolutions and the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity**

**O**n Saturday 24th February, as part of our ongoing engagements, Coiste hosted a tour of historic sites relating to the rebellion of 1798. Our party included members of the Unionist party, former loyalist prisoners, various church groups and their friends.

The first place we visited was Clifton Street Cemetery where Jack Duffin and Philip Orr, our tour guides for the day, gave a short talk on the history of the rebellion informing us that over 30,000 people were killed in one year. Jack told us how the Planters struck to proclaim their Irishness and independence from England while still clinging to their ancestry and English Roots. The rebellion of 1798 was heavily influenced by the American and French

revolutions and the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Thomas Russell, one of the leaders of the rebellion, saw this as a worldwide struggle for democracy. We were taken to the grave of William Drennan, a Medical Doctor, and another of the leaders of the rebellion. The inscription on his gravestone reads: *Pure, just, benign thus filial love would brace The virtues hallowing this narrow space The Emerald Isle may grant a wider claim And link the patriot with his country's name.*

We then moved to the grave of Rev. Steele Dickson, a Presbyterian Minister and a General of the United Irishmen who wrote the scripture of politics and ended up in prison for his republican views.

At this point the question was asked if the remains of Henry Joy McCracken,

another leading United Irishman, were indeed buried in Clifton St Cemetery. Jack replied that Henry Joy was hanged at Cornmarket and buried in St George's Church at the corner of High Street. It was later claimed, however, that his body was re-buried at Clifton Street Cemetery with his sister Mary Anne. He added that more women than appreciated took part in the rising.

We then travelled to the cemetery at Mallusk on the outskirts of Belfast to the grave of Jemmy Hope who fought at the Battle of Antrim and was the last to leave the battlefield. He died in 1847 and what was interesting was that he called his children Robert Emmet and Henry Joy Hope. In 1968 his grave was vandalised by loyalists during the time of the Burntolllet march.

The next stop was at Craigargon Hill where, on the 7th June 1798, over 7,000



Pictured at the tour of historic sites relating to the rebellion of 1798 which included members of the Unionist party, former loyalist prisoners, various church groups and their friends and which was hosted by Coiste



# sites of battle

United Irishmen assembled at 4am in the morning and where the 'tree of liberty', which was planted at the time, is still standing. Then we moved to Templepatrick and to the grave of William Orr who was hung in Carrickfergus. As his body was brought to Templepatrick the funeral route was 'policed' by Dragoons and Yeomanry. In the book 'Remember Orr' he is reported as saying: "I am no traitor; I die a persecuted man for a persecuted country". Our guide for this part of the tour was Martin McManus who informed us that some of the monuments there were erected by Antrim Council at the behest of a former Unionist Mayor of Antrim. Martin himself was presented with a gold pike from the Mayor of Wexford.

Our tour then took us to Antrim Town where we were given a great account of the battle which took place there.

All places of interest were pointed out and so detailed was the account that we all felt we were in the middle of the battle itself.

After a hearty lunch we made our way to Saintfield, which according to our guides was a hotbed of United Irishmen. In 1792, the people had a large bonfire to celebrate Bastille Day of the French Revolution. The rebels were led by The Reverend Lesley Birch. A major battle was won by the United Irishmen but they suffered heavy casualties and the graveyard at Saintfield contains a mass grave where the dead from both sides are buried. There were also two marked graves nearby of men involved in the battle who died later of their wounds.

We went on to view McKee's cottage which was attacked by the United Irishmen who believed that McKee was an informer responsible for the attack at

Saintfield. Eleven occupants were killed in the cottage. For this deed, twelve United Irishmen were hanged. The Battle of Ballinahinch followed on from this but by then the English army had reinforced by thousands. The United Irishmen were militarily defeated and the English army invoked huge punishments on the people of Antrim by burning hundreds of cottages and killing thousands of people.

The tour came to an end with people wanting more. Some of the group forged new links and made new friends. We have received great feedback and encouraging correspondence. Mary writes, "I had a marvellous time and learnt so many facts that I didn't know about." Michael says, "It was a most interesting and enjoyable day and it has made me want to know more."

Rosena Brown

**"I had a marvellous time and learnt so many facts that I didn't know about. It was a most interesting and enjoyable day and it has made me want to know more."**



» INTERVIEW WITH ..... »»

# Jackie McMullan



**Former republican prisoner Jackie McMullan** was born in Belfast in 1956. Arrested in May 1976 he served 16 years in the H Blocks of Long Kesh and was released in 1992. In 1981 he spent 48 days on hunger strike during which ten of his comrades died. For several years he worked with Coiste as Political Education Officer. Recently he was appointed Special Advisor to Caitriona Ruane, Minister for Education in the NI Assembly.

Mick Beyers spoke to Jackie for Coiste.comm.



**Jackie, what will your new role entail?**

I don't think anybody knows exactly what it will entail; it's a work in progress. Basically I'll be shadowing Caitriona, attending ministerial functions with her, discussing the issues and trying to develop policy with her. I'll be providing primarily political advice and also acting as a bridge between her and the different party structures as well as the Sinn Fein Assembly team and other members of the Executive.

**Do you see a tie in between your new role and your previous work with Coiste as political education officer? Is this in some sense a natural progression from your involvement with the political education program in prison?**

That's interesting. I personally hadn't thought about it but Caitriona mentioned it to me yesterday. We were at a teachers' conference in Cork and some people asked me if I had any background in education. I'd answered, "No" that I didn't, assuming that they were talking about the state education system. Caitriona asked me afterwards why did I not mention that I had experience in education in the jail? We had been speaking about Paulo Freire before that and I'd mentioned to her that he had been very popular in the jail. I hadn't made the connection between my experience in jail, my role as education officer in the Coiste, and this latest role. I had just seen it as a natural follow-on from my work within the party. I've always been interested in education. I've always had a passion for it, the development of people, people reaching their full potential. Obviously the experience that I had in jail in terms of education amongst political prisoners will stand by me. Also a lot of the values and concepts that I learned inside with regard to education will be useful.

**What values specifically?**

Well, take Paulo Freire. One of the things I learned from him was the fuller meaning of the word 'education'; that it isn't just about schooling; isn't about what Freire called the "banking concept" of education whereby teachers 'impart' information which pupils ingest and 'store'. It's about the ongoing development of people's full potential. Education should be a two-way process with learning involved for both teacher and student. That changed my understanding of what education is about - it's not about learning things by rote, it's essentially about development. If you trace the word education back to its Latin roots that's what it tells you.

Only a tiny minority of people from the area where I come from, Andersonstown, went to university. When I was in prison though I came to see that 98% of people in prison were capable of university level education. That told me that society wasn't allowing or encouraging people to develop to their full educational potential.

Another major lesson was equality. Equality,

**Obviously the experience that I had in jail in terms of education amongst political prisoners will stand by me. Also a lot of the values and concepts that I learned inside in that work I think will be useful.**

**If we are to do justice to the past and to the future we need to separate out our responsibilities towards the victims of the conflict from the political struggle against British rule in Ireland**

for me, is at the heart of everything and I can also trace that back to prison. Treating people as equals and knowing that there is no one better than yourself. I'm conscious of the hierarchical nature of the civil service and governmental structures. There is a lot of deference and importance attached to the different grades that people have within those structures. I don't buy into that. Yesterday I was sitting in a meeting with the Minister of Education in Dublin, Mary Hanafin. You could see a lot of people fawning over her, showing great deference towards her. It didn't impress me. I'm not impressed by any of those structures or hierarchies. I will treat everyone with respect and will expect to be treated respectfully. Equality applies both to the people I'll be working with and the people for whom we'll be working.

**You're also involved with Healing Through Remembering (HTR), serving on their sub-committee on truth recovery and acknowledgment processes. What does that work involve?**

It involves looking at ways of dealing with the past and the legacy of the past. I've been involved with this project for about 7 years, from the time when I was political education officer with Coiste. The sub-group I'm on looks specifically at ways to acknowledge people's suffering, to acknowledge what happened during the course of the conflict, at the causes of conflict and whether there should be a formal mechanism such as a truth commission for dealing with the past. There is a huge legacy; over 3,700 people killed and there are people living with that every day... people for whom it is still the central experience shaping their lives and who believe that to attain closure or healing they need to know the truth about what happened to their loved ones, why it happened and also to ensure that as much as possible to ensure it won't happen again.

**You obviously feel a particular affinity for this kind of work.**

I do feel an affinity for it. I didn't want to get involved in the first place. I suppose, looking back on it, I didn't want to face up to the issues myself. I just wanted to get on with what I was doing, the political work. And I think that's the case for a lot of people. We're not comfortable with the past being 'raked up'. But when you look at it, you find that you can't close the door on the past - it keeps coming up. If you look at the news over this past week for instance, you will find three or four incidents from the past seeping into the main news items. The past is dogging the present and the future, and it's going to continue doing that. It destabilizes the politics of this place. I personally believe that until we face up to it, do something about it - decide to put it behind us and draw a line under it or confront it in some structured way - it will

continue to destabilize this place with the potential to plunge us back into conflict because of the bitterness attached to what happened in our recent history. And if you look at the experience of other societies, I believe it shows that unless you deal with it it always will have the potential to lead to further conflict.

For many people the Good Friday Agreement represented the formal ending of armed conflict and the beginning of a new peaceful era. The actual written agreement (and its follow up) however, contains very little about victims' issues or how the legacy of the conflict might be handled. In fact, there is a view that achieving an agreement depended on the negotiating parties not dealing with the past in any substantial way. All that was agreed was that it is 'essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation'. Nine years on and I don't think anyone would claim that this has happened.

Over 3,700 families were bereaved during our war, tens of thousands of others were injured and, for most of them, there are still many burning unresolved questions as to what happened and why. Because the issues around truth recovery and dealing with the past are complex and challenging, our instinct is to 'leave it till another day'. This was reflected by some people at a recent seminar when they asked, 'why open old wounds?' The reply that came back from many others was 'because the wounds are badly closed and if you don't treat the infection they will reopen themselves'.

**What do you say to those (republicans) who feel anxious about the implications of a truth recovery process?**

I realise that many republicans view our active participation in such a project as 'making a rod to beat ourselves with' because they fear that our opponents would cynically use some victims in their efforts to halt the political march of Sinn Féin. That's fair enough, but it's not enough. We shouldn't allow ourselves to become entranced by a notion of another 'site of struggle' or to use the cynicism of others as justification for doing nothing ourselves. If we are to do justice to the past and to the future we need to separate out our responsibilities towards the victims of the conflict from the political struggle against British rule in Ireland. When we hear the name Jean McConville, for example, we should think less about Michael McDowell and more about Michael McConville, one of her ten children whose lives have been blighted by the horrific manner of her killing. If our opponents want to make political capital out of it then let's deal with that as a separate issue. It's too easy to lash out at others when we need to be taking a hard look at ourselves.

**And what of the role of the British government in the war?**

The British Government has a strategy to minimise media coverage of its corporate responsibility for the conflict and to maximise allegations against republicans. It goes without saying that we need to counter this. But working to expose Britain's dirty war doesn't absolve us from our own responsibilities. And, twelve years on from the first cessation the question facing us is, do we have the moral courage to confront the ghosts from our own past?

**Do you feel others within the republican 'family' feel likewise?**

For me the most memorable contribution to date on this issue came from a young woman at a seminar we organised on the issue who dismissed all talk of strategy and politics with the simple point that "we should do the right thing." If we are a party of the people, if we are about justice and about what's best for the people then that is what should guide us, whatever negative consequences we think there might be for the party. As far back as 1999 Gerry Adams said "In war all sides do terrible things. The IRA has done terrible things. That is the nature of war but it does not excuse the awfulness of some incident. The running sores of this conflict have to be addressed in an honest and forthright fashion." When are we going to address them? Do we have the courage to do what the ANC did when they acknowledged that even just causes can lead to abuses of power? I believe that we do and that we should.

When I was in jail I met a young man whose twin brother had been taken away and shot dead as an informer by the IRA when he was 15 years old. Their father had been shot dead by the British army two years before that. In 2004 the IRA apologised to his family and I was delighted that they did. There have been other apologies from the IRA and each time they've offered one I've been glad and proud of the fact that they did. It requires courage to be self critical and in my eyes the IRA have enhanced the integrity of the republican struggle each time they have done so.

I've been a republican all my life. I've had the privilege to know many people who, time after time, put their lives on the line for what they believed in. Like others I've had many good friends and comrades killed in the course of the struggle. I've attended a number of events recently to commemorate the 1981 Hunger Strike when ten men died in an act of bravery, which won admiration throughout the world. If the mourners who chased the loyalist gunman Michael Stone while he shot at them and threw hand grenades at them had been in any other country they would have been given medals. There are countless examples of republicans stepping up to the mark when courage was required. We have a different situation now, a different struggle, but courage is still needed.

Republicans, in my opinion,

have to set the standard in acknowledging and addressing the suffering of all those we hurt during the conflict. We cannot undo the past or bring an end to their suffering, but by demonstrating courage and moral leadership we can engender hope for the future. When the IRA issued its apology for the deaths of all non-combatants in 2002 it had a powerful cathartic effect on some victims. Some others dismissed it, but it was still the right thing to do. If you genuinely believe in the integrity of the republican struggle then truth can only enhance it. There are personal and political challenges for us in this but progress only ever comes about by taking on challenges. And, because republicans are seeking maximum change, we are the ones who have to take the biggest and boldest steps.

If we bring courage and honesty to how we deal with victims and truth recovery it might cut through some of the bitterness and anger which infects the politics on this island and transform the way that the past is accepted and understood. It might also help build bridges between the unionist community and ourselves. And it might help some people achieve some healing. None of those outcomes are guaranteed but we should not be seeking to reap political advantage. As republicans we should do it because it is the right thing to do.

**There are personal and political challenges for us in this but progress only ever comes about by taking on challenges. And, because republicans are seeking maximum change, we are the ones who have to take the biggest and boldest steps.**



## »» TAR ANALL'S HEALTH WEEK

Healthy outlook; (Back) Sinéad McLarnon, Maggie Donnelly, Jackie Brennan, Tommy Rocks, (Front) Anne Murray, Brenda Kelly, Rose McLarnon and Trish Boyd

Following on from the major success of their Men's Health Day, Tar Anall, Belfast recently played a major role in the West Belfast Health Week March 12-16.

The Falls and Shankill wards are among the most deprived in the North and a number of community organisation in the Falls, Shankill, Clonard and Beechmount areas joined forces to raise awareness about men's and women's health and well-being. Members of the group kick-started the health drive by taking part in a health walk in Castlewellaan to coincide with International Women's Day. Rose McLarnon from Tar Anall said that the week of events had been organised after a lot of discussion between local partnerships, evaluation from previous health days and feedback from the local community.

"These events promote better working relationships within the partnership, avoid duplication of services, provide follow-up for those who have been previously referred to their GP and, more importantly, address the needs of our people." Other organisations involved in the health events included Conway Mill, the Heart Project,

Clan Mór Surestart, the Maureen Sheehan Centre, Shankill Women's Centre and Leisure Centre, Blackie Community Centre, Conway Education Centre, Falls Leisure Centre and local residents' associations.

During the Health Week the 'Big Bus' from Action Cancer offered services including digital breast screening and a skin scanner to test for signs of damage caused by the sun. Elizabeth Fisher from the Ulster Cancer Foundation said that they want to alert people to the damage they could be causing to their skin and give information on how they can protect the skin of both themselves and their children. "We try to get the message across that children really need to be protected from the sun. A lot of people use sun-screen on foreign holidays but we need to get the message across that they need to use it here too - at least Factor 15 from May to September."

In addition to the above, stress clinic therapists were available throughout the week to offer aromatherapy, reflexology, Indian head massage, homeopathy and acupuncture. There was also beauty therapy and body composition analysis.

Reflexology with Carmel McGivern was one of the highlights of the day

» BELFAST FILM FESTIVAL



ABOVE: Rosie McCorley, Laurence McKeown, Tom Winstone, Dawn Purvis, Jim Auld, Claire Hackett and Raymond McCartney.  
 BELOW: Rosena Brown from Coiste, pictured with Dawn Purvis and the director of the Belfast Film Festival Michelle Devlin



Coiste na nIarchimí in partnership with the Belfast Film Festival hosted a seminar in the Queen’s Film Theatre as part of the 10-day festival. Entitled, ‘Societies in Transition: Policing For The People’ the event included an edited screening of ‘Sinn Féin and Policing’, (directed and produced by Barry Curran of Northern Visions) followed by a panel discussion which included; Jim Auld (Community Restorative Justice - Falls Road); Tom Winstone (Alternatives - Shankill Road); Dawn Purvis - (Leader of the PUP, MLA and member of the Policing Board); and Raymond McCartney (Sinn Féin MLA).

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### WORKING FOR THE REPUBLICAN EX-PRISONER COMMUNITY

Coiste na n-Iarchimi is financially supported by the European Union Peace II Programme through the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, Area Development Management/Combat Poverty Agency and Co-operation Ireland. It is also supported by the Department for Social & Community & Family Affairs, Dublin.

