

Reinforcing Powerlessness

The hidden dimension to the
Northern Ireland 'Troubles'

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Introduction

On 27 November 1995, after weeks of almost daily warnings from Sinn Féin sources that the Northern Ireland ‘peace process’ was in ‘crisis’, this item appeared on *Teletext*:

Mayhew Praises People Power

People power would prevent a return of IRA violence, the Northern Ireland Secretary Sir Patrick Mayhew said. Responding to Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams’ claim that conflict was inevitable without talks, he said the “passionate determination” of [ordinary] people would keep the ceasefires intact.

Sir Patrick was, in my opinion, quite correct to assume that the vast majority of people here fervently desire peace, and equally justified in surmising from this that a return to violence hardly seems possible with so many opposed to it. However, the *reality* is that the very people with the greatest desire to see genuine peace emerge – the ordinary citizens of Northern Ireland – are the ones *least empowered* to see this process through to a satisfactory conclusion. Instead, power over our future remains firmly in the hands of all those, whether government ministers, faceless bureaucrats, local politicians, or the vast army of assorted professionals and middlemen – and not forgetting the paramilitaries – who have so manifestly failed us in the past.

It is not that ordinary people have made no effort to contribute positively to this society’s welfare – quite the opposite. Throughout the past twenty-five years of violence countless individuals and grassroots groups, in a multitude of ways, have striven to effect positive social change within their own localities and to create conditions for dialogue between our divided communities. These efforts, often involving much time, energy and personal risk, have largely gone unrecorded and unacknowledged, yet cumulatively must surely make up the *real* ‘hidden history’ of Ulster’s tragedy.

Throughout our turmoil these individuals and groups have constantly pitted their energies against manipulative bureaucrats, struggled frustratingly for never-appearing resources, stood up bravely to uncaring paramilitaries, and constantly striven to overcome the doubts and apathy of friends and neighbours. Sometimes their efforts met with limited success, but more often than not they were ignored, frustrated, sidelined – often quite deliberately – by those with control over resources and decision-making.

For some years now I have been trying to encourage various community activists to record their experiences, but with little success. Some are too busy confronting present needs, some still doubt the importance of their efforts, some are disillusioned, others simply worn out. Yet our society is at such an important crossroads – where ordinary people must finally decide where *they* want to go – that I feel compelled to make a start at describing how powerlessness is reinforced at the grassroots, even if I have had to make use of many of my own experiences – something I feel very uncomfortable about. Nevertheless, I believe that the recounting of actual experiences is far more effective in shedding light upon the various processes at work than any amount of theory.

1: Safeguarding a professional monopoly

“What business is it of theirs?”

Many professionals fail to recognise the deep chasm which exists between the community and those within the professions, partly because this chasm has become so second-nature it is often only revealed under specific circumstances.

While working as a social worker for the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), I once received an urgent request to go to an estate in West Belfast. An incident involving a young boy left unattended had caused concerned residents to gather outside the family home. The next-door neighbour had then startled this gathering by proclaiming: “It’s time something was done about this family – from what I hear through the wall I think the father is interfering with the daughter!” This pronouncement – as one can imagine – fanned an anger among the assembled residents, and it was then that one of them decided to telephone me (I was known in the estate because of my attachment to the nearby community centre).

By the time I arrived the police had just taken the young boy into their charge, and had gone to the father’s workplace – not at this stage to pursue the allegations, but to prevent him from walking unsuspectingly into the angry gathering. The police had already involved Social Services, so responsibility for the case fell to them rather than to me. However, I felt it necessary to do something about the seething anger of the residents and invited them to accompany me into the community centre.

Once inside I had to listen to a barrage of angry voices as individuals competed with one another in detailing just what should be done to “that bastard” once hands were laid upon him. This continued for some ten minutes until, for no apparent reason, the anger subsided and the tenor of the comments became calmer. Someone said: “Look, we don’t know whether yer woman next door was hearin’ right. She might have got it wrong.” Another voice added: “Aye, there’s been no hint of anything amiss up till now. Maybe she just heard words raised in argument... you know how teenagers can act up.”

These and other comments of caution were now followed – somewhat more surprisingly – by spontaneous suggestions of support. “Look, maybe they’re having a difficult time... we should be talkin’ here about what we can do *for* them, not *to* them.” “They’re not long in the estate, perhaps they feel a bit out of it – we could try and chat to them more.” “Lily, what say you and I take turns looking after the kids once a week to let the pair of them [the parents] get out for the evening.”

I was astounded, not at the turnaround in the threats which had been voiced – for I had expected sanity to prevail once emotions subsided – but at the generosity of the residents in offering unconditional support to the family, *without waiting* for the matter of the allegations to be resolved. It was as if they realised they had overreacted and now wished to make amends and behave supportively, the way they felt neighbours should. The matter was discussed further; then, speaking with the assent of most of those present,

one resident put the following proposal to me:

Would you tell the social worker that we are willing to help in any way we can. He doesn't need to tell us anything about the family, but we *would* like him to call into the community centre and introduce himself. Even if he feels there is nothing we can do, at least we'll know who to contact if problems arise, and it will help us prevent another angry crowd gathering in the street.

At the subsequent case conference, although the police investigation had revealed nothing to substantiate the allegations, the situation was felt to need monitoring and a Social Services social worker was assigned to the case. When asked whether I wanted to add anything to the proceedings I said I wished to present the 'community perspective', noting a few bemused glances being exchanged as I did so. I duly passed on to the social worker the request made by the neighbours.

On a visit to the community centre a few weeks later one of the residents reminded me of this request, saying: "That social worker has driven in and out of the estate a couple of times, but has never come near us." When I contacted the social worker, he asked me to apologise to the residents and explain that he had been extremely busy. A few weeks later I was asked the same question; I again contacted the social worker and received the same apology. This time, however, when I was relaying this to the residents, one of them halted me in mid-sentence: "Don't waste your time – they're not effin' interested! People like us are of no importance to them!"

This time when I phoned Social Services I pursued the matter more determinedly, until the truth came out. It was exactly as those in the community had suspected: "Why should our worker have to go near them – what business is it of theirs?" It was quite obvious that the community were considered to be the people who *suffered* social problems, not the people who *solved* them – that was solely the job of professionals.

'Social' problems? What social problems?

I often felt that the label *social* worker was a misnomer. A more accurate description is *case* worker, for although social workers accepted that each client suffered from 'social' problems, they invariably treated these clients as strictly *individual cases*, with little effort made to find a *social* answer to their problems. Often, social workers made visits from their offices to peoples' homes the way the U.S. Cavalry must have made sorties out of Fort Laramie – conscious that their journey was taking them through Indian territory, but hoping that contact could somehow be avoided. This might seem somewhat exaggerated, but it was my experience that social work management in particular was mostly blind to the strengths and capabilities *already existent within* working-class communities – it seemingly required professionals to import the required expertise from outside – even when the development of such community strengths might help to alleviate the burden faced by hard-pressed social workers.

One of my cases was a young woman with five children – her husband being in prison. Whenever things got on top of her, she simply abandoned her abode and either squatted in an empty house or dumped herself upon relatives until she was rehoused. Indeed, she had been rehoused so often by the Housing Executive they understandably refused to consider her any more, and on subsequent occasions of homelessness she and

her children had to be accommodated, at Social Services expense, in hotels. When even this broke down, the Executive finally relented – for the last time, they insisted – and the family were again rehoused. However, everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before the cycle was repeated, and apart from taking the children into care, which we did not really want to do, no-one knew how to break it, least of all myself.

But people in the community knew. She was invited to join a fledgling women's drama group, and, after some persuasion, hesitantly agreed. Within a very short time a remarkable transformation had occurred. She gained considerably in self-esteem, and – because the group held their meetings in one another's houses – began to keep her home clean and tidy, rather than let a mess pile up from which previously she would have run away. The children gained too, for they realised that this time they might be staying put and so made a proper effort to find friends. Within a short time I was able to close the case – the success owing nothing to social work!

An undervalued resource

When I joined NSPCC it was undergoing a period of self-examination. Its centenary was approaching and it was attempting to redefine itself, especially in relation to its big brother, the Social Services. In such periods of questioning all options can seem equally viable, and I was permitted to develop my own 'community-orientated approach to social work'. I built up close links with numerous community groups in Belfast and Newtownabbey, operating an informal surgery for some of them at selected times each week. These groups benefited from being able to provide an on-site social worker as part of their community outreach, and the close working relationships I developed with some of the groups helped to dispel much of the antagonism with which social workers had invariably been viewed. On visits to the groups – if I wasn't occupied with clients – I would often sit down with the community volunteers and explore how *they themselves* could best tackle the numerous problems they encountered.

I soon discovered ample evidence for what I had long believed – that each community possessed an untapped mine of strengths and abilities. Time and again I encountered individuals – from young people to senior citizens – whose commitment, energy, understanding, and ability to empathise often exceeded that possessed by many trained social workers. All that these community volunteers required was a little guidance and support – yet all they too often received was avoidance and professional aloofness.

In one estate a number of young women – all single-parents – had formed a group for mutual support, and one day informed me that, because I had helped some of them with their problems, they in turn wanted to help some of the families I visited. I explained that for reasons of confidentiality the families on my caseload might not accept their assistance. However, I asked them, surely they already knew families with *similar* problems – what was to stop them offering assistance to those families?

We then explored just what *was* stopping them, and it was obvious they were wary of "what we might find", and anxious that they might not know how to handle it. What would they do, for example, if someone admitted to harbouring fears of injuring their child, or displayed deep-seated emotions? At least by getting involved in *my* cases, they could safely leave such problems to me. More earnest discussion followed, at the end of

which the group and I worked out the following agreement. They would identify suitable families and offer assistance, and if accepted, would engage those families on the understanding that should they need advice I could be contacted at any time. Should real problems surface, they would suggest to the family that I become involved directly. It was also understood that if there was any suspicion of child abuse I would *have* to investigate, whether the family agreed or not.

In the event, these young women rarely needed to contact me, and in subsequent progress meetings I was surprised not only by the range of problems they had begun to tackle, but by the natural abilities they had been able to utilise. And all it had taken was the assurance that professional help was at hand should problems arise – this had been the catalyst which permitted these natural abilities to surface.

Not to everyone's liking . . .

As I repeated this approach with other groups, it was made known to me that other professionals (though not from within my own agency) were observing me with disapproval. I was informed I was 'taking a risk' entrusting serious matters to 'non-professionals'; I was demeaning my years of university training by imagining social work skills could be imparted to community volunteers in half-hour 'chat' sessions; I was consorting with well-known community activists whose strident pronouncements against the prevailing social and economic conditions could cause my employers embarrassment; my presence was adding credibility to groups who *might* have overt political agendas; I was allowing community groups to dictate my workload. . .

It did not seem to matter that the community volunteers were well aware just what constituted a 'serious' matter, and were actually more willing than they had previously been to request professional assistance, because it now seemed less threatening and more supportive. It did not seem to matter that groups who genuinely cared about people's social needs were inevitably developing a realistic appreciation of political and economic realities, and were not in any mood to stick their heads in the sand, a habit perfected by so many professionals. Or that these community groups actually helped me devote *more* attention to the work I was trained for, because while the groups referred difficult cases to me, they in turn accepted *from* me all those tasks which had previously taken up an inordinate amount of my time – benefit, housing, debt and other such matters. No, what really seemed to be at the root of all this professional antagonism was that there was a danger of revealing that the emperor had no clothes, that social work skills were not something magical known only to the initiated, but were a combination of common sense reasoning and natural ability given direction by proper training. One professional complained to me: "These young people could end up imagining they could do our job better than us." What a shock that would be!

"They would need to be under our control. . ."

Despite the efforts to present this antagonism to my community involvement as a 'professional' critique, it was difficult not to conclude that what was really at issue was the *power* relationship between professionals and non-professionals, and the desire, evident in most professions, not to lose control over a jealously-guarded monopoly.

Before I joined NSPCC that organisation used to employ ‘women visitors’, who took on many of the time-consuming support tasks which invariably arose during work with families, thereby releasing the NSPCC Inspector for more skilled work. Time and again during staff meetings my older colleagues would lament the demise of this service, and newer recruits like myself could readily sympathise with them, for our caseloads at that time numbered between 30 and 40 families, and an inordinate amount of our time was tied up with routine support tasks.

After having spent six years building up good working relationships with numerous community groups, some of those groups were now expressing a desire to expand that link to the further benefit of the community. Few groups, however, were in a position to offer much by way of practical support, except for Farset Youth and Community Project, situated along the West Belfast interface, and one of the largest providers of ACE jobs in Belfast. Farset’s manager, Jackie Hewitt, had pondered hard about my workload predicament, and finally put the following proposal to me:

Farset will employ between 10 and 20 ACE workers on tasks similar to those undertaken by the ‘women visitors’ you told me about. They can help children with their homework; accompany mothers on shopping trips; sit and chat with people who are feeling lonely or depressed; baby-sit to give hard-pressed mothers a break; do a bit of housework or gardening if it helps brighten up someone’s home; try to develop a support-network for families . . . *You* identify what the needs are, and *we’ll* meet them. To keep them fully occupied, these workers will obviously have to respond to other requests from the community, but their *primary* role will be to respond to NSPCC needs.

I was delighted, not only because I could envisage the sigh of relief on the part of my colleagues, but because here was tangible evidence that a community-orientated approach to social work *could* result in highly productive relationships being developed with those working at the grassroots. I was soon to be brought back to professional reality. Management informed me that while the scheme had great merit, it was not possible to proceed with it, for a very simple reason: “Those workers would really need to be under *our* control, not under the control of a community group.”

I felt deeply disappointed; the NSPCC was doing excellent work in the community, but like other agencies, it did not seem able – certainly at that time – to countenance practical arrangements whereby its relationship with the community could be based upon a genuine and not a pretend partnership. (Shortly afterwards, when management instructed me to relinquish my community outreach altogether, I resigned.)

I remain convinced that the very people who are experiencing social problems are ultimately the best ones to tackle them, and the sooner professionals discard their ‘them and us’ mentality and begin to work on a basis of genuine equality with the community, the more realistic are our chances of overcoming our social, economic – and ultimately our political – problems. I believe it *can* be done, and there is a growing awareness of the need for such an approach. [Indeed, in the last few years the NSPCC – which always had a strong foothold in our communities through its extensive network of playgroups – has initiated, to complement its Child Protection Service, a number of community-based projects which actively encourage user-group participation.]

2: “Politics is better left to people like us”

“They should be horsewhipped out of the area!”

I have mentioned the fear many professionals have that community groups are too prone to become involved in political issues. This is a fear shared by many within the establishment. Government spokesmen, politicians, church leaders and assorted professionals, who frequently lamented the inability of working-class people to come together and cease killing one another, became decidedly less enthusiastic when ordinary people *did* come together but turned the spotlight upon the social, economic and political inequalities for which those in the establishment were ultimately responsible.

When the radical young members of the Rathcoole Self-Help Group in 1985 accused Unionist politicians of having little real concern for the welfare of the people in this large Protestant working-class estate, local Unionist politicians were outraged. Up until then Rathcoole had always provided a compliant electorate – easily lulled into acquiescence with slogans like ‘This we will Maintain’ and ‘No Surrender!’ Yet here were these young loudmouths kicking up a stink on social issues! One local councillor expressed this outrage in no uncertain terms; labelling the group as “subversives” he asserted: “I think there is only one answer. That is to get a big horse-whip and whip them out of the borough once and for all.”

When a community education project was initiated at Conway Mill on the Lower Falls, it was made clear by the organisers that *any issue* relevant to the lives of ordinary people could be discussed there, and *anyone* could be party to, or even initiate, those discussions. Protestants would have been more than welcome to take up this challenge, although the sectarian geography of Belfast militated against such an opportunity being properly utilised. Many of the debates and seminars which did take place understandably focused on social and political issues pertinent to the people of the Lower Falls, and, naturally enough, were attended by many shades of community and political opinion within the Nationalist community – including the Republican movement.

However, just as their counterparts in Rathcoole discovered, this was not the type of debate those in the establishment had in mind in their appeals to the community. This was not ‘peace and reconciliation’ – this was agitation and subversion. Some of these venues soon found themselves stigmatised in an attempt to silence them, ‘political vetting’ being part of this. Political vetting had its origin in a Parliamentary statement on 27 June 1985 by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Douglas Hurd:

I am satisfied that there are cases in which some community groups or persons prominent in the direction or management of some community groups, have sufficiently close links with paramilitary organisations to give rise to a grave risk that to give support to these groups would have the effect of improving the standing and furthering the aims of a paramilitary organisation, whether directly or indirectly.

Although no specific charges were ever made, several community organisations on both sides of the divide – including Conway Mill Education Project on the Catholic side and Glencairn Community Centre on the Protestant side – had their funding withdrawn. While political vetting did not prevent constructive work continuing at such venues – despite greatly curtailed resources – it militated against them being able to extend any debate in an effective cross-community manner. Indeed, the insinuation that these centres were fronts for paramilitary organisations – notwithstanding the fact that such allegations were never substantiated – made them suspect to the other community, even to the extent that death threats were received.

Not only have community groups been effectively silenced in this way, but whole communities have been stigmatised, with the people of West Belfast in particular – whether in the Shankill or the Falls – made to feel increasingly criminalised and marginalised. This distancing process not only allowed those in the establishment to avoid having to respond to the *real* needs of these communities, but hampered ordinary people from initiating purposeful debate on the root causes of the problems facing them, the communal divide included. Then again, perhaps that was always the intention.

‘Bred’ into politics

Few have been more eager to prevent the voice of the people being heard than our politicians. Certainly they want that voice to be strident when raised at their behest or whenever the big drum is beaten, but not when it is raised independently. Whatever might seem to divide local politicians, they appear united in their concern to ensure that political power does not seep outside their own control. At a public debate in 1994, a well-known Unionist politician, stung by criticism from the floor, proclaimed: “It’s not for you people to be spouting politics.” Then, indicating his supposed SDLP adversary with whom he was sharing the platform, he continued: “Politics is better left to people like us.” And recently a prominent member of the Orange Order unashamedly expressed the ludicrous opinion that “some people are bred to lead”.

Power always acts to reinforce itself

When Unionist politicians condemned the British and Irish governments for ignoring them in the discussions which led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and more recently the Framework Proposals, they were only experiencing a removal from decision-making processes which ordinary people experience daily.

The process is at times quite transparent. One example (out of many I could give) occurred some years ago when a group of people from the Shankill Road, trying to defuse a potentially dangerous situation developing with regard to Loyalist prisoners, asked for a meeting with the Northern Ireland Office, but were refused. However, it was suggested to the group that if they co-opted a couple of local councillors to their cause – who could legitimately represent their case – then the government officials would meet these councillors instead. But why are some forms of representation deemed ‘legitimate’ and others not? The answer is simple – some fall outside accepted structures of power. The councillors represented the *acceptable* face of politics, and meeting them forestalled any need to accord legitimacy to *unofficial* representations originating from within the

community – that would set a bad precedent. For in the final analysis, *power always acts to reinforce itself*.

Our politicians are eager to protect their monopoly even when people in the community are striving to overcome those divisions which the politicians have manifestly failed to address. Describing a “strange rapprochement” which came into being in the 70s between Republican and Loyalist prisoners, former Loyalist prisoner Gusty Spence explained the fate of this rapprochement when confronted by the political establishment:

Deprivation knows no boundaries – Falls or Shankill – and both groups realised that they faced an even greater degree of deprivation within the confines of Crumlin Road jail. How to ameliorate that bare human existence and the lack of dignity, became the burning question amongst the leadership of the combined paramilitary organisations. We decided to deal with the immediate problems and resolved to leave other considerations aside, so long as there was no concession of principle on either side. There was also at that time a ‘no conflict’ policy agreed, so that if tension was to rise, for whatever reason, discipline would hold and the source of the tension would be investigated, and the offending party strictured in a non-physical way, and justice would be seen to be done.

The paramilitary representatives attempted to export this co-operation to the outside world through the medium of a downtown office, wherein welfare groups interested in paramilitary prisoners could meet and maximise their welfare efforts on behalf of those people in whom they had an interest, and heaven only knows where such co-operation could have led Northern Ireland!

Devious and unenlightened publicity, coupled with sensationalism, went a long way towards thwarting our efforts, and petty politicians scoring various sectarian points make it easy for that little dictator Roy Mason to instruct his prison governors to ensure that there was no opportunity for prisoners’ representatives to liaise and resolve the many problems they faced. Subsequently, practical co-operation between paramilitants came to an end, and what had been an important breakthrough was allowed to die.¹

This is not an isolated example. The entire history of our past 25 years of ‘Troubles’ is littered with the efforts of ordinary people who have constantly endeavoured to work for dialogue and accommodation, only to see those efforts thwarted by a political establishment which could not tolerate the development of a process that was not only in contradiction to its own vested interests but was outside its control.

Incapable of taking us into our future?

The Republican and Loyalist ceasefires, while welcomed across our entire community, posed a real dilemma for certain politicians. With the gun seemingly out of politics a great opportunity for them to utilise their political skills suddenly presented itself. However, the question many in the community were asking was: could they deliver? Some went further and asked a more fundamental question: did they *want* to deliver? Even now, well into the second year of the cessation of violence there is little sign among our politicians of any move towards meaningful dialogue. *Monologues*, yes: with Nationalists and Republicans telling us all what *they* want, and Unionists and Loyalists telling us all what *they* want –but no real *dialogue*.

Many in our two communities assume – somewhat over-optimistically, I believe, given all the evidence to the contrary – that our politicians will eventually be capable of sorting things out – after all, isn't that their job? The truth is that the people could easily be abandoned yet again and left to face the inevitable consequences of a slide back to uncertainty and perhaps renewed violence. And rather than being relieved to be able, at long last, to put their political skills to the test, many of our politicians are still steeped in the politics of retrenchment. They almost rejoice when negative occurrences are seen to vindicate their caution – in truth, they probably welcome such situations because they prevent people from seeing the poverty of their ideas. Yet while they seem incapable of moving this society forward, they continue to prevent the devolution of political power into the hands of those – the ordinary people – who could, and have the desire to, do something about it.

A 'risen people'? The dead weight of the paramilitaries

Of course, to claim that it has only been our politicians who have prevented the emergence of real politics here would be grossly inaccurate. Leaving aside the horrific quarter century of murder and its unbearable legacy of grief and heartache, the prolonged existence of paramilitary organisations within both communities has had a devastating impact upon normal community life. The sense of total helplessness in the face of all that has happened within communities was poignantly expressed by one mother whose son succumbed to the lure of Loyalist paramilitaries and received a 20-year sentence for being linked to one of Ulster's worst atrocities:

People think you don't care or you don't feel. I'm a mother and I have borne two sons into this world. I never ever reared one to carry a gun or be a terrorist. It has been a living hell for all my family and I know a hell for the relatives of the victims of the attack. Everyone in Northern Ireland just seems to be born a victim.²

Nothing better highlighted the paramilitary-induced powerlessness of ordinary people than the horrific rape which occurred in the Divis Flats area of Belfast in June 1990. Over a period of two hours up to nine members of a Republican paramilitary organisation subjected a young woman to repeated rape in an electric cable box, before dragging her to another location to brutally assault her again. As if this was not enough, when the victim managed to escape she was recaptured and subjected to further violent assaults.

But while obviously the worst aspect of the whole affair was the horrendous ordeal the woman went through, the reactions of the residents revealed just how powerless and demoralised local people had by then become. *The Irish News* reported:

One woman said: "The screaming was horrific. It was so bad I knew someone was being attacked. But there is so much fighting going on here at different times none of us who heard realised exactly what was happening. We are very afraid of some of the gangs that are preying around these flats."

Another woman who witnessed the attack in Albert Street was still in a state of shock last night. A friend said: "The screaming went on for about two hours. When they brought the poor woman out into the open, this woman saw what was happening but she was so frightened she couldn't go out. She has no

telephone and couldn't call for help and she was terrified that something would happen to her, especially with a gang like that. Since then, she has been unable to sleep and can't go out on her own anymore. She's in a dreadful state of shock.”³

These are not the 'risen people' of Republican propaganda, but a people brought to their knees by repeated assaults upon their dignity, so long perpetrated by sectarian and uncaring bureaucrats from without and now compounded by self-appointed 'defenders' from within. Admittedly, no analysis of paramilitarism can ignore the very specific circumstances which led to the creation of these organisations, or the fears which led normally humane communities to give support to those whose deeds were in total violation of that humaneness, but at the same time it cannot be denied that paramilitarism has added its own weight to the powerlessness now experienced by ordinary people living in those areas in which such organisations hold sway.

3: Jobs for the Boys

The new service industry

Some years ago when I took some foreign visitors around the community network they were surprised by the low morale they found everywhere. Even indefatigable stalwarts admitted to feeling more frustrated and disheartened than they had felt for some time. And this state of affairs was not attributable to the continuing violence – for that was an ever-present reality they had long refused to allow deflect them from their community commitment. No, their disenchantment was borne out of *frustration* at the mazes those with control of funding were making them go through, *annoyance* at the plethora of careerists they were now having to contend with, and *anger* at the bureaucratic obstacles being constantly put in their path. And all of this the direct product of what must surely be the fastest growing service industry of recent years, an industry directly sustained by Northern Ireland's inter-communal problems.

A burgeoning bureaucracy of specialists had mushroomed, all eager to protect their own corners and often only willing to enter into dialogue with the community if the community accepted a subservient role. Professional community workers, researchers, analysts, government advisors, funders, funding experts, statisticians, conflict resolutionists, cultural traditionalists, development officers, consultants, inter-agency specialists. . . and all of them finding (and frequently creating) some career niche for themselves directly between the providers of resources (including American and EU money) and the supposed recipients, the embattled working-class communities.

With this new aristocracy becoming increasingly influential and powerful, local initiatives were all the more easily bypassed, and bureaucracy and manipulation gradually began to erode grassroots energy and confidence. Rather than helping ordinary people tackle problems themselves, more and more 'jobs for the boys' were created, and these new middlemen infiltrated all aspects of community life, in an insidious process which

only served to reinforce the power of the professionals and diminish that of the community. Billy McKeen, a community activist from Highfield estate in West Belfast, voiced his disenchantment:

While it can suit professionals to intrude upon the work done by street-level activists, they jealously prevent any possibility of the reverse happening. Community work has been largely hijacked by such professionals who often redefine a community's problems to suit *their* departmental needs, personnel capabilities and career interests. Those needs may *not* be those of the community, resulting in a flurry of activity and impressive policies which are nevertheless meaningless at street level. Rather than finding solutions to community disadvantage, this often serves to institutionalise and reinforce it. In the process more realistic cures are placed beyond the reach and power of those working at street-level.

Street-level activists are clearly viewed as 'non-professional', while statutory workers (and some at voluntary level) claim differing degrees of professionalism. This leaves professional social workers and community workers not only free to gatecrash into all aspects of community work, but often to assume control. This in turn results in the isolation and alienation of the street-level activists, not only from these professionals, but – as a result of their diminished credibility – even from their own community. It is not surprising, therefore, to those with any knowledge of ground-level realities, why this professional ascendancy has engendered intense grassroots resentment, and my own experience in Highfield estate is undoubtedly a reflection of what happens elsewhere.

Middle-class people who previously would have been unable to find the bloody place were given wide-ranging responsibility for Highfield's welfare. The BAN project, set up by Lord Melchett, was an attempt to open avenues for disadvantaged area groups. The only thing the well-meaning Peter Melchett omitted from his plan was an instruction for agencies to act honestly. In the event, the inexperienced community negotiators proved no match for the agency careerists, whose only aim in life seemed to be promotion. Some of these careerists can best be described as snobs. It was constantly evident to those from the community that they couldn't handle the culture shock of having to negotiate with people from the working class. We found their arrogance completely distasteful. Unless proper credibility is accorded to street-level activists, and the community is genuinely brought into the decision-making processes, then many attempts to counter community disadvantage will founder under a tide of professional and institutional realities.

Assisting the 'worthy poor'

When government and other agencies *did* decide to make resources available to the community, it was rarely given directly to grassroots activists. As journalist Anne Cadwallader noted with regard to Sally McErlean, a mother of six and member of West Belfast Parent Youth Support Group, when the latter made a submission to the Opsahl Commission:

Mrs McErlean's submission was more evidence that the authorities are still not prepared to give money to 'ordinary people' with no formal qualifications, who don't fit in with their concept of the 'worthy poor'. The poorhouse mentality is

with us yet. Money instead goes to properly-constituted boards, to churches, to groups who take children on holidays to the USA. It is not entrusted to 'ordinary people' like Sally McErlean who don't appear 'suitably qualified'.⁴

Even when it was realised that money *would* have to be spent on grassroots projects, not infrequently it provided the opportunity to create more 'jobs for the boys'. Many community groups found that before their funding application was granted it had to be preceded by a consultant's investigation *often costing more than the initial funding request!* Presumably the reasoning behind this somewhat ludicrous anomaly was the need to establish that money was not being wasted. But do these consultants really know what they are looking *for*, or even what they are looking *at*? Might the *real waste* of money not start with them? When advertising a Channel 4 programme on management consultants in the UK, *Radio Times* said:

Each year over three billion pounds is spent on management consultants. But are the words they speak so valuable? Do their insights really provide a solid basis upon which companies can prosper or are they just expensive quacks peddling remedies that companies could work out for themselves? *High Interest* discovers that much of their work is used for surface gleam... or [to] impress the government.⁵

What these consultants *do* seem to know a lot about is how to make money. Every gap in the market is hastily filled: there are even organisations which, for a commission, offer to raise funds for community groups, 'to save them the hassle'. For some of the larger projects community groups often have to accept consultants as an obligatory part of the process, and the fees involved can be enormous. Many projects originating from the energies of unpaid community activists have created lucrative spin-offs not only for consultants but solicitors, architects, builders. . . . When, as co-ordinator of a large residential project, I found myself involved in a heated exchange of letters with a building firm because government money was slow to materialise, not once in those letters did the builders express any support for the aims of our project. To us it was a time-consuming and energy-draining attempt to confront the communal divide; to everyone else it was just another commercial contract. (It must be acknowledged, however, that many individuals within the professions *have* acted honourably in their dealings with the community.)

And, leaving aside the consultants and others, what about the organisations through whom much of the funding is channelled? Are they really all that knowledgeable about grassroots reality? More importantly, are they really willing to confront grassroots problems in a serious way? Some of the community representatives who gathered for the *Life on the Interface* conference openly voiced their disapproval at the intrusion of the churches and other 'acceptable' bodies into the funding equation. With reference to Action for Community Employment schemes the conference report stated:

ACE was also seen as a way of increasing the isolation of genuine community groups, in that the government bureaucrats always endeavoured to keep ACE schemes in the hands of 'respectable' organisations, in particular the churches. Church control of ACE schemes was mentioned as a problem by both communities, but particularly within the Catholic community. Conference participants pointedly expressed the Catholic community's real sense of resentment and betrayal at the

way their church dominated ACE work. The Catholic church leaders were accused of being more interested in control rather than genuine economic development, and a few participants claimed that church schemes had knowingly duplicated already-existing community-based schemes, with the result that needed funds were diverted to the church schemes, completely undermining the struggling community ones. Many ACE jobs, including those run by the churches, were seen as purely cosmetic, designed to look good in the short term rather than create long-term benefits.⁶

‘Maintaining a high standard’

There seems to be no limit to the openings which can be created by professionals for themselves. One has only to attend some of the conferences on community ‘themes’ organised by the academic elite to realise that conference attendance is for some an end in itself, a means to self-advancement for others, or a useful vehicle to expound pet theories – with often very little about real issues apparent in the proceedings.

Ironically, the lack of participation by ordinary people or community activists at such conferences is not seen as a source of embarrassment, but readily justified, as the minutes of one organisation dealing in community relations made abundantly clear:

Mr . . . suggested that a different audience could be targeted, since those at grassroots level interested in community relations were not being reached. The group, whilst acknowledging that the previous conferences were directed towards a minority (mainly from academia), seemed to feel that this was justifiable in order to maintain a high standard.

‘Maintain a high standard’? What is it that these people are primarily interested in – with seriously tackling our communal divisions, or merely organising showpieces of ‘intellectual’ debate? The *Interface* conference already referred to took place without a single academic in sight, and yet got closer to the reality of ‘community relations’ than countless conferences dominated by professionals.

And if servicing the Northern Ireland situation did not provide enough career opportunities, it seems that for many in academia the whole world is now their oyster, as the media announced in January 1994:

Northern Ireland is to become an international training centre for peace work. A United Nations backed centre, based at the University of Ulster, will train diplomats, academics, and help officials for humanitarian operations in the world’s war zones. The initiative, expected to cost £7m over the next five years, is being funded by the United Nations, the European Commission and the Northern Ireland Office.⁷

It will be interesting to see just *who* will provide the expertise which underpins the training offered by this initiative? Those grassroots activists who have been tirelessly confronting our communal divisions for years? Somehow I doubt that – *their* existence is rarely taken under consideration by the academic elite, the documents *they* circulate about their efforts not infrequently resurface in other people’s ‘original’ work, usually without acknowledgement. Unfortunately, the measurement of expertise has all too often been shown to have little to do with actual experience at the grassroots, and more in

having presented some theoretical paper which impressed those within the academic establishment.

At a public meeting a few years ago a prominent academic working in the field of conflict studies admitted that his university faculty *already* had over 2000 research documents gathering dust on its shelves. Before any more money is pumped into this field, it would be worthwhile to know whether questions have been asked as to whether the *right research* was being done before, and whether it was being done by the *right people*.

The new ‘altruistic’ entrepreneurs

At meetings of the Shankill Think Tank *prior* to the ceasefires, a regular complaint was that the Protestant middle class had disowned and deserted the Protestant working class. The middle class was deemed to be more interested in looking after itself – the working class could stew in its own juice. Then along came the ceasefires, accompanied by talk of massive injections of British, European and American funding as part of the ‘peace dividend’. Community activists remarked upon a new phenomenon: various professional organisations as well as some entrepreneurial businessmen were now approaching community groups and expressing a desire to ‘help the community’ develop new projects. Suddenly working-class areas were no longer out of bounds, especially when they were being targeted with massive amounts of money, and it soon became apparent that some people were not looking for money to fit the projects, but projects to fit the money.

Some years ago I had the misfortune to be introduced to a local entrepreneurial businessman, who, in addition to his main occupation, had diversified into the bridal market. He asked me to do some extensive typesetting for which he never paid me. I admit I was completely taken in by him: he insisted that he and I were quite ‘similar’ in many ways, for he “knew what it was like to be self-employed, and the difficulties there could be”; and, showing me a photograph of his young daughter, proclaimed that, like myself, he too was “basically a family man”. When I later perused the extensive print-out I obtained from the Enforcement of Judgements Office – which revealed that creditors had been chasing this character to the tune of £10,000 – I wondered whether he had already planned to add to *my* family’s ‘difficulties’ even as we talked together.

I mention this experience because it provided me with a valuable insight into similar approaches often utilised by some of those who profess an interest in ‘helping the community’, particularly the pretended – and often quite convincing – identification with the community’s needs, when in reality the motivation is self-advancement. Many professionals *are* genuinely interested in helping the community, but unfortunately too many others are simply careerists and photo-opportunists. As a minimum safeguard, there should always be structures in place whereby all outsiders can be made fully *accountable* to the communities they seek to serve.

4: As others see us . . .

Just another stopover

For all the attention the Northern Irish direct towards their communal problems, it often seems insignificant when compared to the attention directed at these problems by others. Throughout the past twenty-five years of violence a horde of outsiders has been scurrying around within our midst. As J Bowyer Bell pointed out, the conflict

transformed the province for years to come into a social science laboratory for theories and models. Northern Ireland became a site for survey research, for conflict and peace theory, for psychological testing, and often merely an example to deploy in distant academic arguments.... Much the same was true for all the ideologically dedicated, just as was the case with the analysts concerned with violence and political modernization or social mobilization or the psychology of childhood trauma. Peace Studies departments, political scientists, those concerned with civil disobedience or conflict studies or small-group relations or game theory, all had cause to be interested. No academic journal was complete, it sometimes seemed, without an Irish article. And in time whole issues would be dedicated to nothing else. Everyone had a special perspective, a special methodology, an ox to gore. The advocates of the Fourth International and political deconstructionism were as one. Ireland offered each vindication and opportunity.⁸

Due to our unique problems this society – particularly working-class areas – plays regular host to visitors of all descriptions: journalists seeking dramatic news coverage; documentary producers looking for that controversial edge; authors assimilating background material for their latest novels; ‘conflict resolution’ theorists out to put in a bit of grassroots practice before retreating to the realms of academia; do-gooders fixated with peace to the exclusion of injustice; student revolutionary tourists out to see where the action is; researchers padding out their theses; foreign experts here to tell us Paddies where we have all gone wrong; individuals with troubled consciences who express righteous indignation and promise the earth to community groups only to disappear into the mist and never be heard of again. . .

It must be acknowledged, however, that there have been numerous visitors who arrived with a refreshing openness, admitting that they just wanted to observe the situation at first-hand and meet people from both communities, some making regular return visits and in time gaining the friendship of many people at the grassroots.

‘Great work in Northern Ireland’

Some individuals and groups flagrantly manipulated our situation. A few years ago, for example, a group of Americans arrived on a fact-finding visit, and were accommodated and looked after by a large cross-community organisation in West Belfast. The members of the group were likeable, concerned individuals and people from both communities

willingly offered them time and hospitality.

However, near the end of the group's stay, their leader took me aside and told me that, while he was more than happy with the programme drawn up for him, he felt there was something amiss with it. It was too 'safe', he said; the community groups he was meeting were already committed to cross-community contact and did not need any 'outside persuaders' to encourage them to work for peace and reconciliation. Could I arrange something a bit more realistic – in other words, meetings with groups closer to those engaged in the conflict, people to whom they could add their own small bit of persuasion. I accordingly arranged that they meet for an hour with Andy Tyrie at UDA headquarters, and although Sinn Féin cancelled a meeting arranged for the full group, the Americans visited the Republican Press Centre in small groups.

The following year, when a member of the Irish host organisation was himself in the USA discussing a youth-exchange scheme, he happened to mention the name of the American group leader and received the response: "Oh yes, we heard about the great work he did while he was in Ireland." As to what this great work entailed, he was told:

[He] appeared on the media here, promoting the new 'conflict resolution' organisation he was setting up, and mentioned that while he was in Northern Ireland last year he had visited opposing paramilitary groups and helped resolve a few problems between them.

Did he now!

An official in the Community Relations Council recently told me of one foreign academic he knew who had spent a short while here pursuing his interest in conflict resolution. Some time after the academic's departure, the CRC official happened to come across a paper written by this academic for a conference abroad, and was astounded at the assertions being made – seemingly this academic had single-handedly established a conflict resolution programme here which would eventually solve all our problems! The claim bore no relation to the work he had actually been engaged in and was a blatant attempt at self-advancement.

As others see us . . .

Before I describe one example of how outsiders 'see' us, I should point out that some sections of our community apparently remain quite invisible. I was once asked to meet with a group of American Protestants, who, somewhat ironically, admitted that it was "only on this visit that we've really seen something of the Protestant community." Had they been too busy on their first visit, I asked. "First visit?" they responded, "this is our sixth." My imagination boggled at the thought that people could come here so many times and repeatedly miss an entire section of our community.

Another group of visitors once told me with great enthusiasm that they had now gained a much better understanding of *both* communities, and could see that Loyalists and Republicans suffered similar harassment, and were equally at the mercy of a manipulative legal system (this was at the height of the 'supergrass' trials). They felt they had now got the full picture. "Have you spoken to any of the victims?" I asked. "Oh yes, we've spoken to Republicans and Loyalists who were arrested by . . ." "I don't mean them, I mean *their* victims," I said. They looked around one another blankly, then

turned to me: “No, I guess we haven’t. Do you think we should?”

Those individuals and groups who *did* manage to gain a broader perspective of the situation here often did not arrive at this perspective spontaneously, but through a learning process in the course of which imported stereotypes were found to be decidedly wanting. One such organisation was the Dutch charity Pax Christi Kinderhulp which every summer for the past 21 years has taken 120 disadvantaged children – selected by the NSPCC – to stay with host-parents in the Netherlands, and all paid for by extensive fund-raising in Holland. However, the longevity of the organisation’s involvement has been due as much to their preparedness to adapt to the peculiarities of our problems and to acknowledge that these problems have no quick-fix cure.

Their learning experience was highlighted during the fifth year of their involvement. That year they brought a sizeable group of volunteers and organisers – 22 in all – to Northern Ireland for five days of fact-finding and motivation. During their stay they were taken to see the areas in Belfast and Derry where most of the children came from; they visited community centres and spoke to people in both communities; they walked in the Mourne Mountains and were drenched in Irish rain (to their credit, the Dutch generously termed it ‘Irish mist’); they visited famous watering-holes such as the Crown Bar and Kelly’s Cellars; they attended folk music sessions in Belfast and Downpatrick; and, most importantly of all, were reunited with some of the children who had gone to Holland on the first holiday scheme five years previously.

On the last night of their stay everyone met for a final evaluation. Near the end of the discussion, I told the Dutch that we really appreciated all the efforts they were making on our children’s behalf – and without exception the children had all benefited from their experience in Holland – but now that we had so many Dutch *here* in Northern Ireland it was an ideal opportunity to share and explore some fundamental issues. “In particular,” I said, “I am curious to learn about your personal motivations in wanting to bring our children to Holland.”

After a short silence, one woman ventured a response: “We are letting the Irish children experience a better way of life.” Another added: “We are showing them how people can live more happily.” Other responses followed: “We are taking them out of a bad environment and showing them a good one...”; “We want them to feel positive things about themselves, not negative things...”; “By bringing them into our homes we are hoping that contact with our own children will be a positive influence.” There were other comments in the same vein, and I waited for a moment before responding.

“This place must be a real dump, then?”

The Dutch were taken aback. “What do you mean!”

“Well, according to what you all say, this society doesn’t seem to have much going for it. It would seem that our children must *escape* it if they are to experience anything positive – it doesn’t seem to have anything of value of its own to offer? Indeed, considering how negative an environment it seems to be, I can only assume that you all must have really hated the last five days?”

A deluge of denials greeted my remarks. The Dutch eagerly listed all the positive things they had experienced: the beauty of the countryside; the fascinating if troubled history; the friendliness and humour of people in both communities; the energy and

resilience of the children; the openness and honesty they had encountered; the less frenetic pace of life; the vitality of the music. . . in short, they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

“Well, then,” I asked, “perhaps a reassessment is needed? I realise that the violence going on here, coupled with the depressing social circumstances many of the children face, creates a very negative image to outsiders. But if you look closer you will find that this society has a richness about it, and the people not only possess an energy and a resilience, but display a friendliness towards visitors that some other countries often lack. Our conflict might seem unreal in today’s world, but the people here are *very* real.”

All credit to the Dutch, but their reassessment began that evening, and the following morning, prior to departure, their chairman spoke on the organisation’s behalf:

Can I say that we appreciated the question posed yesterday. We have talked much about it among ourselves and we realise that although our purpose in coming to Northern Ireland was to learn about the Irish, we must also learn more about ourselves and our motivations. We have been treating your children simply as refugees, who could hopefully learn from our children, but from whom our own children were not expected to learn anything in return. We were also viewing Northern Ireland society very negatively, and we realise now that not only is this inaccurate, but counterproductive if we hope to contribute positively to the situation here.

It was such learning experiences – and it was a learning process that went both ways, for the Northern Irish also gained from their involvement with another society – which finally led Pax Christi Kinderhulp to make a generous gift to the people of Northern Ireland, when they purchased Kinder Community House in Killough, Co Down, for use by community groups.

However, not all such exchanges develop so productively, and, in much the same way that, in our desire to attract inward investment, we undermine ourselves by ‘selling’ Northern Ireland abroad as a low-wage economy, we often allow foreign exchange organisations to package and sell our children’s predicament in a way that is ultimately demeaning and counter-productive when endeavouring to build community self-esteem.

Looking for ‘news’

It is clear that not all outside interest proves of positive value to the communities here. This is especially so when we are referring to the media. Time and again throughout the ‘Troubles’ the media have revealed their obsession with the controversial and the dramatic, and shown scant regard concerning the possible effects on our communities. And if anything is guaranteed to reinforce powerlessness at the grassroots it is the media’s constant refusal to see that the everyday story of ordinary people – separate from the doings of the politicians and the patriots – is worth telling.

To give one example. Denis Smyth, a community historian, writing about the August 1969 period in the ‘Sailortown’ area of Belfast’s dockland, recalled how both sides of the community, by a courageous joint effort, managed to avert the communal violence which was erupting elsewhere in the city. In his recollection he made pointed reference to the negative attitude adopted by the media:

This co-operation was a unique event in the present troubled history of events, but unique only to the ordinary people themselves, it seems, for to outsiders it apparently held no interest. During that period in 1969 when working-class people allowed themselves to be incited against one another, and Belfast was plunged into obscene and irrational violence, a foreign television team visited the Dockland area. Now obviously they had done their research properly and knew that, going on past history, some of the worst of the communal violence could be expected to erupt in Sailortown.

However, much to the surprise and obvious disappointment of the television team, they found the people of Sailortown, while tense, managing to co-exist in peace with their neighbours. In our naivety we assured them that here, after all, was a *real* story, a good scoop for them – here at last, in a city gone mad, sanity had had its way and communal co-operation had replaced sectarian violence. But no, this time to *our* disappointment, they made it clear that such a peaceful situation wasn't 'news'. They wanted to report on the bomber, the killer, the savage tendencies of men – that was real 'news'.⁹

Once, while sending local children abroad on a summer scheme, a TV crew from the host country asked if they could come to Belfast to make a brief item about two children participating in the scheme – a Catholic girl and a Protestant boy. We insisted that the parents must give their full consent to all that was asked of their children, and this was accepted. However, only a week before the crew's arrival the young uncle of the Catholic girl was shot dead during a gun-battle with the British Army. When the TV team learned of this they seemed quite excited, and, somewhat concerned, we insisted that they do nothing to upset the child. How naive we were! Not long into the filming the interviewer began probing the girl's feelings on her uncle's death... and then probed further. As the girl got visibly more upset and her anguished mother paced up and down at the back of the room, we endeavoured to indicate that the team desist, but were dismissed with evasive hand gestures, while the cameraman, completely oblivious to our entreaties, zoomed in on the increasingly anguished face of the young girl. Only when the frantic mother stormed out of the room threatening to "get 'the boys' to turf them out" did we regain some measure of control over events. But it was a salutary lesson for all of us, and clear evidence that when the media decide they have unearthed a good human-interest angle, nothing is allowed to get in their way, certainly not the feelings of those most closely involved.

More reprehensibly, media interference has often thwarted attempts at promoting genuine dialogue. When journalists or reporters get wind of anything 'new' they invariably dash with unseemly haste to the editorial desk or newsroom to proclaim their discovery to all and sundry. People who were trying to sound out possibilities for accommodation suddenly find an unwelcome spotlight turned upon them, and their erstwhile friends and supporters rapidly distancing themselves from whatever was said. The commentators crown their efforts by posing patently unanswerable hypothetical questions, but ones which are guaranteed to raise deep suspicions among the populace, with the result that all concerned have to back down, and yet another attempt to reach across the divide has to be retracted, another window of opportunity is slammed shut.

What do the media believe they achieve when they so readily risk destroying

embryonic moves before these have a chance to percolate into the community consciousness? Is their vision limited to a three minute slot on the evening news? Are they afraid that if they don't leap in, some competitor will grab the opportunity instead?

Despite the self-indulgent congratulations those in the media are so frequently in the habit of bestowing upon one another, many at grassroots level view them with great distrust. During one occasion when media attention not only deliberately distorted what was occurring at community level, but placed those involved at great risk, Ballymurphy community activist Father Des Wilson wrote to me:

We have been betrayed by the BBC and the rest of them so often that we make resolution after resolution never to have anything to do with them again. And time and again we break that resolution. I think we would do well to boycott the whole lot of them.... We don't need them – because we don't need misinterpretation. Better for us to explain what we are doing to a hundred people than have it misrepresented to a million!

One of the more recent assertions made by media representatives when they try to inveigle you to participate is to insist that *their* programme will be balanced, because their programme will look at *both* sides. Is it not time the media did *three* programmes: one about Unionists, one about Nationalists. . . and one about the rest of us!

5: Heads in the Sand

“I’m afraid my shelves are basically Mars Bars orientated”

In November 1993, in the wake of the Shankill bombing atrocity and Greysteel massacre, Northern Ireland witnessed the most intense demands for peace for many years. Not a day went by without government spokesmen, church leaders, business leaders and others appearing on TV or in print beseeching *everyone* in the community to do all they could to bring peace that little bit closer. At the height of these calls for peace I approached the manager of a large newsagents/bookshop (part of a chain of such shops), asking if he would be prepared to stock my series of pamphlets which, I explained, were aimed specifically at encouraging cross-community understanding. His declined to take any, but gave a surprising explanation: “I’m sorry, but I really have to maximise the returns I get from the space I have – I’m afraid my shelves are basically Mars Bars orientated.” I looked around his extensive shop and wondered whether he and I lived in the same tormented country, whether we had been listening to the same appeals for the past fortnight, whether ‘Mars Bars’ could really be more important than all that was happening around us, and whether working for peace was really only for those who would not be inconvenienced too much by it.

Soon after a major UK bookseller established themselves in Belfast they turned down one of my titles because they considered it would be a slow seller. “We live in a commercial world,” the manager wrote to me, “and money tied up in very slow saleable

stock can be extremely expensive.” Now, the expense in question, for 10 copies of the title, would have amounted to the grand sum of £10.72, but it was not this which concerned me. I replied that while we certainly lived in a commercial world we *also lived* in Belfast during a turbulent period in its history, and in my opinion even bookshops could play a positive role – for downtown shops provided an ideal neutral zone for people from both communities to access each other’s material. I felt large bookshops had an *obligation* to provide shelf space – no matter how uncommercial it might be – for such community-based material, particularly if its purpose was to confront the sectarian divide.

‘Of insufficient aesthetic worth to warrant subvention’

Some years ago a young woman from a Loyalist area of Belfast showed me a collection of her poetry. I was surprised at the content, for in her poems she had managed to put herself in the position of *all* women in Northern Ireland suffering because of the violence: the anguished widow of a murdered policeman; the distraught mother of a hunger striker helplessly watching her son’s life waste away; the wife of a lifer coming to terms with *her own* ‘sentence’ – being left to rear her children alone. It is often said that only when our two communities begin to understand each another’s fears and aspirations can they ever hope to bridge the terrible gulf between them. Here was someone who was not only trying to understand the ‘other’ community, but was *feeling with them*, articulating a humanity that transcended the sectarian divide. To enable her poems to reach a wider audience I submitted them to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, requesting help with publication costs.

The response? The writing, I was informed, “remains verse rather than poetry [and is not] of sufficient aesthetic worth to warrant subvention.”¹⁰ ‘Insufficient aesthetic worth’? Our communities had been traumatised by an orgy of killing for years, and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland was preoccupied with aestheticism! In a meeting years later with the author of the Arts Council’s rejection, he reminded me that his remit was to maintain literary standards. I replied that not only did I consider the literary quality of the poems to be quite acceptable, but I believed that for him to judge material solely on the basis of ‘aesthetic worth’ in the midst of our communal tragedy was incredibly short-sighted. Arts Council funding was *public* money, after all, yet instead of it being used to encourage *all* signs of an emergent new consciousness within the communities bearing the brunt of the violence, it was merely subsidising the efforts of the elite. I told him that I might be prepared to accept a concern with aestheticism if we were living in Edinburgh or Cardiff or Leeds, but *this was Belfast*, in a particularly tragic period in its history, and whether the Arts Council cared to acknowledge it or not there was a bloody war going on, and it was up to everyone – the Arts Council included – to use all the resources at their disposal to do something about it. Rather than adopting a position which, as he himself admitted, could effectively “silence a voice” he should have been *actively encouraging* such voices. It seemed ironic, I said, that he and others could travel up and down to Dublin on ‘peace trains’ appealing *for everyone else* to work towards ending the conflict, when, on a bit of reflection, there might have been some extra contribution *they themselves* could make within their own areas of responsibility.

6: ‘Received opinion and scholarly pints’

The real ‘Culture Club’?

Questions of national identity and supposedly irreconcilable cultural ‘differences’ are undeniably at the root of the Northern Ireland conflict. Understandably then, some community groups have a ‘cultural’ component to their work, and when they are denied funding, or face hostility from the academic elite, they often suppose it is a direct consequence of the particular cultural stance they have taken. For example, when the Gaelic League publication *Cuisle na nGael* failed in its efforts to secure funding in 1992, its editors retaliated:

...‘culture’ is being insidiously refined and sanitised by Civil Servants and Government appointees... Culture, too, is being increasingly presented, not in an Irish or even in an Ulster context, but in exclusively Northern Ireland terms. Instead of culture enabling us to broaden our horizons and to enrich our experiences, it is steadily being pared back to concentrate on the ‘culture’ of the Northern Ireland State.¹¹

Although the editors have a point, I do not believe that the problem is ultimately one of establishment allegiance to a specific State, but is more in the nature of an exclusive club fending off intruders, *irrespective* of the cultural stance these intruders might adopt. Sometimes the nature of this club can seem almost benign, as revealed by archaeologist Jim Mallory’s telling insight into the world of academia:

...the layman, no matter how intelligent and industrious, can easily become unstuck, not so much because he hasn’t read everything he could get his hands on, but rather because he doesn’t get the opportunity to drink with the right people. Received opinion in any field is more easily found between scholarly pints than the pages of a book.¹²

Quite often, however, the club is far from benign, and easily reveals its irritation and even its arrogance when its professional monopoly is encroached upon: some academics have thrown temper tantrums in public; others have dashed into print with attacks which even astound their colleagues, or have hastily cobbled together ‘critiques’ through which double-decker buses could be run. And often this is all accompanied by a lack of the very ‘professionalism’ they are seemingly endeavouring to uphold.

No-one knows better the energy which can be expended by ruffled academia than Ian Adamson and myself – as a consequence of our promotion of the shared heritage of the Ulster people. In their attacks academics frequently assert that, as non-professional ‘popular’ historians, we are deliberately misrepresenting history to suit our own ends. In fact, more often than not the misrepresentation originates from them. This is not the place to describe the ongoing exchange in detail – I refer readers to my pamphlet *The Cruthin Controversy* for a fuller account – but a brief mention here of some of the more recent so-called ‘critiques’ might give some flavour of their quality.

“Defenders of the Cruthin myth...”

When reviewing a new edition of Estyn Evan’s *The Personality of Ireland*, Jonathan Bell of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum felt it necessary to add:

Defenders of the Cruthin myth would not find comfort in Evans, however. He is determinedly against racist or ethnic explanations. He is a supporter of cultural exchange and enrichment. His views are in fact close to those espoused by many people working in the area of cultural traditions. Differences between north and south should be seen as “a potential source of enrichment through cross-fertilisation ... To achieve this ... one should first look towards the renewal of regional consciousness in the old province of Ulster.”¹³

This is blatant misrepresentation. As Bell draws no distinction between those (Adamson and myself) who have done most to promote popular awareness of the Cruthin, and those who have abused our efforts for sectarian interests, I can only assume that Adamson and I are considered among those “defenders of the Cruthin myth” whom Bell claims “would not find comfort in Evans.” According to Bell, then, we are engaged in promoting a racist theory, one which is opposed to cultural exchange and enrichment, and which denies the benefits of cross-fertilisation. This type of pretend analysis and sweeping insinuation is the type of approach we normally expect from the assortment of armchair intellectuals who care little of what we are really saying, but gleefully jump onto the anti-Cruthin bandwagon. Bell, on the other hand, should be familiar enough with our books to realise what it is we *are* promoting, and that we have actually quoted Evans in *support* of our work. Indeed, the quote from Evans which Bell singles out is also one *we* have used approvingly in our own material!

Considerations of space do not permit me to counter such misrepresentation here. However, I feel it presents an ideal opportunity for readers *to judge for themselves* the quality of these ‘critiques’. Readers should read a copy of Adamson’s *The Ulster People*¹⁴ or my pamphlet *Ulster’s Shared Heritage*¹⁵, and then decide whether what we are saying bears any relation to such claims that we are promoting racism and denying cultural enrichment. Having done this, perhaps the reader might then spend a moment reflecting upon the motives of those who constantly endeavour to misrepresent our work.

One curious aspect of Bell’s criticism was his mention of those “working in the area of cultural traditions” by way of comparison, almost implying that they are a different breed of people from the so-called “defenders of the Cruthin”. This is to completely ignore the fact that Adamson and I were endeavouring to stimulate cross-community awareness of our shared cultural traditions *long before* it became the flavour of the month among our academic establishment, and certainly long before the appearance of the lucrative funding which finally dragged our academics down from their ivory towers where for so long they had managed to pretend that our communal tragedy was no concern of theirs.

“Quite wilfully annoying...”

One tactic often employed when implying that Adamson and I are simply misrepresenting history is for our critics to feign exasperation at our ‘distortions’, such as Pádraig Ó Snodaigh does, when, referring to Ian Adamson’s contribution to a collection of essays

on the Ulster-Scottish connection,¹⁶ he indignantly remarks that “Adamson’s article is quite wilfully annoying.”¹⁷ This is because he objects to Adamson labelling the 18th century Ulster settlers in America as ‘Scotch-Irish’, when, Ó Snodaigh asserts, “the fact is that the early immigrants... called themselves Irish”, and the ‘Scotch-Irish’ designation was “spawned... in the mid-19th Century. This fundamentally-important fact is seldom averted to, and not once in this book.” This seemingly authoritative and schoolmaster-like rebuke seems to be proclaiming: “Here’s that man Adamson concocting his facts again!” And if Adamson was indeed guilty of such inaccuracy, the reader should more easily be swayed against his overall argument.

But let us look more closely at the ‘accuracy’ of Ó Snodaigh’s ‘fundamentally-important fact’. Contrary to his assertion that the ‘Scotch-Irish’ designation was not ‘spawned’ until the mid-19th century, its use in America was actually noted *as early as 1695* when Sir Thomas Laurence, Secretary of Maryland, wrote: “In the two counties of Dorchester and Somerset, where the Scotch-Irish are numerous, they clothe themselves by their linen and woollen manufactures.” The following derogatory comment was made in 1723 by an Anglican minister in Delaware: “They call themselves Scotch-Irish – ignavus pecus – and the bitterest railers against the church [of England] that ever trod upon American ground.” That same year reference was also made to them in Sussex County: “The first settlers of this county were for the far greatest part originally English, but of late years great numbers of Irish (who usually call themselves Scotch-Irish) have transplanted themselves and their families from the north of Ireland.” Crown official James Logan, himself from Ireland, was upset by the Ulster immigrants’ habit of taking land without proper authorization, and in a letter of 1730 to his employer he complained: “They are of the Scotch-Irish (so called here) of whom J. Steel tells me you seem’d to have a pretty good opinion but it is more than I can have tho’ their countryman.” Another who held them in low regard was the Marylander who a few years later murdered the sheriff of Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, after calling the sheriff and his assistants “damned Scotch-Irish sons of bastards”! George Washington, however, was more complimentary in the remark credited to him during the height of the Revolutionary War: “If defeated everywhere else, I shall make my last stand for liberty among the Scotch-Irish of my native Virginia.”

So while it is a fact that many of the Ulster immigrants quite rightly celebrated their ‘Irishness’ following their arrival in America, it is *also* a fact that the hyphenated title ‘Scotch-Irish’ “had been coined, was generally known, and was even used by some of the Scotch-Irish”¹⁸ *right from the start*, and it is mischievous to pretend that it was only ‘spawned’ over a century later. The indignation expressed by Ó Snodaigh was hardly justified by his misrepresentation of the ‘facts’; while his attempt to discredit Adamson in the process could best be described as . . . well, “quite wilfully annoying”.

Some of the ‘critiques’ plumb new depths. Allan Armstrong, having shown himself to be obsessed with ‘gable-wall’ distortions of Adamson’s writings, can seemingly only respond with little more than a ‘gable-wall’ critique: “When the fraternal knock finally arrives on Robbie the Pict’s door, he’d better beware. The first question is likely to be. ‘Are you a Proddie Pict or are you a Papish Pict?’ ”¹⁹ Quite wilfully annoying? No – pathetic!

Because so many of the ‘critiques’ emanating from academia (and its hangers-on) prove to be little more than veiled antagonism – and flawed by dishonesty and innuendo – the suspicion exists that hidden behind the supposed concern with professionalism and objectivity lies a distaste for any ‘non-professional’ encroachment upon a jealously-guarded preserve. Our academics *could* play a vital role in helping our two communities abandon unfounded and frequently abused stereotypes and embrace a new vision of our diverse but shared heritage, but to do so they would need to descend at long last from their ivory towers and join with those in both our communities who are endeavouring to make history and culture *accessible* and *relevant* to people at the grassroots.

7: The need for community responsibility

Although throughout this pamphlet I have detailed the processes by which powerlessness at the grassroots is reinforced from *without*, I am mindful of the tensions, failings and inconsistencies which exist *within* communities. Often in their haste to tackle the most pressing problems even community activists can inadvertently contribute to the very sense of powerlessness they are striving to overcome. Once when I was walking around Highfield estate selecting children to go to Holland, a resident confronted me:

You’ll not be picking any of my kids, I’m sure. After all, we try to make sure they never get into trouble and do our best to provide for them. It’s only parents who neglect their children, who are out at the boozery every night, who get rewarded with free holidays. Same with the RUC Community Relations: the easiest way for a kid around here to get taken away camping by the police is to smash somebody’s window, or terrorise the elderly. Those of us who make an effort to see that our children behave themselves get little recognition for it.

It was a salutary encounter, and made me realise that, despite the best of intentions, different layers of community reality often go undetected.

Often the community is turned off by the attitudes adopted by local community leaders, some of whom seem impervious to constructive criticism, and whose projects flounder about with little real direction – a situation hardly guaranteed to raise community morale. Occasionally the desire of some groups to tap into funding becomes more important than developing a manageable and purposeful programme, and once funding is secured such groups often become ossified, with the same old personnel holding sway, until the wider community loses interest and their involvement gradually drops away. It is also quite obvious that the post-ceasefire circumstances – especially the lure of all the money supposedly coming in – while offering new opportunities, is simultaneously going to create an entirely new set of divisive situations at the grassroots. (As well as, no doubt, a new surge of professionals and quangos who will again insist that the community requires *their* expertise to properly co-ordinate the new resources.)

It also seems that the high profile painstakingly gained by community action over the years has unwittingly created an 'expectancy' culture, particularly among our youth, which some community activists find near-impossible to fulfil. Even more disheartening for many community activists is the destructive nihilism which greets some of their hardest efforts. A worker who organised an outdoor music concert as part of the Shankill '94 celebrations was dumbfounded by what transpired:

Gangs of youths went out of their way to destroy it – they climbed up to the top of the marquee and slid down, with those inside kicking at their friends as they slid past; they sprayed the expensive sound equipment with the fire extinguishers; and when they realised I was finally having to call the whole thing off, they let out one massive cheer – as if they had won some great victory! And this was all being done for their benefit! They need to catch themselves on!

Across the divide in Catholic West Belfast another youth worker, who for years had tried to raise the self-image of his estate's frequently stigmatized young people, finally resigned when his group, on a residential weekend to Kinder Community House, tampered with all the fire extinguishers, spent most of their time consuming crates of beer, and left the premises in a terrible mess. He relayed to me afterwards the two words which best summed up his feelings: 'burnt out'. There is a constant toll of burnt-out people within the community network, a reality not properly acknowledged, and many genuinely caring individuals have given up, exhausted by constant battles with the bureaucracy without and the indiscipline within.

Much of this indiscipline is obviously a consequence of the social and economic disadvantage which is still a fact of life in many working-class areas, and is also directly related to the experience of powerlessness which only serves to compound such disadvantage.

If our communities are to regain a sense of power over their lives they must not only be prepared to confront the domination of outside agencies, but must be open to self-criticism and be prepared to accept full responsibility for their own actions. Above all, they must always *believe* in themselves.

Some years ago, when the Newtownabbey Musicians Workshop was celebrating its first successful year of weekly sessions in a local lounge bar, they decided that, in place of the usual entrance charge, admission would be gained by handing in an Easter egg (the following day being Good Friday). Prior to the event Bo Dyer, one of the Workshop's leaders, informed me they wanted to donate the eggs to the NSPCC, as well as to a local children's home. "Why the NSPCC?" I asked. "The NSPCC's a reputable agency, people will trust you with the eggs," he replied. "But you are just as reputable an organisation, and know just as many deserving children?" "People don't necessarily see us that way – to them we're a strange assortment: skinheads, punks, you name it..." "Well – why not confront that image, then." I replied.

And so they notified the media that on Good Friday their minibus would visit various Newtownabbey estates and children were advised of the 'drop points' where the eggs would be distributed. If you ignore the fact that the 300 eggs were insufficient to satisfy the hordes of waiting children, the venture was a complete success – epitomised by one resident's comment to me: "They all look a bit weird, mind you, but they're not a bad

bunch – at least they’re trying to do something for ordinary people.”

Under it all, the community knows who is out to help them and who is not. When I look around at our assorted politicians, professionals and others I often feel that Kropotkin’s question is as relevant now as when he posed it, almost a century ago:

Where are those who will come to serve the masses – not to utilize them for their own ambitions?

There *are* many genuine people in the professions and the community *does* need their expertise. But the relationship between them must be one of genuine partnership, one that consolidates and develops community strengths, not one in which the community repeatedly finds itself subservient to the career needs of the ‘experts’.

Now, more than ever before, it is vital that the ordinary people of Northern Ireland begin to demand a greater say over their future, for it is they who have sustained their areas throughout our long nightmare and who ultimately provided the *real* impetus behind the current ceasefires. It is equally clear that most of those charged with taking us into that future – politicians and professionals alike – could easily, without the assistance provided by a genuine community partnership, prove unequal to the complexities of the task that lies ahead.

Up to now the voice of ordinary people has been effectively excluded from the ‘peace process’, and this is the major flaw of that process. Yet, irrespective of whether our politicians reach, or fail to reach, some accommodation with each other, ultimately it is what is achieved at the grassroots of our society that will prove to be the *real* peace process.

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