

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

Loyalism in Transition: 1

A new reality?

compiled by

Michael Hall

Published October 2006

Farset Community Think Tanks Project
638 Springfield Road, Belfast BT12 7DY

© Michael Hall 2006
mikeohall@hotmail.com

ISBN 978 1 899510 71 9

*This publication has been funded by
independent donors from the private sector*

“It is our firm conviction that the vast majority of both religious communities long for peace, reconciliation and the chance to create a better future for their children. But longing is not enough; there must be a mechanism created to harness the love, generosity, courage and integrity of Ulster people in both religious communities and direct its great power towards the light of a new beginning.”

(from *Common Sense*, published by the UPRG, January 1987)

Cover artwork by Robin Hall

Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

A new reality?

(An overview by Michael Hall)

Probably the most significant feature of the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ – aside from the tragic catalogue of deaths and injuries – has been the emergence, consolidation and continuing existence of Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organisations, whose violent activities dictated the political agenda for over three decades. Some members of these organisations, whilst expressing regret for the ‘need’ to resort to violence, often justified it in somewhat impersonal terms. As a former IRA member once explained to me:

Our community realised that it was never going to get justice while the Brits remained, so our goal was to force them out – and the ‘armed struggle’ was intended to do just that.

A leading Loyalist, using a similar logic, told me:

I have no doubt that the British government, faced with the IRA onslaught, would have totally capitulated to Irish Republican demands had it not been for the Loyalist response, which bluntly said: if you try to push us into a United Ireland there will be a terrible price to pay.

However, despite such efforts to present the rationale behind the respective campaigns of violence in such a detached manner, the very nature of many of the killings indicated that something far more elemental was also involved. For example, following the IRA murder of two elderly Protestants who had been repairing Belleek police station, the *Belfast Telegraph* (04.08.88) pointed to the ferocity of the killings as proof that hatred was a motivating factor:

The depth of [this] hatred must be so intense as to suppress the normal instinct of revulsion which would restrain other people, however motivated, from firing 150 automatic rifle bullets into two blameless and defenceless men as they made their way home after a hard day’s work.

Few who have lived through the Troubles – particularly the horrendous year of 1972, when 496 people were killed – will ever forget the widespread communal terror which existed, especially when the Loyalist campaign of random assassinations set out to match the IRA’s ‘armed struggle’ in its brutality.

The fear, suspicion and distrust which still exists as a legacy of three decades of killing must surely be part of the explanation why, *twelve years* after the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires, many people still doubt whether the war is really over. Just as there are many within the Unionist community who believe that the IRA can never ‘change its spots’ – regardless of major acts of weapons decommissioning

– there are many within the Nationalist community who believe that Loyalist paramilitarism had only one *raison d'être*: to kill or harass Catholics.

When, therefore, representatives of the largest Loyalist paramilitary organisation, the Ulster Defence Association, approached government officials in late 2005 urging support for an initiative which would (i) identify and deal with the causes of the conflict, (ii) equip the Loyalist community with the skills and ability to move on, (iii) contribute positively to the reduction of criminality, and (iv) create an enabling environment which could bring an end to all paramilitary activity and weaponry, many people wondered whether the UDA was sincere. To help answer such a question we need to remind ourselves of the complexities which were to be found within Loyalist paramilitarism from its inception.

In the immediate aftermath of August 1969, when the 'Troubles' rapidly escalated and the Civil Rights agitation was overtaken by the resurgence of deep-seated and irreconcilable inter-communal divisions, governmental and statutory authority – certainly in the areas most directly affected – more or less collapsed. It was left to ordinary people to respond as best they could to this new threat to their families and their communities. For a start, the numerous makeshift barricades, erected to prevent incursions by the 'other side', needed to be manned on a constant basis, and vigilante groups soon sprang up throughout interface areas.

In Catholic neighbourhoods some of these defence groupings eventually transformed themselves into local units of the Provisional IRA. In Protestant areas they were eventually co-ordinated, in August 1971, under one overall command: the Ulster Defence Association (apart from those individuals who joined the other Loyalist paramilitary grouping, the UVF). As the IRA intensified its campaign, Loyalists experienced a new fear: that this campaign might succeed in weakening the British government's resolve to maintain the Union.

But while many individuals were responding 'militarily' to the real or perceived threats from the 'other' community, others were just as concerned that the social fabric of their areas was breaking down, and realised that a major effort was required if this deterioration was not to become irretrievable. And so the 1970s in particular saw a remarkable upsurge in grassroots-based activity. The community activists, with their focus on socio-economic deprivation, youth alienation and numerous other issues, attracted those who not only had no stomach for the ongoing violence but refused to believe that it was justified.

Within Protestant communities differences of strategy emerged between those involved in the 'war' and those involved in community-activism, especially when some of the latter began to make productive contacts with like-minded individuals on the 'other' side. However, at the same time there was often much overlap. Some individuals within the UDA, whilst believing that their community and their heritage could somehow be defended by retaliatory violence, also felt motivated to do something purposeful for the everyday needs of their communities and so they began to work in, or alongside, the emerging community groups.

This focus on community development was soon seen by the UDA leadership not only as worthy of support, but as a vital necessity for the survival of Protestant working-class communities. Hence, the current UDA interest in a community development strategy is not something new, but a reflection of a long-accepted reality.

The UDA also had its ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ as far as pursuit of the ‘war’ was concerned. Although the Catholic community remained understandably sceptical, UDA leaders frequently expressed a desire for peace. At different times, and when fleeting opportunities seemed to prevail – and even when everything looked bleak – statements from the UDA talked of the need for accommodation, such as in July 1974, when the organisation’s Chairman, Andy Tyrie, said: ‘We have done some awful things during our war effort because we felt it was justified at the time, but we feel we can sort things out now by getting Protestants and Catholics together.’

Often such appeals were not only viewed with disbelief by the Nationalist community, but were met with condemnation by Unionist politicians. For example, in May 1977, when talks between Belfast barrister Desmond Boal and former Foreign Minister of the Irish Republic Sean McBride were reported to have been held at the instigation of the IRA and UDA (a claim later denied), Peter Robinson of the DUP was quick to respond: ‘The people of Ulster have only one message for the IRA. We seek your elimination. No-one who talks to the IRA represents the Loyalists of Ulster.’

In January 1978 the Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG)† was founded by leading members of the UDA, and in March of that year they published the pamphlet *Beyond the Religious Divide*, which stated:

Without the evolution of proper politics the people of Northern Ireland will continually be manipulated by sectarian politicians who make no contribution to the social and economic wellbeing of the people of the country, but only continue to fan the flames of religious bigotry for self gain and preservation.

In their document the UPRG suggested that the only way ‘proper politics’ could emerge was for both Britain and the Republic of Ireland to ‘withdraw all their claims of sovereignty over Northern Ireland’, and for the two communities to work together for Negotiated Independence, which would encourage the development of their common identity. To the people of Northern Ireland they commended the words of Bacon: ‘He who cannot compromise is a fool; he who will not compromise is a bigot; he who dare not compromise is a slave.’

Talk of an Independent Ulster soon diminished, the concept gaining no support from either community. But the search for a way out of the conflict continued. In January 1987 the UDA published a new political document, drawn up by John McMichael and other members of the organisation. Entitled *Common Sense* it proposed a devolved government for Northern Ireland with a

† Initially known as the New Ulster Political Research Group

written constitution, its structure based on consensus government, proportional representation and shared responsibility. It noted:

There is no section of this divided Ulster community which is totally innocent or indeed totally guilty, totally right or totally wrong. We all share the responsibility for creating the situation, either by deed or by acquiescence. Therefore we must share the responsibility for finding a settlement and then share the responsibility of maintaining good government.

Aspects of these UDA initiatives ultimately found their way – unacknowledged, of course – into some of the proposals later presented by the mainstream Unionist political parties, and indeed within government thinking.

The current efforts of the UDA leadership, given public voice by a newly reinvigorated UPRG, to move their communities into a peaceful and more prosperous future, are therefore building on previous initiatives pursued at times when this society could still see no end to the continuing bloodshed.

Nor is it straightforward with regard to the UDA's attitude towards the Catholic community. While the organisation –and, more particularly, its offshoot the UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters) –will forever be associated with the murder of hundreds of innocent Catholics (and quite a few Protestants), its leadership asserts that it is anti-Republicanism rather than anti-Catholicism which has been at the core of the organisation's thinking.

For example, in July 1979, after it was revealed that there were plans for Pope John Paul II to include a detour to Northern Ireland in his Irish itinerary, the Rev Ian Paisley declared his opposition to such a visit, and the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland also criticised the idea, saying that it 'regrets that the occasion should promote the unacceptable face of Romanism'. Despite such open hostility, however, UDA leaders assured Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich that the Pope was welcome to visit wherever he liked, and a visit to Armagh was finally included in the itinerary (only to be cancelled because of the IRA murders of Earl Mountbatten and members of his family near Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo, and 18 British soldiers near Warrenpoint, Co. Down, on the same day).

Nor has the UDA leadership been hesitant to request assistance from members of the Catholic community with regard to community development and conflict resolution efforts – once the integrity of the individuals concerned had been accepted and their cross-community commitment proven. Indeed, this current initiative reveals that a preparedness to engage with genuine community activists, *irrespective* of their religious background, still prevails.

The UDA's decision to try and convince the British government that the latter needed to support a conflict transformation process, which engaged the Protestant and Loyalist community, did not come out of the blue. A debate had long been under way within the organisation, and, for the first time, the entire membership had been engaged in that debate, most notably through an extensive and all-embracing consultation process which took place from late-2004 through 2005.

The consultation process

While discussion on the future of the UDA had been ongoing since the ceasefire of 1994, the UPRG date the commencement of the current initiative to a statement issued by the leadership in November 2004. In this statement the organisation committed itself to the principles set out within what was referred to as the ‘John Gregg Initiative’. Their intent was to: (a) work towards the day when there would no longer be a need for the UDA and UFF; (b) desist from all military activity; (c) develop a strategy for the organisation which would be one of community development, job creation, social inclusion and community politics; and (d) work diligently with other political parties and the two governments to create an environment which would secure a lasting peace.

Realising that this was a major change for the organisation, it was felt important to engage the rank and file membership of the UDA, for the first time, in genuine dialogue. The consultation process which was then initiated was aimed at ‘establishing a baseline’ setting out how the ordinary members felt about the current political situation, the social needs of their communities, and whether they believed the conflict itself was over. It was also to canvas views on how to move into the future, the UPRG hoping that the membership would support the UDA leadership’s preferred aim of engaging in a genuine conflict transformation process.

The consultation process encompassed all those Protestant working-class communities across Northern Ireland where the UDA had a presence, and many of the numerous meetings which were held involved up to 60 (sometimes 80) rank and file members. Those facilitating the discussions in their respective areas recorded the feedback in different ways. Some meetings were sketchily written up (often due to a concern about confidentiality), while others received a more fulsome elaboration. Hundreds of UDA members participated and a wide range of opinions were openly and honestly aired. Indeed, one outcome of the exercise was the frequently-expressed hope that this consultation process should not be a one-off event but something undertaken on a regular basis.

This section of the pamphlet – prepared by the Farsset Community Think Tanks Project at the request of the UPRG –presents an overview of some of the feedback material, and endeavours to encapsulate the diverse opinions which were expressed. Although such a concise overview has obvious limitations, the UPRG nevertheless believes that it provides an accurate reflection of current feeling within the rank and file membership of the UDA.

* * * * *

Although the IRA had declared a ceasefire in August 1994 (and reinstated it in 1996 after it broke down), the organisation's failure to decommission its vast arsenal was seized upon by the Unionist community as evidence that the war could be resumed at any moment. Indeed, they fully concurred with Gerry Adams' off-the-cuff remark: 'They haven't gone away, you know.' Loyalist paramilitary leaders, however, took a more pragmatic view, but still held deep reservations about Republican intentions. Then, in July 2005, the IRA announced the ending of its armed campaign and followed this up with a major act of decommissioning, witnessed by two clergymen, but without allowing for the provision of photographic or other evidence as to just what weaponry was involved. Nevertheless, the IRA's war, it seemed, was now finally over. But were Loyalists convinced? This was one of the major issues addressed in the consultation process.

Some members were clearly disbelieving:

How can we ever trust Sinn Féin or the likes of Gerry Adams?

We don't know for sure that they haven't retained some arms. De Chastelain [the Head of the Decommissioning body] claims they haven't, but how would he know, for we don't know what arms they had stockpiled in the first place. Anyway, even if they did get rid of all their arms, they still have the finances to buy more should they want to.

Clarification on what was decommissioned is needed. We can do nothing until we're 100% sure that all Republican guns are gone. These rumours that the IRA allowed a number of their units to retain some guns hardly helps build confidence.

Others, however, were more generous, although pointing to a new danger.

I tend to believe them. The problem is that Republican dissidents are increasing in number, and they are quite prepared to continue the war. If we were to disarm, our communities would be left defenceless. What if there was another Omagh?

Yes, where do we stand? How would we respond? Republicans have shot Protestants in Cluan Place [East Belfast].

If it's over why are there still attacks on the Protestants of the Fountain estate [Londonderry]?

I think the war effort should continue until it *all* stops on their side.

I still think there remains a threat from the IRA itself. I believe that they still have a lot of guns.

Nevertheless, I believe that we are heading in the right direction.

The IRA has too much to lose to go back to the gun.

Look, even if they retained some of their guns, the question is: despite 30 years of the IRA's 'armed struggle', is Ulster's position still secure as part of the UK? If it is, then we have won, and that's the main thing.

And, assuming that the IRA's decommissioning was real –it had certainly been accepted as real by the British and Irish governments –where did that leave the question of Loyalist weaponry?

What will happen to us if we don't decommission? We'll be crucified by the government. The PSNI will continue to hound us – the ordinary rank and file can get 10 years for membership of the UDA, the leaders even more.

We will have to decommission at some point. But we needn't rush into it, for we don't want to find ourselves defenceless. We have to be able to retaliate if our communities are attacked.

But we do have to engage somehow, otherwise we'll be left behind on our own.

What if the IRA follow a political path but the dissidents show their muscle with a string of incidents? The dissident ranks are increasing, with disillusioned IRA men coming over to them. We know for a fact that there is recruitment going on.

We don't know for certain that the IRA and the dissidents aren't in this together. I think it's a bit too much of a coincidence that whenever Sinn Féin doesn't seem to be getting things its own way, the dissidents do something. And then government caves in because they don't want a return to full-scale violence.

I don't think so, I think the IRA hates the dissidents.

But what if that was the scenario: the IRA following a political path and dissidents keeping the pressure on government by their actions?

Maybe we would have to do that too. The organisation could decommission and declare itself political, and a dissident UDA could be formed to combat the Republican dissidents.

The Republicans squeezed a lot of concessions out of the government before they decommissioned. We should do the same. We should get as much for our communities as we can.

We still have good reason to be here, anyway. Look at the pressure the White City [North Belfast] is continually under from the Catholic community. And look at the rioting in Short Strand [East Belfast] a while back.

No, while there are dissident Republican groups we should not consider giving up anything until they're *all* disbanded.

It's way too early yet, and we shouldn't jump to follow the IRA, we can't let them set the agenda.

I don't think we're being realistic here. I think that agenda has already been set. And if we don't move soon we'll be left behind.

Maybe that's one of the things the dissidents are hoping will happen –to keep us locked out of what's going on?

I would like to know what the views of the Inner Council are on all this. It's one thing to ask all of us, but what do *they* think about it all?

If the war is genuinely over, I think we should support a process of change.

But at the same time, the IRA didn't give up on its goal of a United Ireland so we shouldn't give up on ours of defending Ulster.

As far as the government is concerned, the Provos' war is over –and the PSNI don't bother them any more –but we're still being attacked by our own government as if we're all gangsters. Everything is now black propaganda against the UDA.

But if the war isn't over, just *who* are we supposed to be fighting? I think we have to accept the fact that it *is* over and we are entering a new reality.

The war might be over but the struggle to defend Ulster is still on. It's just that it's a political struggle now rather than a military one.

I wonder what concessions were made to Sinn Féin to get the IRA to decommission?

Let's face it, the IRA are always going to retain some guns. Just as Loyalists will have to.

What do we do about our guns? And when? And after we give them up, what type of process do we get into? And, anyway, is there a process which offers any real benefit to Loyalist communities?

When a show of hands was called for (in each area) on the question 'was the war over' a majority of participants stated that the war was *not* over. However, when this was probed further, it was apparent that most individuals thought that while the IRA's *military* war might indeed be over, their *political* war was certainly not. For the IRA it was a change of tactics, but their goal remained the same –a United Ireland.

The war is being fought now on a political front and our government is letting us down. The IRA changed its strategy because it couldn't win militarily –and the government helped them to change.

Do we need to follow suit, in case we are left behind?

We need to be able to challenge Republicanism politically.

Look at the gains Sinn Féin have made. Martin McGuinness and company were in the government of Northern Ireland not that long ago, and no doubt they will be again.

Not only in government – within five to ten years I can see Catholics running all the statutory agencies.

If the assumption was made, despite reservations, that the war was over, what did the rank and file members think the UDA should do now?

We need to have a political strategy no matter what happens.

I think we need to get back to being a community-based organisation, that's where our focus should be: on supporting and strengthening our communities. To me, that's what true Loyalism is all about.

And we need to have our own organisation beginning to work as one. There's been too much division, too much feuding.

No matter what political route we take it'll come to nothing if we haven't the backing of our communities. We need to gain respect in our own communities by working hard for the people, before we pursue anything else.

We need to go forward politically but without losing our muscle at the same time.

I can't see us being able to do that. The pressure we will come under to give up that muscle will be enormous. And they're going to use every argument against us. [Secretary of State] Peter Hain recently blamed the existence of Loyalist organisations for stifling investment in our communities.

There's a lot of money out there which could be used to benefit our communities. I think we must be realistic about this. If we accept change we might be able to get government to put more of that money into Protestant areas. Loyalists have been lazy since the ceasefire; we have waited for things to happen. Not Sinn Féin: their strategy is to use every avenue to advance their cause, and benefit the Catholic community. We should do the same.

Republicans take over everything in their areas – residents' groups, community groups – perhaps we should follow suit?

No; we don't want to be repressing our own people. Real community development isn't about controlling people, it's about *empowering* communities.

There'll always be a need to combat Republicanism, and if Republicans have moved to an exclusively political struggle, then we must be able to match them in the political arena.

I don't think Loyalists, even though we have all strong opinions, are able to

articulate their views and needs the same way that Nationalists and Republicans do. And that hasn't changed over 30 years. I think we still lack confidence.

We still need to keep the organisation in existence, possibly in a community policing role, to combat paedophiles, drug dealers, etc.

We need to support our own political representatives [UPRG] more.

Wind the UDA down. Give ourselves a totally new name. Move back to being a community organisation, and take on a community development role.

I don't feel we should down-size or stand down. Maybe we could reduce recruitment numbers.

We should get involved in conflict transformation.

We need to push a political voice. We must try to do something politically. And to do that properly we need a political party of our own.

There are too many divisions within Unionism as it is, I don't think a new party would survive.

What did the rank and file members feel about the UPRG at some stage in the future entering the political arena, given that previous efforts on behalf of the UDA –the UDP (Ulster Democratic Party), for example –had either been short-lived or had ultimately been sidelined by the mainstream Unionist parties?

I don't know that we could ever make much headway; the Unionist vote is split as it is.

But we need to keep trying. We have individuals there with political abilities. People's attitudes are beginning to change, and as long as the community starts to trust us – and we should try and earn their respect – I think a legitimate Loyalist political party might just work –not overnight, but we could slowly build up support.

I don't know. The UPRG would be seen as weak electorally, so people might feel that a vote for them was wasted. And given that the Sinn Féin vote is increasing, Unionist votes cannot afford to be wasted, so people will give them to the DUP or the UUP.

But why do we support the mainstream Unionist parties when they shun us?

You ask most working-class Loyalists what they think about the mainstream Unionists, and they'll tell you the same: that they don't speak for us, or even care about us.

The only time you ever see them is when they're looking for votes.

Yes, how many Unionist politicians do we ever see in our areas? We need to get our own people into power or we'll gain nothing.

When there's community events on they usually try to stick their noses in, but once the TV cameras are gone, they're away again. They're only interested in photo-opportunities.

Are the DUP going to fight the IRA if it takes up arms again?

The DUP only uses the UDA and have done for years. They take the credit whenever Sinn Féin don't get their way, but they don't recognise the UDA as having played a part in that.

I think that rather than trying to bring us 'in from the cold' they actually want to keep us from engaging in politics, in case we begin to pose a threat to them.

I think they see it as a threat when we are engaged in grassroots work.

I think they see *all* community work as a threat. They don't want an empowered community; they want to have a monopoly on everything that goes on.

If we remain out in the cold we'll get nowhere, and our communities will always remain at a disadvantage.

I would really like to be able to vote for someone who is working class.

We *are* the community. Get among the people and show them who we are.

We should get involved in 'bread and butter' politics. Start from the bottom and work up.

I still think we need our own political voice.

Perhaps we may need a combined Loyalist political party – representing the UDA and UVF. But even if we had one, how do we get people out to vote?

To be honest, before you ask people to vote for the UPRG –say they wanted to put up candidates –we'd need to know more about them. Not all of us understand their role.

And, anyway, do the members of the UPRG speak with one voice? Do they not have their own disagreements?

But having disagreements is simply the nature of *all* politics. You can see it within the UUP, or even between Blair and Brown.

We need someone to speak to government on our behalf. If government wants us to come on board they'll have to accommodate our needs in some way. After all, the IRA and Sinn Féin usually get everything they want.

We need to get people voted into office.

I don't believe there's enough support yet for a political mandate alone. We

need to be getting more involved with our communities, start dealing with social issues, housing issues, what we can do for our young people.

We must elevate our political profile more. There's a new leadership now, positive changes are taking place, and the new attitudes should be more attractive to voters. If we worked hard we might begin to get votes. For a start, we have to get every UDA member to use their votes.

Tellingly, on another show of hands (taken at different meetings), it was discovered that only half the participants had registered to vote, and of those only half actually voted.

There is a feeling of powerlessness among Loyalists.

The IRA has gained through dialogue, so we need to follow suit.

I think the image we had – the 'spice boys', the 'bling' – put working-class voters off from taking us seriously, in the political sense. They probably thought UDA leaders were more interested in body-building, Armani suits and jewellery, than in important political and social issues. I think that image did us no good at all.

It was this issue – image and past history – which took up a good part of the discussion sessions.

We have to clean up our image, we have to start with ourselves. In the early '70s every door in the community was open to us out of respect. We need to gain that back. We've been dragged into the gutter. We have to respect our community or they won't respect us, because we need them.

Stop all beatings for a start.

What about at the highest level of the organisation? Could there be another feud?

Is the UDA ready to tell people that they've changed, and prove it? It's the only way forward. Earn the community's respect – go back to them.

The UDA lost ten years in East Belfast because of the last leadership regime. But respect is slowly coming back there. The change is noticeable.

What about North Belfast? How can the UDA move forward when there's a problem with North Belfast? Will the criminal element there hold us back or can we move on without them? †

How is it that one or two criminals can hold up the whole process of change for the UDA?

People are wanting to know what the intentions of the two main Loyalist

† The consultation process took place prior to the events of August 2006 when this element was deposed and the area reinstated into the UDA.

groups are, and even why they still exist. Many people assume that it's all about criminality, and that the paramilitaries don't want to let that go.

To rebuild trust we need to cut out criminality within the organisation itself and then work on local issues. Work with the young people, let pensioners and others see that not all young people are out to cause trouble.

I think the criminal and gangster element should be sorted out.

We need to show we aren't bullies any more, and work to gain the respect of people.

There should be a zero tolerance of criminality. No more drugs in our areas.

Zero tolerance can perhaps be achieved in relation to hard drugs, for people will accept that and understand that. But it'll be difficult with things like 'blow', for many young people are taking it and I don't think we can eradicate its use overnight.

How can we get a better quality of workmanship from Housing Executive builders if people associated with us keep extorting large amounts of money from them?

We have to end all that, reduce people's fears and work to create stability.

We have to eliminate all criminality.

If we have to pay dues then put that money into the community.

Everyone hates us because of drugs and criminality. We should stop it all then the people will support us again.

There's others involved in drugs too. Other paramilitary organisations are up to their necks in it, no matter what they say.

And there's all the hoods involved too; we need to sort them out.

The IRA is the source of a lot of the hard drugs, but you rarely hear about that. All the 'coke' that comes into Northern Ireland comes through them and other Republican groups.

Drugs, especially soft drugs like 'blow', are in every area now. I don't think it can be cut out in the short term. There'll always be people, including other organisations, prepared to deal in drugs.

Let them go ahead. But we have to cut out the drugs completely and get rid of our bad image.

If we cut out drugs and the other paramilitary organisations don't follow suit then they'll lose face in the community.

No Loyalist should be selling drugs at all, even soft ones. Get rid of them all; it destroys lives. I think we should have an anti-drugs policy.

And what about alcohol? I think it does even more damage to people and families than the likes of 'blow'.

We should broaden our horizons and deal with all anti-social problems.

But how can we deal with drugs and anti-social behaviour without looking like thugs or dictators? The government and the PSNI are just dying for more opportunities to make us look really bad again.

We joined the UDA to fight Republicans, not to sell drugs. We don't want to be associated with drugs and criminality.

That should be down to the PSNI.

But they aren't doing it. In many cases we're doing the PSNI's job for them.

I believe that the PSNI actually allows drugs into our communities. They use drug dealers as informers.

Yes, I think the security forces often let people sell drugs, so that they would weaken our communities from within.

I don't think society will ever be without drugs.

Okay, but at least get them off the streets and away from our kids. Behind closed doors is okay if that's what people want to do with their lives.

The drugs issue has already divided the Inner Council, so how can the UDA members agree a policy on drugs when the Inner Council can't. Can the Inner Council not have the power to expel senior UDA figures who are dealing in drugs and are involved in criminality?

The Inner Council should have more powers to act. There is too much pressure on ordinary rank and file members to remove tyrants.

And what of the immediate future for their respective areas, in terms of confronting the myriad problems which beset Protestant working-class communities?

Should we get more into community restorative justice schemes? We need to deal with anti-social behaviour, for the community is constantly demanding it, especially as the PSNI do so little about it. Community restorative justice schemes would be better than beatings.

No-one has any confidence in the PSNI. People always come to us instead, asking us to do something.

We should 'police the police'; we should meet with them and point out where they are failing our communities.

But would they care? Didn't the PSNI beat up women and kids during the trouble at the Whiterock [West Belfast] parade?

The community needs our support. Even if the military war seems to be over there is a struggle going on in our areas with all the social problems: housing, drugs, vandalism, unemployment....

Even the look of an area is important. Without a doubt some of the murals need to be redone, to reflect more positive themes. I like that one of James Magennis VC, we need more history ones.

And Magennis was a Catholic too. I think that was a positive gesture. In fact, I think we need to engage more with the Catholic community – we don't want to see things going back to what they were.

We need a shopping list to force the hand of government and the statutory agencies.

At the same time, I don't think we should do *anything* until our own government proves that it is genuinely prepared to help Protestant communities.

But everyone wants to smash us over decommissioning and disbandment, and they will continue to exclude us from the political arena until we do what they want.

Even if we do all that the government and others demand, they'll still be trying to freeze us out.

And we're still demonised by people in our own communities.

The mainstream Unionists ignore the needs of the Protestant working class. We must fight for the people in our areas the way Sinn Féin does for Catholic areas.

Many of our younger members have expressed a desire to have some sort of positive role in their areas but aren't sure what it could be.

There were other hopes expressed.

I think there is a real need for a debate on our identity.

History lessons should be organised for our communities.

Even a history of the UDA itself.

And some pointed remarks were made.

Why have the UDA spoken to the decommissioning bodies when this is the first meeting of this kind? There was no consultation with the membership beforehand.

I think we should have meetings like this more often. There's a need for more debates –on everything; what's going on politically, what's happening inside our communities, on history, on our culture...

Smaller discussion groups would be a good idea, it would encourage more people to talk.

None of us ever had this chance to discuss things openly before – we were all too afraid to speak out.

I'm just happy that the fear has gone. You know it's going well when you don't get slapped for talking.

* * * * *

The nature of the discussion process did not lend itself to a quantitative analysis of the responses made by the hundreds of participants (although a remarkable effort was made in some instances to adopt 'good practice' methods in the recording of material), and there is no way to state, in a statistical form, which of the opinions expressed above represented a minority viewpoint and which held widespread acceptance. However, the facilitators of the different discussion groups were instructed to request a show of hands on important and pertinent topics, to see whether there was a consensus around the different views.

Accordingly, the UPRG found that there was a majority (sometimes an overwhelming one) in favour of the following statements:

- The UDA needed to enter into a new process of change.
- The military war has been transformed into a political one.
- The need to defend Ulster was as necessary now as it had always been.
- The UPRG should endeavour to move the situation forward politically, and the membership should give it its full support.
- There was a desire for a thorough debate on identity and culture.
- The mainstream Unionist parties don't really represent the needs of working-class Protestants.
- The UDA must end any association with criminality, especially the pushing of drugs.
- The UDA should play an active part in the regeneration of Protestant working-class areas.
- The UDA should engage its membership in regular debates and discussions.

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

‘Loyalism in Transition’

Having thus received a mandate from the rank and file to ‘move on’, the UPRG, in collaboration with members of the UDA’s Inner Council, began to assemble the core components of a new initiative. It was to be known as the ‘Conflict Transformation Initiative: Loyalism in Transition’. Discussions were commenced with British Government officials, and community worker Sammy Douglas was commissioned by the department for Social Development to assist in the preparation of a proposal document. This document, in its ‘mission statement’, made explicit the intention behind the initiative:

Conflict Transformation Initiative: Loyalism in Transition is a new and innovative initiative that will assist key Loyalist activists through a process of conflict resolution and community transformation and will ultimately enable Loyalism to emerge out of thirty-five years of conflict to play a full and meaningful role in a process of reconciliation.

Although the issues of ‘conflict resolution’ and ‘reconciliation’ were not addressed directly during the consultation process itself – indeed, there was no discussion at all as to the nature of the UDA’s ‘military’ response to the IRA, nor its devastating impact on the Catholic community† – the historical overview with which the proposal document commences does not shy away from an admission of culpability in the nightmare which Northern Ireland had to endure:

As the IRA attacks grew in ferocity and depravity, Loyalists took the law into their own hands and dished out summary justice on whoever they saw fit, and tried to match the IRA, tit for tat. As one UFF member stated: ‘We weren’t looking for reconciliation or justice, we wanted vengeance for what they were doing to us.’

The proposal document lists a number of dangers – both historical and present-day – which the initiative seeks to address and, where possible, overcome:

† Avoidance of what had been perpetrated under what was euphemistically termed ‘a military response’ is not a uniquely Loyalist attribute. The IRA ceasefire statement of August 1994 makes no mention of innocent victims, and its July 2005 statement on the ending of its armed campaign – perhaps mindful that the Loyalist ceasefire statement (of October 1994) had at least offered ‘abject and true remorse’ for all innocent victims – only included the perfunctory comment: ‘We are conscious that many people suffered in the conflict.’ It is to be hoped that, as the ‘peace process’ progresses, a genuine dialogue will ensue which gives proper and long overdue acknowledgement to the wrongs which were committed against the innocent in *all* communities.

- Political instability has been a major factor in this island's politics not just during the period of the Troubles but throughout the entire 20th century. This has in turn led to the frequent use of violence as a supposed justification for achieving political goals.
- This instability and violence can be directed internally as well as externally –witness the history of feuding amongst Loyalist and Republican paramilitary organisations.
- There is currently general disaffection amongst the Unionist community as a result of the Belfast Agreement, particularly in working-class areas.
- There is increased political fragmentation within the Unionist community and an absence of political leadership at community level.
- There is also a perception that the Nationalist community is reaping the rewards of the 'peace process' at the expense of Unionism.
- People are fearful of the loss, or a diminution, of their cultural heritage because of the way the Ulster Protestant identity is being constantly challenged.
- Those at the interface of conflict have come from socio-economically deprived or disadvantaged communities, and much of that deprivation and disadvantage remains at a high level.
- Young people in Protestant working-class areas in particular experience a lack of youth provision and employment opportunities and have low levels of educational and employment aspirations.
- The mayhem that swept some working-class Protestant areas in September 2005 –in particular, Whiterock in West Belfast –was the worst seen for many years. It starkly revealed the depth of alienation felt by Loyalists.
- Evidence has shown that many Loyalist working-class communities suffer from either low or non-existent community capacity and infrastructure.
- Additionally, there is a perception that 'community development' is the preserve of the Nationalist community, and works mostly to their benefit.
- Loyalist communities still have difficulties in engaging in inter-community work, and 'single identity work' to enhance self-esteem is still very necessary.
- Although much single-identity work remains to be done, the Loyalist community has demonstrated its willingness to work beyond existing social, economic, religious and cultural barriers.
- Mainstream Unionist politicians have been reluctant to engage with Loyalist communities or their representatives. (Some contacts claimed for media consumption by certain political leaders have, in reality, been fleeting, and hardly worthy of the word 'engagement'.) This means that a genuine

Loyalist voice is not being heard within the political process, with all the dangers which that entails.

- There is a sense that certain Unionist leaders still seek to use the existing paramilitary structures for their own benefit.
- Unionist political leaders do not recognise the benefit of community development as a means of moving Protestant working-class communities out of conflict.
- There is a very real belief that the British political establishment does not value Northern Ireland as a full member of the United Kingdom and this has a major negative impact on potential industrial investment from British industry and entrepreneurs.
- Few of those in positions of political authority fully acknowledge the willingness of the Loyalist community to move on, and out of conflict, or their desire to eventually end all paramilitary activity and live in a safer community free from drugs and criminality.
- Current structures have not provided appropriate mechanisms for a genuine engagement with Loyalism.
- Cross-community and conflict resolution processes to date have been ineffective in reaching the Loyalist communities.
- Politicians and others often talk of the need for Loyalist paramilitaries to eventually 'leave the stage', but the process by which this might happen has never been outlined.

The UDA admits that they too have been part of the problem. Not only because of their involvement in the violent conflict, but because the retention of attitudes and tactics symptomatic of that conflict have become self-destructive and are even alienating those on whom the organisation is reliant for support. Sectarian attitudes within the organisation and the wider community need to be identified, confronted and hopefully eradicated.

So, what is it that the 'Loyalism in Transition' initiative is proposing?

Basically, the UPRG is arguing the urgency for the British government to recognise the need to fund a genuine conflict transformation initiative, which would begin to tackle the myriad problems currently facing Protestant/Loyalist working-class communities. The tasks undertaken within this initiative would include:

- tackling pressing socio-economic community problems and needs
- countering the sense of Protestant disaffection, including widespread youth alienation

- rectifying the absence of inclusive political dialogue
- supporting community development and regeneration projects
- attempting to rectify a weak community infrastructure
- initiating or supporting cross-community and interface contacts
- supporting, and, where possible, facilitating conflict transformation and conflict resolution processes
- promoting and protecting the freedom of religious and cultural expression
- supporting those who have been victims of the conflict
- advocating rights, along with an acceptance of responsibilities
- assisting in the eradication of criminality, both inside the organisation and within the community at large
- pursuing a genuine engagement with political parties and government
- genuinely reflecting their community's cultural aspirations and socio-economic needs.
- working towards an end to all paramilitary activity
- working towards the creation of an enabling environment where violence is no longer an option in the pursuit of political or cultural aspirations

Such a list would defeat an army of professionals working for many years, and miracles are not expected. However, the list does highlight the immensity of the task and provides evidence as to why government assistance is being urged.

To implement such an initiative would obviously require the establishment of a team of dedicated workers and their support staff, who would manage and drive the initiative in the different geographical areas of Northern Ireland. Each team member would have responsibility for implementing specific plans, supporting existing and emergent community development projects (with their agreement), determining which items on the above list might be tackled in their own geographical area, while all the time ensuring a positive and productive engagement with the local community.

Such a team would operate out of a central office with administrative support in Belfast, but it would also be necessary to establish a work-base in the north west of the Province.

Supportive linkages

Although the UPRG wants to place the UDA at the leading edge of radical change, it is realistic enough to seek assistance from those in the wider community, especially those who have an established track record in trying to move this society out of conflict as well as addressing socio-economic needs. Three primary sources of this additional support are listed here.

Farset Youth & Community Development Ltd.

Farset has a long pedigree of involvement in working-class issues, interface contacts, cross-community work, and the exploration of the shared heritage of the two communities in Northern Ireland. Just as significantly, it has extensive experience in administration, from the time when it was the largest ACE employer in Belfast (with over 260 workers), to its current support of Farset International Hostel, which is increasingly used by groups from all sides of the community, as well as visitors from abroad (including Israel, Palestine, Moldova, Kosovo and other places which have experienced inter-communal conflict).

An approach was made to Farset through Jackie Hewitt (Farset's Manager) and Barney McCaughey (Farset's Chairman), with the outcome that Farset has agreed to act as the employing body for whatever team might be set in place to both implement and develop the initiative, and also to process any financial aid provided by government for it.

Farset Community Think Tanks Project

The purpose of the Think Tanks Project is to stimulate a greater awareness of community issues and to provide a unique vehicle for dialogue and debate, both within communities and between communities. It does this through a dual process: (i) a series of small-group discussions are convened on a range of community concerns and from each series an edited and accessible pamphlet is produced; (ii) copies of each pamphlet are distributed widely around the community network free of charge. To date the project has convened some 70 Think Tanks and distributed over 150,000 pamphlets on a cross-community basis.

The UPRG sees the Think Tanks as not only an ideal means of engaging the wider community in the process of change –including the Nationalist community when the time is appropriate –but of honouring the commitment made to keep the UDA rank and file involved in the initiative. A number of separate Think Tank discussions – involving members of the UPRG, people from a UDA background and others – are planned which will address a range of relevant themes, and 3000 pamphlets (or more, if funding permits), describing each series of discussions, will be distributed among the UDA membership, and a further 1000 around the community network on a cross-community basis.

MICOM

Although coming from the Catholic community, Joe Camplisson, who was the first fieldworker appointed by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission (not to be confused with the current Community Relations Council) had, as part of his work, made contact with the UDA leadership in 1972. Impressed by his genuine commitment to resolving the conflict the UDA has utilised Camplisson's services on many occasions over the years.

Camplisson was therefore prevailed upon yet again to assist in this new venture. Given his extensive expertise in community development and conflict resolution efforts Camplisson has been asked to assist with the implementation and delivery of the initiative, and the training of the team members in community development theory and practice (which he sees as integral to eventual movement towards conflict resolution).

Camplisson incorporates interaction with community activists from other arenas of conflict as part of his approach. Through his organisation MICOM he helped establish a community development and conflict resolution process in Moldova (which is in conflict with its breakaway region of Transdnistria). This work then attracted the interest of a group of Israelis and Palestinians who are seeking to implement an effective conflict resolution process in their region.

Camplisson intends to utilise these international contacts to the benefit of the Northern Ireland peace process, and in particular to this UDA initiative. Indeed, plans are already at an advanced stage for an 8-day 'Foundation Workshop' bringing together key Loyalists and community activists from Moldova, Transdnistria, Israel and Palestine, as well as international experts in community development and conflict resolution. It is hoped that through this exchange the Loyalist participants will gain much which will be fundamental to their personal and organisational development and the consolidation of any initiative.

Addendum

Just as political initiatives in Northern Ireland never progress smoothly, neither do community-based ones. Leaving aside the August 2006 confrontations with regard to North Belfast – which were peacefully resolved – the UPRG felt disheartened when a complete tranche of vital projects, to be based in Protestant working-class areas, were turned down for support by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland. Likewise, the Think Tanks Project was turned down for funding under the 'Peace II Extension' European package, and a request for assistance to one of Northern Ireland's leading cross-community funding bodies wasn't even acknowledged. The UPRG and Think Tanks Project express their appreciation, therefore, for the funding provided by sources from the private sector which ensured the publication of this pamphlet.