

Towards a shared future

(6) In search of a process

Compiled by Michael Hall

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The **Island Pamphlets** series was launched in 1993 to stimulate a community-wide debate on historical, cultural, political and socio-economic issues. Most of the pamphlets are edited accounts of discussions undertaken by small groups of individuals – the ‘**Community Think Tanks**’ – which have embraced (on both a ‘single identity’ and a cross-community basis) Loyalists, Republicans, community activists, women’s groups, victims, cross-border workers, ex-prisoners, young people, senior citizens and others. To date 105 titles have been produced and 190,400 pamphlets have been distributed at a grassroots level. Many of the titles are available for (free) download from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>.

Introduction

In the wake of the failure of the inter-party talks facilitated by Americans Richard Haass and Meghan O’Sullivan, a number of community activists voiced a similar response: “Sure the Haass Talks were bound to fail.”

Taking this negative assertion as a starting point for debate, the Community Think Tanks Project engaged (separately) loyalist and republican community workers around two interconnected themes:

(1) Why do you think the ‘Haass Talks’ failed? What it because of who was involved? Or because of who *wasn’t* involved? Did you feel the process was flawed, and if so, why? And what is it about such efforts which often results in failure?

(2) Conversely, what do you think a more effective process should look like? What ingredients should it contain which might offer a more realistic chance of success? How could such a process be initiated? And by whom?

The responses given to these questions are summarised in **Part 1** of this pamphlet.

Perhaps not surprising given current difficulties and tensions at both party political and grassroots level, a strong negativity characterised many of the opinions expressed, a reflection not only of a widespread disillusionment, but – and this came over very strongly – a belief that Northern Ireland’s political leaders were ‘failing to deliver’. To offset this, and offer something more positive amid the ‘doom and gloom’ (as one interviewee described it), **Part 2** of this document describes an alternative process (of conflict resolution) which attempts to address some of the concerns raised.

For a start, it proposes to engage *all* those who have a role to play in resolving the conflict (and the absence of a loyalist presence at the Haass talks was a constant complaint from within the Protestant working class). It also focuses heavily on the deep-seated, identity-related needs which lie at the core of our communal divisions. It also centres on shared *analysis* rather than political duelling and ‘whataboutery’. And lastly, it does not seek to undermine or sideline the politicians, but rather to *complement* – and, indeed, assist – whatever engagement they might undertake at a party-political level.

Michael Hall *Co-ordinator Farset Community Think Tanks Project*

1: A flawed process?

The Loyalist viewpoint

A number of separate discussions were held with loyalist community workers, during which they were asked the questions outlined on page 3. For sake of conciseness the main responses have been collated together in this section.

- The parties involved in the Haass Talks were supposed to determine how to deal with, among other issues, the ‘legacy of the Past’. Now, it has always been an accepted fact that to deal with the past you have to directly involve those people who were involved in the past. Haass indicated that he would speak with us [loyalist organisations]; that never materialised, we had to make representation through a third party. So, who was represented at those talks? On the nationalist side you had people there – Sinn Féin – who *could* deal with the past, because they represented those who had been directly involved in it from their side. However, on our side you only had unionist politicians, many of whom would openly say that they have no time for loyalist paramilitaries – so how could they have represented the experience of the loyalist community in the conflict? They couldn’t. Representation at those talks was unbalanced. There was no level playing field.
- Unionist politicians used loyalist paramilitaries in the past and then disowned them. And there were these politicians, claiming to speak to Haass and O’Sullivan on behalf of the entire Protestant/unionist/loyalist community. No, they weren’t! To be honest, when we realised that our voice was going to be excluded, most of us switched off straight away, and said: no, it’s not for us.
- Our rule-of-thumb in here [community centre] is: ‘Nothing about us – without us – is for us.’ Now, that is primarily about the delivery of social policies: if we are not involved in their design then they are of no use to us. I think the same applies to politics and the whole Haass thing. We weren’t involved in it, we weren’t asked – so why should we buy into something over which we have no say or influence?
- On the unionist side there is currently no process which connects the people who were most heavily involved in the conflict with the people who are now charged with dealing with its legacy; there is a total disconnect. As for the parties talking about how to deal with the ‘legacy of the past’ – there is one word which is missing around that discussion: honesty. Progress cannot be made until people are honest with each other. We have the leader of the Sinn Féin/IRA cult still denying that he was a member of

the IRA. This constant denial is a real stumbling block for those people in our community who might be willing to engage in meaningful conversations.

- Republicans seek to rewrite the past, to portray themselves as some kind of freedom fighters who waged this ‘honourable struggle against British oppression’. And they do this by ignoring – if they can’t completely airbrush it out of history – those incidents which don’t fit that glorious image. So, while they will clamour for inquiry after inquiry into things done by the state, they fall very silent when mention is made of any of the many acts of ethnic cleansing that *they* were responsible for – Bloody Friday, Kingsmill, La Mon, Enniskillen, Darkley.... Sinn Féin talk about wanting an ‘Ireland of Equals’, but their selective view of the Troubles isn’t very ‘equal’, and that doesn’t sit well with people in our community.

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- The republican propaganda machine has always tried to claim that collusion was one-sided. But recent revelations have shown that collusion was *not* only on one side. Also, there still has to be an acknowledgement from the republican movement that they fought a sectarian war. I had a long debate with one senior republican who served a life sentence for murder, and he said to me, “I didn’t murder anybody; the Movement murdered those people.” I had to ask myself: am I dealing with a robot here, or can we not say to each other: Did we both do bad things? Yes, we did. Did we hurt each other’s communities? Yes, we did. Are we the people responsible for resolving it and making a better life for our kids and grandchildren? Absolutely!

- By the same token, our unionist politicians will not be honest either. Can you imagine any of them ever acknowledging the negative role that politicians played in the conflict, such as the inflammatory speeches by the likes of Craig and Paisley†.

- The reality is that while mainstream unionism is engaged in the discussions that are needed to move us all forward, it ain’t going to work if they prevent our participation.

† For example, on 18 March 1972, Ulster Vanguard leader William Craig, declared: “We must build up a dossier of the men and women who are a menace to this country, because it may be our job to liquidate [them].” On 27 April Craig, addressing a meeting in London, said: “I am prepared to kill and those behind me will have my full support. We will only assassinate our enemies as a last desperate resort when we are denied our democratic rights.” On 23 November 1981, addressing a ‘Third Force’ rally in Newtownards, Rev. Ian Paisley said: “One of my commanders said to me ‘any rat will suck eggs in the presence of a chained dog’ – that is what the IRA vermin have been doing in the presence of the security forces. If that dog is not unchained, *we* will be the unchained dog! The killing of the IRA is over as far as Ulster is concerned! ...the IRA have got to be exterminated from Ulster!”

They need to be fully representative of what the thinking is on the ground, and have the balls to invite paramilitary representatives into the negotiations. Sinn Féin never shy away from putting people with baggage, people with a history, into the front line on a political basis. Until mainstream Unionism is prepared to do the same and say: if you are part of the political solution in this country, then you need to be part of the negotiations. Until we are brought to the table and seen as an equal partner, then the process is going nowhere. So the answer to your question very much lies within the heart of mainstream Unionism. The change has to be at their level. We are open for it. We have produced enough papers and have done enough research, and we have articulate people quite able to put our case forward at *any* table.

- Another thing: the CLMC [Combined Loyalist Military Command] statement [13.10.94] offered “abject and true remorse” for all innocent victims killed by loyalist paramilitaries: they said they were sorry. But republicans cannot bring themselves to say that. Until they say they are sorry, the dynamic will not change. It would remove so many barriers, it would mean an awful lot to victims, it could open up new possibilities for a genuine engagement.

Are ordinary people ready for [their politicians] to move forward? Where is the blockage? Is it at the top, or is it at the bottom as well?

- People complain that the politicians won't show leadership, are afraid to move forward, but are ordinary people ready for them to move forward? *Where* is the blockage? Is it at the top, or is it at the bottom as well?

- I believe that people at a grassroots, interface level, are more prepared to sit around a table with one another and engage in meaningful discussions than the politicians are.

- Yes, but most community engagement is mainly focused on everyday issues. I don't see many people tackling the harder questions, such as how to deal with the Past.

- That might be true, but the community meetings you refer to are nevertheless a necessity to maintaining peace at the interfaces. Because of those contacts we are able to manage interfaces and certain difficult situations which have arisen. But, you're right: that debate needs to be taken to another level, and not be restricted to day-to-day issues. But to do that, the circumstances have to be right, the timing has to be right, and there has to be a willingness to engage honestly. Whenever you are sitting down face to face with republicans you are always left feeling that they're looking at things with a political hat on as well, and being very careful of what they say, and how much they can go into the public arena with it.

- If loyalists *were* sitting down with republicans, do you think those broader questions *could* be confronted more productively; could you make a better job of moving forward than the politicians?

- I believe we could. There are agreements made at a grassroots level almost on a daily basis, that sustain relative peace on the ground, so we *could* move on from there. But there is one big problem: where does it go to? Our republican counterparts would be able to take any agreements – or suggestions as to where agreement might be found – to a party structure which might well say “okay, we’ll run with that”. But on our side the agreements are being taken to unionist politicians who are frowning on the very people sitting round the table making the agreements in the first place! So how does it go anywhere? The agreements we make are largely unofficial, off the record, and we cannot take them anywhere. There is no accepted mechanism for doing that.
- There’s another problem too, which could derail any such engagement. Take from our own perspective – the North and West of the city. You finally feel you are getting somewhere with your republican or nationalist counterparts – cross-community phone networks operating, arrangements agreed as to how to prevent interface violence – and then Gerry Adams, for some reason, turns round and says that the UDA and the UVF add nothing to any peace process! So despite *all* the daily involvement we have in numerous forums and face-to-face contacts – which, according to the people we sit down with, *are* important – senior Sinn Féin people can totally ignore these efforts, and instead trot out the old mantra: these people are gangsters, criminals, etc, who do nothing to advance peace. Never mind ‘big-house unionism’ thwarting us, sometimes the leadership of republicanism does great damage to our cross-community engagement as well.
- To return to your feelings that the Protestant working class is not properly engaged in any process, how do you think that could be changed?
- The recent election and the increased vote for the TUV [Traditional Unionist Voice] showed that the DUP’s [Democratic Unionist Party] power-base is weakening and that they have to change tact. I think we now have an opportunity to put the case to mainstream unionism that they need to embrace their working-class electorate, and see how we can work together.
- But you say that the DUP don’t really represent the Protestant working-class. In any link-up between you and mainstream unionism do you think that would change?
- The only other way would be to fight our corner at the ballot box, but the past record of Protestant working-class parties is poor. Anyway, our concern is not to divide the unionist vote. We don’t believe there is room for *more* Unionist parties. We would still advocate unionist unity, but a unity that would be all-inclusive in its representation – working class, middle class....
- Okay, we would still be wary about such a unity. Protestant working-class communities have paid a high price for the sake of ‘unity’ in the past. Notwithstanding our loyalty working-class Protestant communities have been left increasingly

disadvantaged, demoralised and alienated. But what is the alternative? What *realistic* alternative?

- Some of the republicans I have interviewed have suggested the creation of a public debating forum, open to everyone to come along to share and debate their views about our future.
- I would be interested in that. But the politicians wouldn't want a public forum, because that would be an opposition and they wouldn't want that. They silenced the Civic Forum very quickly. And look at the Unionist Forum; it fell apart before it started. There was only one sub-committee formed. The whole thing was a charade.
- I think many people are wary about *most* processes. If you ask people their definition of the 'peace process' they will say: the Troubles have ended – full stop. Now, is that good? Of course it is. But is *all* that we thought it was going to bring about? No.
- The Good Friday Agreement for many people at the grassroots means one thing only: there is less killing on the streets. That's it, period. What else does it mean to people who are unemployed, who can't read their children's homework...? Sixteen years into the Good Friday Agreement has sectarianism been challenged? No. Has the past been dealt with? No. Have flags and parades been dealt with? No.
- For any process to work you have to have people who are committed to it, and the politics we have in Northern Ireland is structured around two rigid blocks, each with opposing views as to what a shared future will even look like. And until that conversation shifts, until our politics moves away from one of Orange and Green, we will forever be treading water, stuck in the same place, going nowhere.
- We had the sight of DUP and TUV supporters shouting, jeering and waving Union flags at every success during the recent elections, instead of just accepting their victories in a sober, mature manner. To me, that was just a blatant display of Orange and Green politics, right in your face, splashed all over the media. What example does that set to the kids in the streets? Why should we expect those kids to behave more responsibly when the DUP and TUV supporters are prancing around like idiots?
- But are the politicians out of step with the grassroots, or are they *reflecting* the grassroots? I mean, would people actually allow them to start to engage? Everybody complains that the politicians won't sit down and talk productively together, but the minute it seems they might be doing that, there are hands held up in horror: "You're selling out!" So, is the blockage *just* with the politicians? Do people here *want* to move forward? People are often happiest in the security of their comfort zones.
- I think it's also a question as to whether our politicians really want to find a way forward. They get the majority of their votes from Orange and Green politics. If you take that away, who is going to vote for them? So, it is in their interest to keep this

going. So how committed are they to finding an agreement?

- But if they are stuck in Orange and Green politics because that's where their vote comes from, that means that those voters must *also* be stuck in Orange and Green attitudes?

- Nevertheless, even if ordinary people *are* stuck in sectarian mindsets, surely politicians are elected to *show leadership*, to take us beyond all that – but they seem completely unable or unwilling to do that. If they engaged fully with communities we might all find a way to move forward. But that engagement is lacking.

- Look, Stormont is dominated by two extreme parties, whose approach is the same: “I am right, you are wrong.” And that approach remains constant – it never changes. But sooner or later we have got to say, “It’s done.” It’s either over or it isn’t. And if it’s not, then go back to war. Not this constant going round and round in circles. The way Stormont is going it is just two opposing parties stuck in their righteousness, and sooner or later it will all begin to fall apart. I think it is getting close. We have to say, “It’s done, we now have to focus on how we want this place to be.” And what’s getting in the way is the “I done this, because you done that; we hate you because you won’t do this, or... this has to be resolved first.” Round and round it goes. And the main thing that is driving it is, “I am right and you are wrong.” If they hold on to that it will eventually break down.

- You have all these moderates saying that the vast majority of people want to move on. But the two extreme parties still get the largest amount of the votes cast here, so who are all these so-called moderate people voting for? *They* must still vote on a sectarian, ‘Orange and Green’ basis too.

- I think someone has to be bold. Someone who is willing to declare that the past is done. And for us to move forward, and move out of generations of conflict – which was basically about traditions, culture, identity – and into what people would call a normal society with normal politics, somebody has to be bold enough to declare that the past is complete, done; now we need a declaration to move forward. And I think what is preventing that is the ideology of righteousness: each side is saying “We’re right, and *you* lot did wrong to us.” And that’s what is preventing things from moving forward.

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- But about people who have lost loved ones? There are over three thousand unsolved murders. And while many of the family members would want to move forward, they still feel there is a great void in their lives, by not knowing, not having anyone made accountable, or anyone explain what happened to their loved ones.

- And that’s understandable, and people have to respect that. But the more we regurgitate the past, the more we bring it back into existence, the more we could retreat back into conflict. We are going round and round. I mean, how long now have we been in a ‘transitional’ peace process? But yet the source of that conflict is still being debated, discussed, in terms of ‘right and wrong’ – and that’s a dead end.

- Say unionist politicians said: “Okay, we’re going to show leadership; we have to move on, and the first gesture we are going to make is to accept the flag vote†”, what do you think would happen at the grassroots? Would they come on board, or say “No way!” – and go back onto the streets?

- To me something *has* already altered at the grassroots way of thinking, around tradition and identity. Because see this whole thing around the flag issue; if that had’ve happened in the early seventies, it could quite easily have led to civil war. But it didn’t this time. All the talk about masses of people out on the street, and out and out conflict... it didn’t materialise the way some people had predicted. So, to me something has *already* shifted at the grassroots. The flag protests that I myself witnessed only had five or six people standing in the middle of the road, or a couple of hundred people outside the City Hall. If the flag issue had arisen in 1972 you’d be talking about thousands upon thousands of people. So something *has* shifted in the loyalist grassroots reaction to things of that nature. And to me there is more people out there among the ordinary grassroots, traditional Protestant background, who *do* want a peace process, who *do* want a way forward. But the politicians in their disagreements are keeping us entrenched. The shift has to come at the top; they have to show leadership.

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- But is that shift in perceptions positive – wanting to move forward – or it is negative? One young person recently said to me that “The Protestant community is finished as a community.” So it was a sign of deep apathy on his part.

- I think it is a bit of both. Yes, there is apathy, but there is also disillusionment with our politicians. There has to be proper leadership shown, and from what I see of the people in Stormont, the leadership that they’re showing is more committed to holding on to everything which *divides* our two communities, rather than the things which might unite us. I watch the TV and on every discussion, including *The Nolan Show*, ordinary members of the public repeatedly make the same complaint: “I’m sick of hearing the same politics being spouted over and over again.”

† On 3 December 2012 Belfast City Council voted on a Sinn Féin and SDLP proposal that the Union flag, which had been flown every day on the City Hall, should not be flown at all. The Alliance Party’s compromise was carried: that the flags should be flown on designated days.

- When it went to a referendum about whether people wanted peace, the people voted for it, overwhelmingly. If it went to a vote again – and despite all the grumblings voiced since – I suspect that people would *still* vote for it. And people who voted for that were putting their faith in those who were voted in, to take up that baton and make it happen. And whilst we might have an end to violence the stumbling block at the minute is dealing with the past, and that is one of the main things which is preventing us from moving forward into a normal political society. And the people who are keeping that going are the people at the top who are arguing and not willing to agree.
- Even working-class parties can get fixated with ‘identity’ politics. The PUP [Progressive Unionist Party] declared that all their candidates standing for Belfast City Council would have to sign a pledge that they would work to get the Union flag flying again over the City Hall. Now, to some that might indeed be important, but surely it isn’t the main priority for working-class communities?
- What about a second tier of political debate? One led by people at the grassroots?
- There is certainly space for people at the bottom to begin to alter the debate and conversation; not to abandon their aspirations but to try and agree a way forward. But that will take people to be bold, people who are prepared to take risks and hope others follow.
- But any debate involving republicans is already unbalanced by the fact that they are already getting most of their wish-list: the likes of OTR letters† and Royal Pardons††. Within our community there is the perception that nationalism and republicanism got quite a lot out of the Good Friday Agreement, and we have been left behind. So any debate would not be taking place between equals.
- See what you just said there, that’s why I find things so totally frustrating, because we are still talking about “they got this, and we didn’t get that...” This conversation that *we*’re having is exactly the same conversation that is going on at the top of the political leadership. And *we*’re not going to agree on it, and *they*’re not going to agree on it, so to me it is *not about agreement*, for we are *not going to get* agreement. What we need to do is to put our identity needs to the side – not to abandon them, just agree that they are not the dominant issues – and come up with a shared vision of what we want this society to look like: prosperous, a good education for our kids, a better standard of living, an economic system that functions on the basis of equality.

† ‘On The Runs’. In early 2014 it emerged that almost 190 on-the-run republicans had been given letters informing them that they were not being sought by the police authorities in the UK. It further emerged that 95 of these individuals had been linked by the police to 295 murders.

†† On 2 May 2014 the Northern Ireland Secretary of State disclosed that 365 royal pardons had been issued in Northern Ireland between 1979 and 2002. The Northern Ireland Office said that the vast majority of these pardons were not terrorism-related.

- I'm not sure that those other issues could actually be tackled by our politicians. I'm not convinced that they have that capability. It is far easier for them to deal with 'Orange and Green' issues. Many of the people who have entered politics here over the past forty years are people whose main 'expertise' – if you want to call it that – lies in the politics of division. That's where they feel most secure, that's what gets them fired up.
- Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea if the Assembly did come down. Maybe there needs to be a crisis for people to see what is at stake.
- They *should* be able to move away from the old politics. I mean, at the core of the old politics were unionist fears of a United Ireland. I don't think the United Ireland agenda has the same ability to raise those same fears now. Poll after poll shows that there is no appetite for a United Ireland. I think unionism is not scared to the same extent. So perhaps a totally new conversation about what we *really* want *is* possible.
- I would agree. We had a meeting a while back involving a number of people from different political backgrounds within unionism and loyalism, and the question was put to them: do you believe the Union is safe? Any *every one* of them said, 'yes'... every one of them.
- So why then are our politicians still trying to make it appear that it is under threat?
- Because it keeps them in power. That the way politics is misused. They will do anything to stay in power.
- All current political conversation is just a regurgitation of everything to do with the past, which got us into this mess in the first place. And that conversation is happening at the grassroots of this society, right up to the top. It's all to do with the past, not what do we want for our future, and what is each side willing to give up to make it work?
- But what more can we give up? Republicans are in a constant battle to remove all symbols of Britishness from Northern Ireland.
- What I'd love to know is: if Sinn Féin ever get their United Ireland, are they going to demand that all the British symbols, to which they object so strongly in Northern Ireland, will have to be removed from Dublin? If you visit Dublin, symbols of Orangeism and Britishness are everywhere and no-one has any problem with it. There are two massive tapestries in the Bank of Ireland depicting William at the Boyne and the Siege of Derry. St Patrick's Cathedral is coming down with regimental banners, Union flags and memorials to the British Army and RAF. The museums have commemorative plates and other items presented by William... What will the Shinners do with all these symbols of Britishness? I don't think the Dublin tourist board would be too happy if they were asked to remove these things.

- Let's stay on the topic of culture and identity. As you point out, people in the Protestant community feel that they should be allowed to celebrate and cherish their British identity. So freedom to express one's identity is a fundamental right?
- Of course it is.
- How, then, would you assist people in the Catholic/nationalist/republican community in celebrating and expressing *their* identity?
- But they're trying to suppress *our* identity.
- That's a different issue. How do you protect *all* identities, on an equal footing?
- I have no issue with their identity at all. I don't even have an issue with the Tricolour. It doesn't offend me; if they want to fly it let them fly it. But one thing we have to understand: the Union flag in Northern Ireland is the flag of our nation, it is for *everybody* in Northern Ireland. The flag is not for Unionism or Loyalism, it represents everybody throughout the UK: all the different cultures, all the different backgrounds, all the different religions, which make up the UK. Where else in the world would you get a situation where you weren't allowed to fly your country's flag!
- But look at eastern Ukraine. The national flag of Ukraine isn't flown in pro-Russian areas; the groups there say that it doesn't represent them, they fly the Russian flag instead. The fact is that a flag can mean different things to different people.
- Stop there! Before we get any deeper into this discussion, let's take a reality check. I spent seventeen years in jail, taking a stand in defending a position in opposition to another position! I don't want to do that again. People have to ask themselves: is our constant bickering over 'Orange and Green' politics, and who did wrong to who in the past... is that what we really want, for ourselves and our kids? Or is it something else? And if it is something else, people have got to be prepared to take risks and let go of something to make it work. And that will mean us saying to the Catholic community: we're willing to let go of whatever needs to be let go of, to make this work. And the Catholic/nationalist/republican community have to say the same thing, that they're willing to let go of whatever *they* need to let go of to make it work. And we're not going to like it. Just as the victims are not going to like it if we say, it is now done and we're not going to pursue people and punishment; we're going to look at some other mechanism which can hopefully give you some sense of closure, but we're not going to continue to have inquiry after inquiry, where the people who are pursuing these are doing so from the position: you were wrong, you shouldn't have done that to us. So, going back to one of your very first questions, we need a process that can help us to move on, or else we will begin to move back – and surely no-one wants that.

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The Republican viewpoint

The republican participants were asked the same questions as their loyalist counterparts. The following is an edited summary of some of the responses.

- Haass and O’Sullivan came here with totally unrealistic expectations. They were going to spend four months here, and at the end of that period they were going to present a report that would tell us how to resolve 800 years of history and move forward? Totally unrealistic. The only people who are going to solve our problems are ourselves. Americans in particular are not going to do that for us. In fact, they can make things worse. Let’s face it, thanks in part to George Mitchell’s efforts, sectarianism and communal division were consolidated in the creation of the power-sharing Assembly. Rather than resolve our divisions, it exacerbated them. Okay, the guns may be silent, but *sixteen years* after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, does anyone see evidence that we moving into a new future, a shared future? Only the other day Robinson and McGuinness were swapping accusations of ‘cowardice’, and flinging the past at one another.

Sixteen years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, does anyone see evidence that we are moving into a new future, a shared future?

- In every conflict throughout the world where America has involved itself, where has it solved any problems? As was just said, they often make things worse. They went into Iraq and it now faces a continuing sectarian bloodbath. Same in Libya: it is now a lawless state. Everywhere they have gone they have left a mess. So what makes them think they can come here and solve *our* problems?
- The way the Assembly is constituted there is no incentive for the political parties to tackle sectarianism, because if they do and people then start voting on class politics, three-quarters of the people sitting up at Stormont won’t be there. A politician’s primary aim in life is to protect his party and his seat.
- What *type* of process could be workable?
- A workable process must be inclusive. And what concerns me is that the Protestant working class have nobody to stand up and speak for them. People like Davy Ervine, Gusty Spence, Billy Mitchell and others tried to take their community in a new direction, but they are gone and haven’t been replaced.
- Loyalists are obsessed with perceived threats to their Britishness. But two of the greatest British institutions in the history of the world – the Welfare State and the National Health Service – are under *real* threat, yet nobody from the Protestant

working class is motivated to stand up and oppose these threats. Surely fighting to protect the National Health Service and the Welfare State is more relevant to the core values of Britishness than waving a piece of coloured cloth. The irony is that I, as an Irish Republican, am expending more effort to preserve those two great British institutions than most loyalists!

- But identity is nevertheless a real issue to them. How do we get a process in which *whatever is real* to people is tackled?

- Whenever loyalists hear the word ‘Republican’ the first thing they think is: IRA man. But I know *British* republicans, who are intensely protective of their Britishness and value great British institutions – their parliamentary democracy, the welfare state, the National Health Service – but see no reason why Britain cannot be a republic rather than a monarchy.

- But do republicans have to question their own attitudes and assumptions as well? The other day I had the following conversation with some young nationalists/republicans:

“Why is it that you don’t like Orangeism?”

“Why the f___ should we?”

“Well, orange is an integral part of the Irish Tricolour.”

“Oh, the orange doesn’t stand for Orangeism, just for Protestants.”

“But many Protestants are either in, or supportive of, the Orange Order.”

“Well, we don’t f___ing like the Orange Order.”

“Even though your flag seeks to represent both Green and Orange traditions?”

“Are you just f___ing trying to wind us up!”

- I suppose many nationalists and republicans would oppose the Orange Order because they can’t respect an organisation which is so exclusive in its make-up, the way it deliberately excludes Catholics.

- But republicanism has been exclusive too. De Valera, in an Easter radio broadcast [1935], said that “Since the coming of St Patrick... Ireland has been a Catholic nation; she remains a Catholic nation.” And in 1933 deputy premier Sean T O’Kelly declared that, “the Free State Government was inspired in its every administrative action by Catholic principles and doctrine.” So some republicans have been highly dismissive of the Protestants of Ireland. Is that not being exclusivist as well?

- You’re right. Both sides here can be equally self-righteous.

- I think the Orange Order *has* a part to play, but it would be social, it would not be political or economic. One lad said at a meeting: the Orange Order has no role to play in a new Ireland. And I asked him: “What do you know about the Orange Order?” “Nothing.” A mate of mine was a Worshipful Master in his lodge, and he told me

about the social aspect of being an Orangeman. The only thing he hates about being an Orangeman is marching! There are socials in his lodge every week, and there is a vast community aspect to being in the Orange Order. And they have a right to that culture, to their Protestantism – that is fine. But what they don't have is any right to tell me how to live my life: whether in economic terms, or politically, or morally. And I don't just direct this at the Orange Order. I include all the churches, especially the Catholic Church. In a modern society the day is gone when these institutions should be allowed to take on the role of moral guardians for the rest of us. Those days are over. And that is why the churches are emptying in droves.

- I was at that meeting, and one of those young lads said that nothing would be solved in Northern Ireland until the Orange Order was done away with.
- If the perception is that the Orange Order is part of the problem, then they also have to be part of the solution. Just like the ex-prisoner groups. If we were part of the problem which got us here, then we need to be part of the solution that gets us beyond this.
- You are asking us about a viable process. But there might never be a viable process here; our politicians are locked into a blame game from which they don't seem to be able to escape. If you watched *The Nolan Show* the other night many of the young people in the audience were saying to the politicians: “When are you going to stop all this posturing, when are you actually going to do something constructive, carry out some actual politics?” And the DUP and Sinn Féin could only respond with the same old rhetoric, the same old finger-pointing. I don't see a ‘viable process’, as you call it, anywhere near the horizon.
- You also asked why such processes fail. It's an interesting question. Is it the parties? Is it the personalities? Or maybe it's *us*, the ordinary people. Maybe people have been segregated for so long that they actually *don't* wish to reintegrate or live together. There has been that much hurt and pain that that's possible. We might have to wait a generation or two, until the majority of kids start going to school together.
- There might be something in that. A friend of mine went to work abroad for a number of years. While he was away his father, who was in the RUC, was killed by the IRA. His firm flew him to Dublin, the Garda drove him to the border, and the RUC then took him straight to the funeral. I saw him the following day, and he said to me, “You know, I feel really bitter. But don't get me wrong, I don't mean bitter against the Catholic community for what the IRA did. No, having been away for all these years I have realised that there is a whole different world out there, where people are not so self-obsessed in their wee bigotries and petty attitudes. I am bitter against this *whole society*. I really believe that many people here *enjoy* their wee bigotries; it is a comfort blanket to them, and they would not thank you for trying to take it away from them.”

• I can see why he would feel like that. One of my nephews, from a strong nationalist family, went to work and live in Australia. Within six months you could see from his emails that his attitude was changing. He eventually said: “I will never go back to Belfast. I couldn’t put up with hearing the same old attitudes, watching the same old rituals – on both sides.” And he was right: people’s conversations in the local pubs today are probably the same as that of their fathers and grandfathers.

“I really believe that many people here enjoy their wee bigotries; it is a comfort blanket to them, and they would not thank you for trying to take it away from them.”

People perpetuate those ‘them and us’ attitudes which keep us divided.

• What worries me is that there are people sitting in the Falls and the Shankill who would have no problem if things went back, for it would reignite their self-image, their status, their macho strutting about like Che Guevara or Lord Carson. And it’s absolute nonsense! But if we keep voting in a tribal way we will never move forward.

• It seems so much at odds with the openness, generosity and friendliness of people here. Take the reaction to the *Giro d’Italia*. Visitors kept saying the same thing to the media: “You people here are so friendly!” It’s like we have a split personality. We have the ability to be open and hospitable to outsiders, and yet we can’t rise above our petty bigotries. It would probably take a psychiatrist to explain us to ourselves!

• Let’s go back to our discussion about ‘process’. Is there still a ‘peace process’?

• No, there isn’t! The peace process at the grassroots was sidelined long ago by the political process at Stormont – if you could call it ‘political’. And the two main players up there are so far apart, and there’s an unwillingness from an awful lot of them to tackle sectarianism. What gets me is that £80M peace money has been targeted at our conflict to date, but it is all a waste of time if our politicians remain entrenched in the old sectarian attitudes. And while community workers, when they apply for funding, have to jump through endless hoops to show that they are working ‘cross community’, no such expectations are laid on the political parties. And yet they have the ability to undo all the positive work done at the grassroots. It’s farcical.

• People vote on the old tribal card. Their mummy or daddy voted for Sinn Féin, or their uncle was shot dead so in his mortal memory they will vote Sinn Féin. The loyalist working class will vote for ‘big-house unionism’ time and time again.

• If you look at the recent [local government] elections, Jim Allister’s vote is going to scare the crap out of the DUP, so they can’t be seen to be compromising. There’s an election in about a year’s time, so there will be no movement from unionism within that timeframe, so we are condemned to another year. And then there will be the Stormont elections after that. The continuous cycle of elections will not allow

progress. You have these ones got their backs to the wall at Twaddell† and they don't know how to get out. Unionism to me falls into the same old trap. We had it over Drumcree, we had it over Ormeau Road: 'Our backs are to the wall, we can go no further!' You would actually be surprised how much further they can go when the issue is pushed. But they still fall into that trap: "Let's shout the loudest and see what happens." But what's the result? Themuns are stuck at Twaddell not knowing where to go, apart from bitching about 'traditional routes'.

- Just because you say you have a right to march, it doesn't mean you *can* march. With rights come responsibilities. But the Orangemen aren't talking about their responsibilities, they're just harping on about their 'rights'! "We have a right to march the Queen's highway, when we want and where we want. That's the fundamental thing you have to bow down to!" The images of them outside St Patrick's show what their baseline is. They're just sectarian freaks and they haven't moved from that baseline. Some of them *have* tried and have got lost in the mist. Because of the recent vote the DUP are going to have to become even more right-wing than Jim Allister, so anyone with a liberal mind within the Protestant community is going to get lost at the next elections. As soon as there is any talk about accommodation or even social issues, the cry will go up: "No, the main issue is our marches, our flags!" It shows the siege mentality and where they have got themselves politically.
- Even if unionist leaders *did* want to begin to work on the social issues they are afraid of the crowd standing outside the City Hall. Instead of political initiatives coming down from the political leadership, it is these small number of people *pushing up* who are dictating. So that vocal section of grassroots unionism is dictating big politics.
- Even if the majority of people at the grassroots wanted to move forward, I don't think they can do anything, because the political will at the top of unionism just isn't there. Certainly the will to tackle sectarianism doesn't seem to be there. So, to go back to your question: I don't see *any* process being successful. Politicians can't engage meaningfully while they are entrenched in this tug-of-war game between unionism and nationalism, and it's the ordinary people and their children who will suffer.
- One of the things which has surprised me, is that whenever I have asked people within the nationalist/republican community what's missing from the process, ten or fifteen years ago somebody would have been sure to say that Partition has not been addressed. But this time the word has never come up. Is that a dead issue, then?
- You know, you're right. Unionists feel that the Union is secure. And if you look at the Sinn Féin project down South, for them Partition is blurred now. They have an

† When local Orange lodges were refused permission to complete the homeward leg of their Twelfth parade, rioting ensued. At Twaddell Avenue, close to the interface, a 'Civil Rights Camp' was set up on derelict ground, vowing to remain there until the marchers were able to 'return home'.

agenda that, particularly with them ensconced in the two administrations on the island, it will *look like* it is a United Ireland. And if you go to Ardoyne and ask about Partition, they will say: “Of course, yes, we’re against it... but there are other more pressing issues here, social issues, and in particular the Orange Order.”

- If it *was* possible to come up with a new process, they need to invite *everyone* along. There will be people who come along and make a complete idjit of themselves. There will be others who will come and not contribute. There will be others who will contribute, some negatively, others positively. But at least they are involved. But to not invite people risks any process falling apart.
- What galls me is that our politicians – who won’t engage in any *serious* process of conflict resolution – still have the nerve to sell our ‘peace model’ to the world: “Look, this process here brought the main protagonists to an end of conflict.” It is being sold as the complete package. You’d almost think it was being promoted simply for the sake of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board!
- How come, if the conflict is ‘over’, there have been forty *more* peacewalls erected in Belfast *since* the conflict supposedly ended? The people I have met who came here from other conflict areas round the world have departed very disappointed. It is sold as the way to achieve peace. But people come here and say, “No, it’s not.” Some people from the Middle East told me: “This isn’t peace, this is conflict management.” It’s hard to disagree with that.
- When Haass came here he must have been aghast. Here he was, meeting with highly educated politicians, well dressed, well spoken, yet totally unable to undertake what was necessary, some of them because – let’s be honest about it – they still remain out-and-out bigots. He was probably glad to see the back of the place.
- The Unionists annoy me the way they cannot just come out and condemn things; there is always some caveat added. Instead of turning round and saying, “What happened to the Alliance Party in East Belfast was totally and utterly wrong, full stop”, there have to qualify it: “But we can understand why some people might feel...” Crap!
- And as for the Shinners... Sinn Féin’s priority around here is ‘protect the peace process’, i.e. protect their vote – if you vote for somebody different you must be anti-peace. Take even those residents opposed to the proposed new stadium at Casement Park. They held a protest outside Connolly House, but Sinn Féin claimed the protest had been hijacked by ‘anti-Sinn Féin elements’! This was nothing to do with politics, this was to do with a stadium overshadowing people’s houses! But because they had the audacity to stand outside Connolly House they were somehow ‘anti-peace’.

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- Sinn Féin and the SDLP are willing to compromise, they seem to have more flexibility than the unionists. When something happens, instead of reflecting on it, unionists can't get politicians onto the TV quick enough to condemn it. Don't forget that Peter Robinson threatened to bring down the Assembly over a screw's badge! "You take that badge away, and I'm out of here?" The Shinners backed off. They should have said, "Go ahead, then, close it down." But they are willing to tug and give, because they have a bigger picture. And maybe that's the problem within unionism: they don't have a bigger picture, they only react. They have no game plan. Whether it is five years, ten years... They don't have a strategy; they don't know where they are going. At least Sinn Féin, no matter even what I think of them, have a game plan. Now, I will disagree with it, and say that it is not working, but they still have a plan. Look at the way the two unionist parties went ballistic over that flag vote at the City Hall. They are saying they would reverse the decision if they get enough councillors back in. Now, say that ever *did* happen, do you think the SDLP and Sinn Féin will raise tensions within nationalism and get people out protesting outside the City Hall every Saturday? No, they won't; they will say: this is a short-term thing. In another four years we'll be the biggest block on the council again, and we'll take it down then. They are willing and intelligent enough to take a step back when something doesn't go according to plan. Unionism doesn't seem to be able to do that. For them it's a case of: "That didn't go the way we wanted: how we get it to go the way we want immediately!" They block roads. When the Orangemen couldn't get up through Ardoyne they rioted. And they're standing there at Twaddell howling at the moon. They barged ahead and built their wee so-called 'Civil Rights Camp', when any sensible group of people would have sat down and asked themselves: "Now, if we do this, how long are we prepared to be here? What are the chances of us getting what we want? Could we lose out here?"

- They are giving it all this about their culture and their rights, as if their rights supersede everyone else's. And to listen to them their culture is apparently the only culture in the world, better than anyone else's. They talk about a shared space, but a shared space is somewhere anyone can go and not feel intimidated. And if you have an Orange band marching up and down, that is not a shared space, that is just marking out territory. It's not a space where everybody feels welcome.

- There *are* loyalists there who are doing their damndest for their community. We know that, for we work with some of them, but they are stifled, people don't vote for them, they can't break through that barrier.

- Unionists and loyalists don't seem to be able to step back and ask themselves: "Look, this is our culture, this is who we are. Now, how are we going to express it to our best advantage? Let's analyse the way we are currently presenting and promoting our culture, and determine if we are going the best way about it. Are we explaining ourselves properly; what is the public image of ourselves we are putting out?" But

they don't seem either able or willing to engage in that. Maybe because unionism and loyalism never had to; they were in control, they could dictate to Catholics. That has all changed, but *they haven't*, they haven't changed in their thinking process.

- Someone like Jim Allister can get 80,000 votes from the unionist community and many in our community wonder how someone like him can get so many votes. He is seen as being on the entrenched, bigoted fringe of unionism. I say to them: sure Ian Paisley got far more than him and Allister is no different from Paisley. He was in Paisley's party, and he learnt to do what Paisley used to do, and he is doing it now because Paisley isn't doing it any more.

- And unionists thunder on about their 'democratic rights'. The way the voting patterns are going Sinn Féin will eventually be the biggest party, and you could have a situation where Martin McGuinness becomes First Minister. What will unionists do then? Some of them have already indicated that that would be a bridge too far. And then we will learn if they *really* believe in democracy.

We could eventually have a situation where Martin McGuinness becomes First Minister. Then we will learn if [unionists] really believe in democracy.

- Anyway, we're wandering off the questions you asked us. So when you ask: how do we resolve the marching and other contentious issues, the truth is that we don't have the politicians who can do it. And by asking someone from outside – like Haass – to come in and do it, the politicians are, in effect, admitting their own inability. They don't seem to have the courage to come up with a deal and ask the people to accept it. Instead they allow that small number of people who are howling at the moon to dictate. What use are politicians like that?

- Many of the loyalists I spoke to claimed that republicans are not being honest about the Past.

- We're not being honest about the Past! For f___'s sake, what about them being honest about the Present! They play a sectarian song outside a Catholic church and then tell everybody, "Oh that's not that song about dancing on Fenians' heads, that's a pop song." Do they think we're f___ing stupid! And they say, "Oh, we didn't realise we had stopped outside a church." Again, do they think we're stupid? If they want to talk about 'honesty', why don't they just own up and say, "Yes, within our ranks we have bigots, but we're trying to move away from those attitudes," rather than all this pretence. They try to tell everyone that the Orange Order is solely a cultural organisation. Why can't they be honest and say, "Yes, within Orange ranks there are bigots and people who have acted in extremely sectarian ways in the past, but, again, we are trying to move people away from that." Be honest, own up about those things and then we can all begin to move on. Even though I am an Irish Republican I can see ways in which Loyalism and Unionism could be presented as strong, even

progressive, political philosophies, but the way they are being promoted at present they come over completely negatively to the nationalist community. Unionists and loyalists are not doing themselves any favours with all their antics.

- I know what you mean. Some years ago I sat down with a small group of leading Orangemen to discuss the Garvaghy Road situation. As the conversation progressed all the old righteousness that I had been only too familiar with from the media came over loud and clear: their sense of grievance in particular. I then asked them how they felt the local Catholic community perceived the situation, and there was a short silence. And then one of them said that the last thing that he wanted was for Catholics to think that he felt superior to them, or that he was out to put them down. Another, with genuine emotion in his voice, said that he was basically a ‘country’ Orangeman who always had good, friendly relationships with the Catholic farmers around him, and it really saddened and hurt him the way events were driving a wedge between them. I must admit I was surprised by this frankness, and I remarked: “What you have just said presents you in quite a different light than the way you come over in the media. Why won’t you reveal this side of yourselves?” “Oh, we couldn’t do that; there’s other people would soon come down on us like a ton of bricks.” That’s the tragedy of this place: many people do want a genuine accommodation, but they are forever looking over their shoulders.

- On the subject of Garvaghy Road. We were in a meeting with some loyalists and they were laughing about an incident that happened with the lodge members. As you know there is this ritual where they attempt to walk their route, the police block them, and they then hand over their letter of protest. And one day the PSNI weren’t there. And instead of taking this great opportunity to finish their walk down the Garvaghy Road they phoned the cops to tell them they had a letter to give to them! The loyalists thought this was absolutely hilarious.

- I fully agree with what you said a moment ago about people not feeling able to say exactly how they feel, without fear of being viewed as ‘traitors’ in their own community. At a joint meeting we attended recently a leading loyalist from East Belfast put forward the suggestion that there should be a federal Ireland. Now, that was quite something to hear coming from a loyalist! Unfortunately the rest of them just sat there and said nothing. But those are the type of things that would make for real debate. I would be perfectly willing to engage with loyalists on the pros and cons of either a United Ireland or a strengthening of the Union.

- We all have taken on aspects of each other’s identities, anyway. Whether we like it or not – or whether we know it or not – we all have British and Irish aspects to our identities, right down to the football teams we support.

- Anyway, *who* is it determines that others are being ‘traitors’ to their communities? Who is supposed to be the typical Protestant or Catholic? When the media want to

portray the Protestant working-class community they drag on flute band members who talk about how the ‘Taigs’ are talking their culture away from them and won’t let them march down the road. It’s almost a cliché now. And the media do the same with us: Sinn Féin present their own version of the flute band members, or else the media throw in a few dissidents. But do these people *really* represent two entire communities? If you want to know who I think should be involved in a new process, it is the ordinary person on the street. Keep the politicians out. Even us – keep us out too, we are all too long in the tooth. We are too saddled with the baggage of the past.

- I have one major problem with the questions you are asking us. Well, not so much with the questions, but the fact that – for this particular pamphlet at least – you are directing them at loyalist and republican ex-combatants. People tend to think that ex-combatants are nearly all political, but they’re not. Because they went out and fought, people assume they were political. But a lot of them didn’t join up for political reasons, they joined because ‘our’ side was fighting the ‘other’ side, or ‘our’ side was fighting the Army. And I think sometimes people expect too much of them, and after the length of time and effort we have been devoting to this ex-prisoners thing, to be quite honest, all it has done is to tame down the ex-prisoners and stop militancy in their areas to a great extent. But I am now beginning to wonder whether it is going to advance in any way beyond that. To be honest, I come away from ex-prisoners’ meetings feeling quite despondent. Yes, we have respect for one another. Yes, we can agree that the war is over. Yes, we can agree that our kids shouldn’t have to go through what we did. But that’s it. We don’t seem to progress beyond that point; we don’t sit down and plan a pathway to the future.

Yes, we can agree that the war is over. Yes, we can agree that our kids shouldn’t have to go through what we did. But that’s it. We don’t seem to progress beyond that point; we don’t sit down and plan a pathway to the future.

- Thankfully, we are not living in the violent society we lived through in the seventies and eighties. But have people settled for that? Yes, I think people have settled for the lowest common denominator, rather than trying to fulfil aspirations to make things even better. And we also have a middle class who are comfortable with their decent civil service salaries and pension provision, and they won’t rock the boat.

- We need a political forum of some sort, providing the opportunity for an ongoing debate, which isn’t attached to either of the tribal identities. There should be some form of ongoing debate, it has to be continuous. Another aspect would be that if certain conclusions came about the politicians could use these as get-off clauses. Help to get them off the hook.

- Everybody is afraid that if you deviate from your path you are going to let that other

crowd gain points over you, and so you act in solidarity with – what? The whole debate has to be with that ‘what’. Each group is afraid of another group coming up more nationalist or unionist than them. We are constantly looking over our shoulders. What we need to have is something at the core which we can all believe in, irrespective of cultural allegiances. Those allegiances should be at the back of our heads, but at present they are at the front of our heads, when ordinary economic and everyday issues should be to the forefront. Hopefully the nationalist thing would fade over a few generations. It is that invisible thing on both sides. But we have to define it, and be honest about it. McGuinness has to say, “I know there is not a United Ireland on the horizon”, and Robinson has to say, “I know this place isn’t as British as Finchley.” We must give up those rigidities for the sake of a better future.

• I know a lot of what has been said to you will make depressing reading, but, to be honest, while I accept there is still a large amount of sectarianism in this society, I think it is gradually dissipating. Would anyone here say that their children are more sectarian? I don’t think they are. It’s the bandsmen and flag protesters and dissidents who are trotted out on TV every week who make you believe that this place is more sectarian than ever. But it’s not. If you go into the centre of the town, into the bars, it’s mixed in ways it never would have been before. Young people increasingly make their friends from ‘across the divide’. Indeed, many of my young nieces and nephews don’t even *know* whether their friends are Protestants or Catholics – *and they don’t care!* But no mention is made of all that. We have to stop being held back by the strident bandsmen or the dissidents, and ask: what about the rest of us? What type of society do *we* want?

Many of my young nieces and nephews don’t even know whether their friends are Protestants or Catholics – and they don’t care! We have to stop being held back by the strident bandsmen or the dissidents and ask: what do the rest of us want? What type of society do we want?

• I think that all these discussions should go into pamphlets and widely distributed – and I know that that’s what you *have* been doing – so that the lessons reached can be shared among more and more people. Because we go into meetings time and time again, and come to similar conclusions – but nothing happens, until the next meeting and then we start discussing the same issues all over again! We need to move forward – and we need a process that will assist us to move forward. Unfortunately, there doesn’t seem to be one about at present.

A hint of anarchism?

• You're asking about what kind of process could take us forward. The main problem I have with all talk of a 'process', is that it assumes the involvement of the politicians. I genuinely believe that that is a dead end. Having faith in the ability of our political leaders to move forward is, to me, completely misplaced. In my opinion they are *just not capable*. A recent study of DUP members reveals that many of them dislike having to share power with Sinn Féin. Some DUP MLAs can't even say 'hello' to Martin McGuinness when they pass him in the corridors of Stormont. So how can we expect people to engage in purposeful dialogue with their political opponents when they can't even show them the simplest of courtesies? We have to be realistic here. At the core of the DUP is a religious and political fundamentalism which I think will always prevent them from being able to make the necessary accommodations and compromises. So I feel that people are just deluding themselves by relying on our politicians. We have to look at the community instead, and see if a purposeful process can be developed *from the bottom up*, rather than from the top down.

• I would agree with that; I am sick to death of our politicians – I think we should do away with them all. We just need people with skills to run the country. Get rid of all our assorted political parties, and bring together a bunch of people who are recognised for their expertise and commitment with regard to the important things in life – economics, education, health, welfare – and say to them: look, here's the budget we have, work out how best to use it for the greatest good. And let them deal with it. You would probably get far better results than from the politicians.

• Never mind the politicians, what gets me is all those *unelected* people – Special Branch, MI5, MI6 – who seem to be following their own agenda, doing deals behind our backs – even behind the backs of the politicians: OTR letters, Royal Pardons.... And these unaccountable securocrats weave a web of deception. People talk about Russia or China being secretive societies, with hidden cabals pulling the strings – sure the same thing happens here!

• You lot are all beginning to sound like anarchists.

• Oh no, I think we've had enough bomb-throwers!

• No, that's not anarchism. I mean the anarchist belief that society should be organised from the bottom up, and not dictated to by politicians, clergymen or bankers.

• You know, there might be something in that. In Belgium in 2010–11 the political parties, representing the Flemish and Walloon communities, were unable to agree the formation of a coalition, with the result that there was *no government* in Belgium for *twenty months*! Yet Belgium didn't fall apart. Indeed, some of the politicians expressed concern, not at their inability to work together, but that the population

might conclude that it wasn't really necessary to elect them in the first place!

- Going back to what was said earlier about any process being rooted at the grassroots. People try to claim that our own peace process 'started' with John Hume and Gerry Adams, or Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern... not forgetting a host of Americans, Clinton among them. But, in reality, *the peace process started the same day the first stone was thrown*. It was started by ordinary people, in both communities, wanting to do something positive amidst the chaos going on all around them. And this at a time when government agencies were largely paralysed and didn't know how to react.

The peace process started the same day the first stone was thrown. It was started by ordinary people, in both communities, wanting to do something positive amidst the chaos going on all around them.

- You're right. I was amazed when I read that pamphlet you did about how people at the grassroots responded to the Troubles.†

- If you were to try and sideline the politicians they would raise an almighty stink.

- No doubt. I was a founder member of the Rathcoole Self-Help Group, which was set up in 1982. It was largely made up of young people who were disillusioned with the mainstream unionist parties, who only seemed interested in 'this we will maintain' and 'not an inch'. So, in the Newtownabbey Borough election of 1985 we decided to put up candidates for the 'All Night Party'. One of the candidates, Hagar the Horrible – named after a popular cartoon character – went around the estate wearing a viking helmet. Our election manifesto included 'promises' to rebuild Stormont in Rathcoole and turn it into an all-night disco, to hold the next Olympics in Rathcoole, and to tilt the world's axis so that Rathcoole would get more sunshine! Our election banner – reading NO MORE SHITE – VOTE ALL NIGHT! – was strung across the entrance to the estate. The politicians were totally outraged. Members of the DUP confronted us, absolutely livid, and accused us of "making a mockery of politics". Our response was: "We are making a mockery of politics? We don't have to – you lot have been doing that very successfully for years!"

- To get back, I think there would be mileage in that suggestion made to you by republicans: for a permanent debating forum open to all sections of the community. I would be up for that.

- The politicians wouldn't like that either; they would see it as a threat.

- Tough!

† Island Pamphlet No. 90, *Self-help at the grassroots*, available as a free pdf download from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

2: An alternative process?

In December 1969, as a direct response to the inter-communal violence, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission (not to be confused with the current Northern Ireland Community Relations Council) was established by government under the chairmanship of Dr Maurice Hayes, for the purpose of mending relationships between the Protestant and Catholic communities.

The Commission's first fieldworker was Joe Camplisson, a resident of the Catholic working-class estate of Turf Lodge in West Belfast, who got involved in grassroots community action by necessity rather than design.† Camplisson was able to establish strong and trusted relationships with republican and loyalist paramilitary leaders.

However, achieving productive results from this engagement was no easy task. For instance, one particular conference convinced Camplisson that simply bringing people together to debate without adequate preparation and theoretical underpinning was not only insufficient but could be detrimental to any conflict resolution process. It was held in Amherst, Massachusetts, and was attended by leading loyalists and republicans, as well as mainstream politicians. One participant was Seamus Costello (Irish Republican Socialist Party/Irish National Liberation Army), whose blistering counter-attacks on most of those present proved devastating. As Camplisson recalled:

He was absolutely sharp in his intellect and he quickly demolished the analysis offered by the moderate Irish politicians who were present. Then he started in on the loyalists with a similar incisiveness. But it would have been better if he had held back and allowed some articulation of positions to be developed, for the only way his argument could be equalised was by the gun and that was what it was inviting. I later sat with him over lunch and challenged his approach, saying I felt he had set back much of the work that was being attempted. To his credit, he did then begin to pull back, but it was a salutary lesson for me. [Costello was shot dead in Dublin in October 1977 by other republicans.]

The lack of theoretical underpinning was to be greatly rectified when the Commission brought in John Wear Burton (1915–2010), from London University, to assist Camplisson. It is Burton's theories on conflict resolution which still guide Camplisson in his work today. Camplisson recalls:

† Camplisson's remarkable journey from TV repair-man to conflict resolution specialist, and his still ongoing involvement not only here in Northern Ireland, but in the conflict between Moldova and its breakaway republic of Transnistria, as well as in the Middle East, is described in more detail in Island Pamphlet No. 70, *Grassroots Leadership (1) Recollections by May Blood and Joe Camplisson*; Island Pamphlet No. 58, *Making Road Maps to Peace*; and in the book *From Conflict Containment to Resolution*, Island Publications, 1999.

One of Burton's ideas I was drawn to was that of 'assisted self-analysis': of bringing people into a situation where, with the help of a third party, they could judge whether or not what they were doing was self-defeating. Now, the third party was *only there to assist*, it was not there *to direct or determine* that analysis. There was no point in the third party telling the protagonists that their tactics were self-defeating – they had to be placed in a position where they could set out their objectives, evaluate their strategy for achieving those objectives, and then determine *for themselves* whether this strategy was taking them towards those objectives or taking them further away.

Of course, when assisting a self-analysis of people's positions, particularly extreme and opposing ones, it needs to be done within a process where both sides can see how their respective positions have evolved and have been impacted upon by each other. Often it boils down to significant identity needs, which are not necessarily expressed through political, social or economic issues, but through the symbols people want to have in place. So the question becomes: how can they satisfy those identity needs without coming into conflict with 'the other' community? Now, the process which brings them to that point unfolds while they are sitting across the table from one another, and John Burton's conflict resolution theory holds that people can only ultimately satisfy their own needs by recognising that the needs of their enemies have also to be met, and that *they* have something to say in satisfying the needs of their enemy.

Camplisson witnessed Burton give a clear demonstration that this conflict resolution approach could actually bear fruit in practice.

I watched while Burton guided Billy McMillen, the Commanding Officer of the 'Official' IRA (later assassinated in a republican feud) and leading members of the Official Republican movement through an analysis of their position during which they acknowledged the self-defeating nature of military action – in particular the alienation of Protestants from Republican ideals. The Official IRA declared a ceasefire soon afterwards.

However, shortly after this, the promising conflict resolution process set in place by Burton had to be abandoned. It was frustrated by people within government and the security services, who clearly felt threatened by a process over which they had no control. Similarly, in an act of amazing short-sightedness, the Community Relations Commission was wound up by the (short-lived) power-sharing Executive of 1974.

Camplisson, however, was able to obtain funding to run a Community Development Centre in North Belfast. Numerous cross-community initiatives emanated directly from the efforts of this Centre, and a remarkable assortment of people came in and out of its doors: community activists from Protestant and Catholic interface areas, loyalist and republican paramilitary leaders, sympathetic academics, progressive

clergymen of all persuasions. Even more remarkably, these individuals, despite an ongoing war situation, were willing to sit down with one another in earnest debate, with the goal of moving their communities away from violence.

Burton's conflict resolution process

Burton draws a sharp distinction between a *dispute* and a *conflict*. A dispute is something which is often amenable to compromise and accommodation.† A conflict, however, often involves deep-rooted, identity-related needs, which are *non-negotiable* and usually not amenable to compromise. (Indeed, if a 'compromise' is foisted upon the protagonists, unresolved identity needs can surface again in the future, even if it takes a generation.) Many conflicts around the world – including the Northern Ireland conflict – are often tackled as if they are disputes rather than conflicts.

Burton held that *conflict resolution* (as opposed to conflict management, conflict transformation or conflict reduction) requires a process, not of negotiation or compromise, but of *assisted self-analysis*, in which the parties to the conflict are brought to an understanding that what they are facing is a *shared problem*.

Burton also believed that for a process of conflict resolution to have any realistic chance of success, it had to involve the parties at the extremes, for only through them could you get sight of the depth of the conflict, and only through their direct engagement would it be possible to engender *movement towards* resolution.

What might such a process look like in practice? Burton felt that, right from the beginning, the parties should jointly engage in the process. However, decades of experience (by the Community Think Tanks Project) in the facilitation of small-group debate would indicate that before the parties to a conflict are brought together, it might be more productive if, as a first step, each party is separately exposed to the process.

The process might unfold as follows:

Stage 1: Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) community

A small or medium-sized†† group of people is assembled, representing (as far as is possible) different strands within the PUL community (including the political parties, religious, cultural, and paramilitary organisations). This group then engages in the process of self-analysis. This analysis would be assisted, but not guided in a particular direction, by a facilitator: all outcomes must arise from the *self-analysis* of the participants. The process involves a number of stages:

† To give a very simplistic example: a man wants to grow his hedge 10 ft high; his neighbour wants it cut to 4 ft; they might compromise by agreeing that it can grow to 6 ft.

†† A small group is more effective than a large group, as participants tend to focus more productively.

The group debate what they consider to be the root causes of the conflict

Here they focus not just on the actions of their opponents but the broader historical background, and how *their own* actions may have contributed to the conflict.

The group sets out their core shared needs and aspirations

Such as the maintenance of the Union, the freedom to celebrate their culture, continued validation of their Britishness† . . . whatever is felt most important. Also, more generalised goals: a tolerant society, a rights-based society, etc.

They list all the other players who they believe might either assist, or obstruct, the achievement of these needs and aspirations

Such as the British government, the Irish government, the wider Protestant community, republicans and nationalists, the wider Catholic community, the international community.

They list the different options for satisfying their needs

This would include *every* option, from ‘going back to war’ or mass street demonstrations, right up to the use of persuasion through democratic institutions.

They analyse the likely ramifications of each option, and try to predict how the different players (identified above) might react

The aim is to determine how each particular tactic – when viewed alongside the likely responses to it from the other players – might move them either *towards*, or *away from*, the satisfaction of their core needs and aspirations.

The group determine what they will take forward into the joint process

Not only do they discuss what they will expect from their opponents (assuming that there is a willingness to engage in *shared* analysis) but what they might offer *to* their opponents. ††

They present their deliberations to a wider audience within the PUL community

This is not only to stimulate further debate, but to validate (or not) the conclusions they have reached.

† It might also be a useful exercise to explore what the group feels to be the core components of ‘Britishness’. The Think Tanks Project has facilitated a number of cross-community discussions where a republican has suddenly asked a loyalist: ‘Okay, you feel British: tell me what that means,’ and, apart from a few hesitant references to the Queen and parliamentary democracy, the reply was often less than convincing. And yet, when the topic was later explored in more depth there were numerous aspects of ‘Britishness’ which could have been articulated.

†† Advance preparation on this particular theme is essential, for the participants need to know what might, or might not, be acceptable to their own side, so that they can engage in the joint discussion with confidence, rather than feel they have to constantly look over their shoulders.

Stage 2: Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) community

An identical process engages members of the CNR community, where they too take a hard, analytical look at their goals and aspirations – a United Ireland, equality, etc. – and how different actions in furtherance of these aspirations can either take them *towards*, or *away from*, their core needs and aspirations, etc.

Even if the two parties, for whatever reason, decide not to go forward into a joint engagement, the analysis they have each undertaken thus far will undoubtedly have served a useful and productive purpose.

Stage 3: A shared analysis

An agreed number of participants are selected from both groupings to engage together.

Note: The process of self-analysis is different from that of mediation or political negotiation, as there are no legal or power-related constraints, and there is no pressure to find compromise agreements or solutions. The parties are simply encouraged to approach their conflict as a ‘shared problem’, and the ‘problem-solving’ process sets no agenda other than that which the participants agree to. This will hopefully compensate for any sense the participants might have that self-analysis is inherently threatening, especially when they engage in such analysis in front of an ‘enemy’.

At commencement, each side states their fears, concerns and aspirations. These are then subjected to in-depth analysis, aimed at reaching (as far as is possible) a shared understanding of the causes of the conflict and the denied/frustrated needs at its core (including those of one’s opponents).

Successful analysis would clarify each party’s objectives and assist an exploration of those policies, tactics and strategies which either hinder (i.e. are self-defeating) or advance the satisfaction of the core needs identified (by both sides).

They would explore possible alternative strategies for the attainment of aspirations and goals.

They would identify impediments to the resolution of the conflict and explore how these impediments might be collectively addressed.

They would explore possible actions and strategies (both short and long-term) which could be taken both by themselves and by the other major players, to engender *movement towards* conflict resolution and move the situation towards a ‘win/win’ outcome.

This analytical process often engenders within the participants a shared realisation that the most effective way to move towards the satisfaction of *one's own needs* is to assist one's opponents to move towards the satisfaction of *theirs*. This might seem an impossible task, given the chasm which often exists between contending aspirations, but a 'win-win' outcome *is* often realisable.

Complementarity

The process seeks to *complement*, rather than compete with, any existing negotiating process involving the political parties. Indeed, if, during the problem-solving process, the participants move away from analysis towards issues or areas where agreement *is* possible, further discussion surrounding these can be handed over to the separate negotiating process.

Furthermore, the absence of any expectation to reach political accommodation in the problem-solving process should ensure that it remains available as a trust-building forum should the party-political negotiating process face stalemate. (This was Joe Camplisson's experience in Moldova, where the problem-solving process often assisted the political parties there to overcome several impasses which developed in their own separate negotiating process.)

Given the current state of Northern Ireland politics (especially the bitterly-contested narratives regarding the root causes of our conflict) the process outlined above might seem to be totally unrealistic, especially as it can only be entered into if the participants are willing to subject their strategies and actions to in-depth scrutiny and analysis. Nevertheless, when a document outlining the process was distributed at community level, it received a positive response, and a number of people – community activists, paramilitary members, and others – expressed the view that they “would be up for this”. Even if the process was given a ‘test run’ on a small scale, it might prove its efficacy for a broader engagement.