



The blanket

A Journal of Protest and Dissent

West Belfast Snores Back

Anthony McIntyre • 13 August 2007

Long billed as one of the jewels in the crown of the annual Feile an Phobail this year's West Belfast Talks Back event at Louise's School was more like a thorn. Boring, flat, and sleep-inducing are the most frequent adjectives used by people who attended it. It was truly an underwhelming experience.

The composition of the panel hardly lent itself to stimulating discussion. Catriona Ruane and Edwin Poots were there as ministers from the British government's Stormont division. Poots has the wit to know he is a British minister. Ruane claims not to be but labours to explain what sort of minister she actually is. Their presence made the event appear stage managed; its real purpose to allow Sinn Fein to parade a new minister after a year of mixed electoral fortunes. The ambience surrounding Ruane and Poots, no longer polluted with the same paralysing tension of yesteryear, emitted a spirit of cooperation even if grudgingly given. And although she failed to rise to the occasion, it was carefully pitched to portray Ruane as the more tolerant and progressive of the two.

Government ministers do not turn up to tell audiences the truth about anything. They come to tell the them what the government wants them to hear rather than what the audience needs to know. Frequently they tell people what they too want to hear. Ruane did exactly this. Poots was more worthy of study if only because he is not beholden to the audience, cares little what it thinks and is free to say what he pleases. Although had the discussion been in North Belfast, billed as Glenbryn Screams Back, Poots would have been less liberal with his tongue.

Desmond Rea of the policing Board along with Eoghan Harris from the Sunday Independent made up the other half of the panel. On the evening, Rea would have been better placed as the spokesperson for some technical management project facing scrutiny from a parliamentary select committee. Fastidious and methodical, he managed to

There is no such thing as a dirty word. Nor is there a word so powerful, that it's going to send the listener to the lake of fire upon hearing it.
- Frank Zappa



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generate all the excitement that committees for the management of paint drying, whose task it is to investigate committees for the management of concrete setting, are renowned for.

Harris was different. He said his task as a writer was to tell the audience what they did not want to hear. He was true to his word. As much as his opinions prickled me Harris was the reason I went along. I had never attended this particular event before but his presence, and the sheer inability of anyone to defang him, augured well for a clash of perspectives. The sparks jumping from the clash between him and his critics made attending something other than a complete waste of time.

I turned up with Kevin McQuillan and Richard O'Rawe, each of us at different points in our lives having faced the ire of the muscle and muzzle goondas of West Belfast politics. A fourth guy to whom we had given a lift had at one time been kicked and punched about South Belfast by the same type because he had expressed opinions they didn't like. The highlight of the evening, however, was the quick few pints we quaffed after we had made our escape, during which nobody talked about the evening's discussion.

The opening question from the floor came from the youngest son of the murdered solicitor Pat Finucane. It concerned the family's call for a public inquiry. This set the tone for the discussion for the remainder of the evening. Each time the theme of exposure was raised Poots, Rea and Harris all too easily zeroed in on the inconsistency in the Sinn Fein position. Poots wanted an end to inquiries in the interests of moving forward, Harris successfully showed how unsuccessfully Sinn Fein sought to monopolise victimhood, and Rea felt that the Bradley-Eames project should be allowed to devise a method for dealing with the problem.

Ruane failed completely to stem the tide. It is hard to see what other than piffle any question could have drawn from her anyway. In her tennis career she may not have conquered Wimbledon but her political life has seen her emerge as the undisputed queen of Waffledon.

Her vacuity demonstrated that Sinn Fein itself is too easily exposed by the issue of exposure. Her performance accentuates the extent to which today's march for truth sounds like one hand clapping. That people like Eoghan Harris and Edwin Poots can come into the heart of West Belfast and sound more logical than the dominant party in the constituency is instructive of how intellectually moribund the republican project has become. Issues about state collusion that could at one time have been handled with aplomb from a radical republican perspective are now subject to sustained erosion and ridicule because republican discourse has been replaced by the language of all things to all people. With Rea pointing out that the IRA created more victims than any other single group engaged in the conflict many are demanding a return on the victims issue and Sinn Fein is clearly unable to pay out the dividend.

Elsewhere people in the audience persisted in leading with their chin. One man pointed to a British Army comment that the IRA were unbeatable, while making no reference to the many gloating utterances from the same body claiming that Operation Banner had secured the objectives of the British state while the IRA had to abandon all its objectives and embrace everything it fought against. The bulk of the panel made mincemeat of claims that the IRA had not been defeated. Ruane was unable or unwilling to demonstrate otherwise. In an uncomfortable encounter for Martin Meehan, who at least along with

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John Kennedy

Jude Collins brought some badly needed moments of light relief to proceedings, the former republican prisoner was struck stum by Harris's rejoinder that he was venting his spleen precisely because he had fought a futile war for thirty years and ultimately had nothing to show for it. Meehan's profession of pride at having been an IRA member was highlighted by Poots as being in stark contrast to someone else in the audience who continuously publicly denied IRA membership.

One man complained about intimidation of speakers and an atmosphere that generated the anonymous pressure of the group which prohibited people on the floor from asking a critical question of Sinn Fein. There were enough people in the audience not easily dissuaded by menace, of which there was none on the night. Why turn up to a supposedly hostile event and be afraid to ask a question?

Even Harris agreed, given his views, that the audience treated him politely. He got few claps but he was hardly going to interpret that as intimidation. The real intimidation goes on out of public view. On our way to St Louise's I spoke on the phone to a man who claims to have just been told by a senior IRA member that he would never die in his sleep because of the republican political opinions he expresses.

He may have died in his sleep had he went to St Louise's.

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