

Seeds of Hope

An exploration by the ‘Seeds of Hope’
ex-prisoners Think Tank

compiled by

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ISLAND (27) PAMPHLETS

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Michael Hall and Anne Gallagher

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Introduction

The ‘Seeds of Hope’ ex-prisoners project originated from the inspiration of Anne Gallagher (née McGlinchy), four of whose brothers became involved in the Northern Ireland conflict and served long prison sentences, one being later shot dead. During the height of the ‘Troubles’ Anne worked as a nurse in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, where she witnessed almost on a daily basis the horrific consequences of this conflict. Despite being appalled by what she had to confront, she refused to demonise – as her own family members had been demonised – those who had got involved in the conflict, believing that they too were victims of extra-ordinary circumstances, and that their life experiences contained lessons for our society, even ‘seeds of hope’ for the future.

She made contact with paramilitary organisations on both sides of the communal divide, suggesting to them that a project be established which would support ex-prisoners in their efforts to create and sustain self-employment. Anne felt that the skills which many prisoners had acquired during their imprisonment – in craftwork, in the visual arts, in drama and music, etc – could be purposefully utilised to this end. The ‘Seeds of Hope’ project, as it became known, would not attempt to duplicate the energetic efforts already being made by Republican and Loyalist ex-prisoner support groups, but would work in partnership with such organisations, as well as with individual ex-prisoners, helping not only to extend the outreach of these organisations but to promote the products made by ex-prisoners, on both an inter-community and a cross-border basis.

Ultimately, the ‘Seeds of Hope’ project hopes to embrace not only ex-prisoners but anyone who has experienced hurt and pain as a consequence of the past thirty years of conflict. Anne holds the strong belief that the personal stories of all those who consider themselves to be victims of the conflict will need to be heard if this society is to embark upon a true healing process, and that perhaps one step along that road would be for the ex-prisoners involved in the ‘Seeds of Hope’ project to begin to tell *their* personal stories.

It was with this objective in mind that Anne approached the Community Think Tanks Project. Previous Think Tank pamphlets had given her a valuable insight into sections of our community rarely offered a public hearing, and she felt that an ex-prisoners Think Tank, comprised of the core group of individuals who had gravitated towards the ‘Seeds of Hope’ project, might be one way to accomplish that objective.

The core group, once appraised of this idea, were supportive but also uncertain. Firstly, they expressed some scepticism as to whether the wider society would want to hear the personal stories of ex-combatants. Secondly, there were concerns that perhaps the ex-prisoner population itself was not ready for such a

step to be taken, especially if these personal stories were to be disseminated widely in pamphlet form. As one Loyalist member of the Think Tank noted:

We need to be very conscious of how we approach any document. This group is relatively unique, in that the majority of ex-prisoners wouldn't sit down with each other the way we are doing. Indeed, most Loyalists that I know wouldn't particularly want me to be sitting here discussing things with former Republican prisoners. Okay, some may have the confidence that I won't misrepresent them, but I think that there is still a lot of people – on both sides – who will say that we don't represent them, that we don't represent their points of view, and I think we have to accept that as quite legitimate. So we must make it perfectly clear that this pamphlet is simply seeking to give a voice to *us* as a group of individuals – it is not claiming to represent the views of all ex-prisoners out there.

One of the Republican participants concurred with this sentiment.

I agree. This is about us speaking about our personal experiences, around the themes we have already identified: what the circumstances were which led each of us into prison; what our experiences were while in prison; and what we feel our role can be – still speaking at a personal level – now that we are back out into our communities. If we can keep to that, then I feel happy with the idea of a pamphlet. After all, each of us is perfectly entitled to talk about our own personal experiences, and maybe it's time to start telling people our side of the story.

After some debate, it was agreed to hold a series of discussions and see whether what came out of them could contribute in a positive manner to the wider debate which is currently taking place at community level.

The contributors to this pamphlet –bar one, who had been taken by his parents to England where he had ended up as an 'ODC' ('ordinary decent criminal') there – encompassed all four main Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organisations, for at the time of their imprisonment the Think Tank participants were members of either the IRA, INLA, UDA or UVF. Finally, it was unfortunate that although there were a small number of females imprisoned because of their involvement in the conflict, no female ex-prisoners were involved in the Think Tank.

Michael Hall

Note: All indented paragraphs represent a quote, and spaces between quotes indicate when a new contributor is 'speaking'. In line with Think Tank procedure, no quote is attributed, a policy which experience has shown allows for more openness.

Extra-ordinary Circumstances

Each of the ex-prisoners involved in the Think Tank had experienced the sectarian divide as part of the everyday reality of growing up in Northern Ireland.

I was about eight and my ma went into hospital and this aunt was minding us. Now she was a real diehard Loyalist, Paisley to the bone, but it was cheaper to get your hair cut on the Falls than it was on the Shankill, so she sent me up the Falls to get my hair cut. This was well ahead of '69 and I can remember sitting in the barbers – I had a red, white and blue jumper on – pulling my coat round my jumper, absolutely terrified. Now what was that about? Why was that fear there? It was because I knew I was in 'enemy' territory.

Same with me. We used to go over to Peter's Hill at the bottom of the Shankill for it had the best fish shop around and it was all fresh stuff. And we would go there specifically from the Falls, but we'd never wear anything that could identify us as coming from there, we were always conscious that that could get us into trouble.

At other times the reality of the communal division confronted some individuals in a more dramatic manner.

My first experience of coming into contact with Protestants was when I was twelve and beaking school one day. This was about 1966. I hadn't changed out of my school uniform into my old clothes, which I usually did for walking around the streets. I was going through the Protestant area of Suffolk adjacent to the area where I lived, and I met these two guys of about eighteen or so. And they seen the badge on my uniform and came over. And one of them grabbed me and says: "you're a Roman Catholic, ye wee bastard!" And he proceeded to beat the shit out of me – so that was my first encounter with Protestants. It was then that I realised that there was a conflict between Protestants and Catholics here!

Ever since I was a kid I can remember there being some kind of division. My doctor, who was a Catholic, was at Unity Flats and I went one time with a sore throat and got beat up on the way back out. There was always a feeling of 'them and us'.

For some, the political component of the divide within Northern Irish society was also something which loomed large in their personal development.

In school I was taught Irish history by a schoolteacher who taught very much from a Republican viewpoint, and at that age I thought that the IRA were all great lads and I wanted to be one of them when I grew up. I had a few

Protestant friends while I was growing up but once the Troubles broke out there was a divide there.

The family I came from was Lower Falls, my mother was a former member of the Cumann na mBan and my father was a former member of the IRA in the early 30s and 40s. So there was always a bit of Republicanism within the house. I remember my mother talking about this woman called Bridie Dollan: they were moving gear in Leeson Street and whatever happened a grenade went off and Bridie Dollan was left blinded and with no arms. And as you were a child growing up my mother used to say – if Bride Dollan was walking by the door – now there’s a woman who you should respect. And then you had the Divis Street riots in 1964, and I always remember the cops coming round the streets with water cannons and hosing people down and what have you. So I was always aware of the fact that the cops weren’t part of our community. And then in 1966 you had the anniversary of the Easter Rising. I was thirteen at the time, and there was this Republican shop which had opened up at the corner of Conway Street, it used to sell a lot of Republican paraphernalia and I was forever going up and buying books and stuff, trying to become more aware. And I think that was when I read the *Selected Writings of James Connolly*, I was more orientated towards his way of thinking than I was towards the likes of Patrick Pearse. Then you had ’68, the start of the Civil Rights, PD, Bernadette McAliskey coming on the scene, things like that there. And you were starting to become more aware of what was happening around you: about housing, about social conditions, things like that.

Indeed, it was the traumatic events of 1969 which proved to be one of the most significant, motivating events in each of their lives. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the deep communal suspicions which existed then – and, indeed, which had always existed, even if only as an undercurrent – both communities believed that responsibility for these events could be laid squarely at the feet of the ‘other’ community – that ‘they’ had started it.

In ’69 I was working as a plasterer with a Protestant firm, I was the only Catholic in it. And we were coming up from Cookstown after finishing a job, and they normally dropped me off in Wilton Street on the Shankill Road and I’d walk down onto the Falls and get a bus home. But this day as we were coming in towards Royal Avenue they said I’d better get off there. And I said: “sure just drop me off on the Shankill.” And the driver says, “no, no, you’d better get off here.” So I got out of the car and walked up Castle Street and then I noticed all the places burning and the smoke coming out of everywhere. And further up the road I met a friend of mine who told me: “The Orangies have attacked.” I realised then that the guys that was dropping me off must’ve knew that that attack was coming and knew not to bring me up the Shankill Road but to drop me off before.

In ’69 whenever it all blew up I lived on the corner of Dover Street where the whole thing started – I was eleven then. Rioting was going on in Derry and

there was rumours in Belfast, where tension was really high, that the Catholics were going to start trouble in Belfast so as to put more pressure on the police, to weaken them. On the 13th August they burnt the car showrooms at the bottom of Conway Street and most of the men about the Shankill Road on the 14th were all standing about Conway Street waiting on another attack. And it was actually Dover Street where it happened, and there was just a handful of people held it back initially, and then the whole thing erupted and the Falls Road was practically invaded. One of the key things I can remember was standing at the street corner watching the tracer bullets coming down. To me it was the IRA shooting down the street, it was only years later when I was in jail that I was told it was actually from the Shorland armoured cars. The B-Specials were shooting over people's heads to disperse the crowds but a wee lad was shot dead in Divis Flats that night. My da was standing beside Herbie Roy when he was shot dead and my sister was also standing there, and when she seen Herbie Roy lying there with a bullet wound at first she thought it was me da and it just threw her into hysterics. The next day I was out making petrol bombs for the following night's rioting. But I didn't understand the politics of it then, I was just defending my area.

Irrespective of who had 'started' the inter-communal conflict, there was no denying the traumatic manner in which it engulfed both working-class communities.

There was snipers here and there and petrol bombs getting thrown and everything. I stayed on the Falls Road most of the day and while I was there my younger brother was up in Bombay Street and had just been shot by the B-Specials. He was helping people evacuate from Bombay Street and at that time he'd have been about fourteen, and the B-Specials subbed the whole street and I think there was four or five shot. He wasn't wounded too badly, he was just shot in the leg. I eventually got home later that evening and there was a whole mass evacuation going on – all my family were down on the Falls Road bringing people up, all the relatives that were down there, bringing them up into the schools and houses, putting everybody up wherever they could. I spent the next four or five days manning the barricades. Still, I didn't have any inclination at that time to get joined up and fight.

It was all very emotional, people were looking at houses and things that they had built up over the years all being totally destroyed. And they were being destroyed by Protestants and yet they had lived next door to Protestant neighbours. And I think that was one of the worst aspects, that although there was some Protestant neighbours who protected them, there was others who led the charge against them, pointing them out. That was very significant to them people, you know, that sense of betrayal – by people who they had probably shared a pound of sugar with or a cup of tea with or something of that nature.

In '69 when the Troubles started I was nine and used to live in Brown Square at the bottom of the Shankill. And any time after that when there was rioting or petrol bombing all the kids of the area were rounded up and put into houses in two wee courts off Wilson Street. You had maybe 40 or 50 kids

per house, stuffed into the bedrooms, with wet blankets put up over the bedroom doors and over the windows to keep out the CS gas that the Army had been firing at the time. It scared the life out of you.

At the start of '69 there was the riots in Derry and the call went out to relieve the riots in Derry. And there used to be a big car place at the top of our street, Isaac Agnews. So people went in and burnt it out. And the scout hall we were in was in Gilford Street, just down facing Dover Street and Percy Street, and we were able to look out of it and see up those streets. And it used to be a mixed area and we seen these crowds of Protestants gathering and I remember saying to someone: "I wish the bastards would come down so that we could get into them" – I'll be quite honest about that. And he looked at me and says: "are ye stupid or something, what chance would we have?" And I said: "fuck them, let them come down, let's get into them!" 'Cause I was very emotional about the IRA and about what was happening in Derry, you were listening till it and you seen the police going in, marching down the street and beating people up and that there. Okay, you always had your agitators there with the petrol bombs and stones to start it off, but that's reality. And on 14th August I didn't actually get involved that night, but the next morning I remember this young girl running up to the door and shouting: "we need your milk bottles, we need your hurlies!" And my ma turns round and says: "right, come on, we have to go up here." She was that way, like. We run up to the top of Balaclava Street and that was just facing the corner of Conway Street, and we had hurlies, like, and my ma was down giving everyone milk bottles at the corner of Balaclava Street. We actually got in with the crowds, and all we had were hurlies and stones and bottles and all that. I was only fifteen at that time and all you seen was houses burning and people crying and things like that.

I always remember the travellers from the Glen Road coming down in the lorries and helping people move whatever furniture was left. And you seen this here scene of destruction, you know. That same day Bombay Street had happened, and young Gerald McAuley had been shot dead and there was a real bad feeling in the area about Trooper McCabe and the wee lad Rooney, who had been shot dead the night before by the B-Specials with the whippet-guns. But I'll be honest with you, I didn't join the IRA at that stage. I thought to myself: I'm a wee bit young, I'll hold off. I just didn't know what to do, although I was on the barricades and things like that. Dumps were going through houses here and gear was going there. There was a lot of rumours of IRA men coming from the Free State with their guns and all that. But at the end of the day there was nothing there, there was only the people themselves. It all really started off with defence and I believe that most people who joined the IRA at that stage did so out of an emotional reaction rather than a political reaction. It was our area, our community, so we'll defend it. And recruitment went up and up.

Nevertheless, despite the stressful situation faced by most residents in the worst-affected areas, for those growing up as youths in the midst of such

mayhem there was no denying its potential for excitement.

If any Protestant, anyone with an Orange badge or anything like that, strayed near the Falls Road side of town these couple of young fellas would notice them and they'd come and tell me. And I would go and beat the living daylight out of them and take their badges. We saw their badges and their scarves as trophies, like. One time my brother and I put on all our badges and our Linfield scarves and we dandered up the Shankill Road as 'Orangies'. It was great craic.

I had been brought up at the peaceline at Unity Flats and was fighting with Catholics all the time. They came over and broke our windies and we went and broke theirs; we actually deliberately went over and broke theirs to try and get the big lads out 'cause you knew that people were coming out with rifles and guns and this was exciting. This was what you wanted when you were a kid.

For one of the Think Tank participants, however, the outbreak of violence in 1969 was to result in him being moved away from the Troubles, but, ironically, not removed from the inevitability of imprisonment which confronted all the other participants.

I was thirteen in 1969 when the Troubles started. My da was a Prod and my ma was Catholic. I remember when it started the excitement of it all. 'Cause a whole lot of kids came up Agnes Street and said that people were lootin' shops on the Shankill, and I remember running down Agnes Street and going into chip-shops and getting bottles of sarsaparilla and other stuff. Everything was smoke-charred and burned, and there was water everywhere. I remember people building barricades at the corner of Agnes Street while the Catholics were building barricades at the other end, and I just remember the excitement of it all. But August '69 was enough for my parents and we left in September and that was me straight into England. We went to a place called Corby where my da got a job as a steelworker, and it was all very strange for me. I was the only kid from Belfast in my school and I had a strong Belfast accent. And I remember how strange it was to have people calling me 'Paddy' at school, and me saying to them: "Are you fuckin' stupid, I'm from Belfast, I'm from the Shankill." And I remember always getting into fights and getting hammered because I wouldn't accept being thought of as Irish. I'd say: "I'm not Irish, I'm a Protestant, I'm British!" And every time the IRA would kill a British soldier or blow up anywhere in England I used to get stick at school, because they somehow blamed me for it. And I was so resentful and began to hate the whole fucking thing: I really hated Belfast, I hated everything to do with the place. Anyway, I eventually got into trouble and in 1976 ended up in jail in England when I was eighteen.

For the other Think Tank participants the decision to join a paramilitary organisation did not arise directly from experience of the events of 1969. Rather, it was the cumulative impact of the rapidly escalating violence which made such a step seem ever more inevitable.

Despite what I had witnessed on the Falls in '69 I didn't join up at that stage. I went and looked for another job; I worked in the docks for a while, alongside my father and a couple of uncles. And we used to go up to my Aunt Maggie's for our lunch every day, which was handy. And one day we were walking up the New Lodge Road and this Welsh patrol pulled us. They were all big, hefty guys, and they started giving us lackery an' all, and we started giving a bit of lackery back. The next thing we knew we were all rifled up against the wall, spread-eagled, kicked, generally roughed up, and searched. And I think that was the first time I really said: "Fuck these bastards!" So it was more of a reaction to that sort of thing. There was no real staunch Republican history in my family, it was more a reaction to the Brits and their attitudes – here were these people from a foreign country pushing me up against a wall with their rifles. And within a few weeks I had joined the IRA, for it was easy to join at that time.

I think the two key incidents that really triggered me into wanting to engage was the Balmoral Showroom bombing and Bloody Friday – watching the torsos being threw into the body bags. When that happened I just wanted to do as much damage to them as they were doing to us. And you also had our political representatives going round warning us about the 'IRA threat' and you just accepted whatever they said. Nobody questioned it, by questioning anything you would have been seen as somehow treacherous. So you just accepted whatever they said without question. I just felt this was a natural thing, it was as if you were being prepared to take the fight on for this generation. I would throw it back to the education system, especially in working-class areas where you were told to leave 'politics' to other people, your role was as a follower, nothing else. And all of the political statements – Bill Craig's 'liquidate the enemy' speech was a classic example – were taken literally. That would have been one of the key things for me, being at that rally in the Ormeau Park, and hearing him say that. It was just like: well, that's their approval, that's what they mean. Then the Four Step Inn getting blew up. You see the way they call Frizzells 'The Shankill Bomb'? Well, I don't like that, because I can remember so many other bombs going off on the Shankill. And all of those actions reinforced what the political people were telling you.

I lived in Ardoyne, and probably 60 per cent of my friends were Protestants and there was never a word in our house about Protestant or Catholic. I was aware of the difference, I'd been called 'Fenian bastard' the odd time, but it never really annoyed me. Although my grandmother was a Republican my family were not overtly political and there was no sectarianism. Then 1969 happened and Ardoyne was attacked and there was three streets burnt: Hooker Street, Brookville Street and part of Chatham Street. Then Internment happened, and this probably galvanised a whole generation of people – 200 houses burning, thousands of British soldiers on the streets, five people at least dead in and around Ardoyne. After all those experiences Ardoyne became a Republican stronghold. For many people there was now no turning

back, even people who welcomed the British soldiers coming onto the streets in 1969. And from that moment my own actions were directed against the Brits and the RUC.

At nine years of age I used to run in and out of Brown Square barracks, I was the British Army's mascot. I used to run to the shops to get them their cigarettes or whatever they wanted out of the shop. And in 1971 when I was nine there was an incident took place when three Scottish soldiers were lured away from a city centre pub and murdered, and their bodies were found up at Legoniel. And I actually went over to Scotland for the funeral of the three soldiers. There was a soldier stationed at Brown Square barracks who played the bugle at their funeral and I got permission from my parents and I went over to Scotland with him. I came back again and asked the question: who killed the three soldiers? I was told it was the IRA. Well, who's the IRA? And I was told it was the Fenians, the Taigs. So from a very early age I had this impression that all these Catholics were in the IRA, and my community was being attacked, people that I knew were being murdered and the security forces were being murdered. And by the time I was sixteen everyone around me seemed to be joining organisations that were prepared to defend us against these people.

At that time we would all have gone out to meet the Civil Rights marches and witnessed them being brutalised by the RUC. But the main event for me was Internment when I and my brothers were in bed, in one room, and the next thing I was aware of was being dragged out of bed and an SLR being put to my face. Then being dragged down the stairs and threw into the back of a Saracen, along with my father and two other brothers – and taken to Magherafelt RUC station. At that time I was only sixteen and my political motivation would have been nil, but for them three or four days I was brutalised, dragged about and beat up in Magherafelt RUC station. I was released with my father, like. We had no Republican connections in our family, but when I was released Dominic was interned. I mind when he was interned going to these friends of mine and saying to them: "look, we'd better go and do something here." So that next night three of us went out and burnt haysheds belonging to a Protestant man, a well-known Loyalist. I was lifted after that and sent to a young offenders home, St Pat's in Belfast, and it was mainly in there that I made my connections with the Provisional IRA at the time, with people who were in for political offences – anyone under 18 at that time would be sent there for whatever offences, they weren't sent to jail. And on my release it was very straightforward who to go to to join up locally. And that's how I got involved in the Republican movement, it wasn't through anything in my family history, just my personal experiences of being dragged out of bed and being brutalised.

I think for me it was Bloody Sunday. I was there at that march, and I thought: well, if we can't walk our streets without being shot off them, then there's only one option left and that is to take up the gun.

There was a genuine desire to protect one's own community, not so much in the grander sense of the all-embracing 'Catholic/Nationalist community' or 'Protestant/Unionist community', but more in the local sense, of one's own 'home patch'.

People in Ardoyne still clearly remember some of them early gun battles. They can remember '69 when the Prods came down and burnt the streets, and in June 1970 when they came across the road again. But this time three people from the other side were killed – and people still point to that as one of the gun battles which stamped a line in the sand which said: don't be coming back! They even had this song about "they'll never do it again". That partly explains the intensely proud nature of the people within Ardoyne and North Belfast – we had fought them alone and won . . . and they've hated us ever since.

Alongside this developed a deepening sense of community solidarity, and also a new sense of belonging – something often enhanced by the sartorial proof of paramilitary membership.

As well as that, all the UDA ones used to get a blue jacket with a fur collar on it, so I says I'll have one of them. So it was also about a sense of identity. This was the thing I thought that made you a man – that you were prepared to take your stand with the rest of the guys and protect your community.

Having taken that first step into paramilitary activity, involvement in the ongoing violence rapidly deepened.

The Falls Curfew happened in 1970 and I remember I was coming home from work and I seen the Black Watch and I seen what they done, and I says: fuck this, I'm not having any more of this! So during the Curfew we were all banged up in the house, we weren't allowed out, the houses were searched, people were abused, a lot of people were arrested, I seen people getting beat up in the street, and I said: fuck this, I've had enough of this! But I had sat back for a year. I went and joined the Official IRA and started training. They had moved off the defensive and onto the offensive. The Brits were attacked in different places and there was gun battles. At that time you had moved away from defending your area to this perception that you were actually fighting to free your country. Then the Officials called their ceasefire, though there was the perception among some of us that the ceasefire was imposed on us from above. Then after a girl I knew was shot dead by the Brits I fell out with the Officials and eventually became a full-time active service member of the Provisional IRA. A lot of the people who were with me were shot dead, were interned, sentenced, so there was a lot of hurt building up there.

It got to the stage where you felt that you were going to end up dead or in jail. I knew the statistics, and the likelihood of it happening was 50:50. Everybody took that step knowing that, and it shows the commitment they had towards their own community. And the feelings and the whole mood that was in the community at that time was powerful, the ghettoised communities. There

was the enemy in that ghetto over there and we were in this one across the road, although they were no different when it came to social and economic issues. There was just that divide there which had been played upon over the years. Divide and conquer – they still try to play that card today. Most people on the Loyalist side who actually went through the organisations and all the rest of it are now more socially and economically aware than the politicians are.

But to engage in the violence required a rigid single-mindedness, a perception that everything was totally subordinate to the ‘cause’, something which not only blinded participants to the possibility of making mistakes, but rapidly led to the dehumanising of ‘the enemy’.

I can remember a cousin of mine, whenever I was active, saying to me to “catch yourself on, you’re going to either end up dead or in jail”, and he was asking questions and I was looking at him and saying this is treacherous talk coming from him. And if he hadn’t been my cousin I’d have been reporting him back, saying we have to watch this boy here.

I had just started working at a building site on the lower Shankill, and this spark came in one time with a parka jacket with Che Guevara on the back of it. At that stage all the Stickies were wearing them, at least that’s who we identified them with, anyway. So I asked the question – “where’s he from?” –through three or four sources. “Stewartstown Road.” So I says: “happy days, he’ll do.” And I decided to set him up to get him shot. And I went back out and says there’s a guy down here, come down and check him out. And a couple of guys came down to check him out and were intending to shoot him but then I got lifted, and while I was in jail I found out that his brother actually belonged to the same unit as me!

There came a point in the war when the war changed, and when the enemy wasn’t solely the British and the RUC, but the Protestants. Although for me the Protestant part of the war was a small part, my main thing was still ‘Kill the Brits’. But you were being told, you’ve got to go and do certain things – and I know very few people who said ‘no’. Someone came along to me and said: “look, listen, there’s a taxi depot up there and yer man in it is a UDA man, go up and kill him.” “Are you sure he’s a UDA man?” “Yeah, I’m positive – go ahead.” And that’s literally how the thing would happen. I’m not saying you weren’t aware that the information might be wrong – well, I was certainly aware within that split second of carrying it out that something wasn’t right. But you did it and moved on to whatever your next operation entailed.

I had been thrown out of school when I was twelve so I didn’t have no formal education whatsoever. I couldn’t read and I couldn’t write. All my friends were joining the junior paramilitaries at sixteen, the junior UDA, and I wanted to join the UDA. It was about a sense of identity, it was about acceptance, stuff like that. Seventeen years of age I was out with my friends,

drinking, coming home from a club, and I came across a group of men who were holding two Roman Catholics up against a wall. One of the fellas turned round to me and says "have you got a gun?" and I says "no, but I can get one." And as he said that one of the Catholic guys run off. I took the other Catholic guy away. I set myself up as judge, jury and executioner and I took that young man's life. So before I was eighteen years of age I finished up in the Crumlin Road prison.

There's like a whole dehumanising process went on, where all sides were demonised by each other and didn't see each other as human beings at all, certainly at that particular time. I didn't want to get to know Catholics, there was never any real attempt to see them as equals, these people were out to take over.

I think when you are growing up, everybody wants to blame somebody, and in those days it was hard to blame somebody, 'cause you didn't know who that somebody was, so you blamed everybody. And that's why it became 'them' and 'us'. It was easier to blame a whole community than try to pick out an individual.

We react to the fears that are generated about the other community, and then when the other community does something, even if they're only reacting to something started by us, it in turn reinforces our original fears, and people say: well, doesn't that prove it!

It's the whole thing again about identity, that you wanted to belong to a certain group. And you felt that to really belong you had to act in a certain way, and I think, in a sense, the more vicious you were the more acceptable you would become, and that's the reality for some people, not for everybody but certainly the reality for some. And they felt that that was the best way to be accepted among the in-crowd – that proved your identity. Especially when you're brought up to see Catholics as different and as enemies. And if you felt that your community was under attack, and people from your community was always being killed, then you wanted as much damage done to that other community as possible.

Nevertheless, there were often moments of real discomfort and uncertainty, not so much about the cause one espoused, but the actions one might be required to undertake on its behalf.

I worked in a shop and there was Protestants and Catholics both came into it. And there was one woman who I liked well, and her son was in the UDR, and I remember being in a room one night where it was discussed about killing him. He wasn't killed, but it was planned to kill him, and because I knew his mother and I knew him I was very uneasy with it. There was also a bread man came into the shop about four times a week, and he was a likeable man, but he too was a member of the UDR. And I never thought of targeting him, it never crossed my mind, but on one occasion his name was also mentioned. Luckily the conversation went on to something else and he was never mentioned

again. I was quite relieved at that 'cause I knew the man on a daily basis, and I liked him, and it's much harder to shoot people if you're mingling with them every day and know them as human beings.

I was in the Official IRA in the early days and then moved to the INLA, and I can remember once being in a room where it was said that if any Catholic was shot in Dungiven – where I was from – then we would go into the nearest Protestant pub and shoot everybody in it. I think it was just talk; it was very easy to talk about things in a room but to actually go out and do it was another matter. I knew Protestants, I had Protestant friends, but at the same time I was mixed up with a crowd that were prepared to shoot them at the end of the day. And at times I felt uneasy about all that. We were supposed to be a socialist group with ideals of uniting the working class and all that kind of stuff, but when hardy came to hardy I suppose there was a sectarian thing there too. There was also this belief that once you got a united socialist Ireland the Protestants would all fall into place; there was this almost fairytale notion that somehow overnight we would become a class-based society, rather than a sectarian-based society.

I had the ideals about a free Ireland and all that, but when it actually came to killing I was deeply uneasy with the whole thing. I met a lot of guys inside who had killed and they were harder than most others, they were 100% behind the cause, and I thought that once you cross over that line and kill people it's very hard to turn back, it makes it that much harder. I was caught before killing anyone, it wasn't that I wouldn't have done it it was just that I happened to be caught before that, so I was lucky that way.

To see one's enemy differently would have required a degree of questioning which at the time would have been seen as dangerous.

To question anything was almost like an act of treason. You became a suspect then; you came under the scrutiny of everybody. To start to doubt things was to step outside of the mould that was there, outside the community feelings. If you started questioning things you'd be ostracised, you'd be treated as an enemy, you'd be under suspicion and everybody would be watching you. And I think that would be true of both communities.

Some things that were done you felt like: Jesus, that was bad that there. But you're getting on with your life, and your life was the Republican movement and at that stage people from within weren't critical of the Republican movement. They said: "it's a pity, but it's happened" – you know what I mean? Like, you didn't go out to maim and kill ordinary people, you would have gone out to maim and kill British soldiers or RUC or what have you, there's no problem there, but when civilians were injured it did hurt everybody who was involved in it. Yet when I seen some of the operations that were carried out I had to turn round and say: "is this really what we're about?" And that didn't go down well. You had this sense that if you did question an operation then your whole make-up as a person was itself called into question. And what they might have done was to turn round and say: well, he's lost his

bottle or he hasn't got it any more. It was unwarlike to question, and once you did then your whole character was under focus – were you getting soft? It's like one person said to me: "you're only as good as your last operation."

Despite a genuine openness among the Think Tank participants, some topics proved more difficult to broach than others, and not everyone was prepared to talk about the actual event which led to their imprisonment.

I remember talking to someone after our last meeting and we felt there were difficulties talking about those experiences. And part of it was that we had found that we could all sit down together if we focused on working towards those things which we had in common, and that's how relationships between us gradually started to develop. But to talk about those specific experiences which resulted in imprisonment would have created a lot of discomfort. Were we going to be giving offence? Were we going to start travelling ground where we were going to start trying to score points off each other? Would it deteriorate into a question of who committed the worst atrocity?

The first time we met, different things people said triggered off things which I wanted to discuss again. I can't remember offhand, but different things. Like how much I had divulged and how much I had left out – that first meeting was like breaking the ice.

But inevitably, given the extra-ordinary circumstances the Think Tank participants had found themselves caught up in, they each ended up in the one place which provided plenty of time for analysis and reflection – prison.

One day I was approached and asked did I want to go to England and I says 'okay'. 'Cause I knew my time was running out here, it was only a matter of time before I was shot or put into prison. Anyway, we moved into a house in England, but one day, because of a suspicious landlord, the police rumbled us. As we run off the next thing cars came from everywhere and tried to run us down and we opened up on them. And this here cop came out of a car and run behind us, so we shot him, in the lower regions of the body – to get away, like. Which we did – we got away from Southampton. There was a big manhunt and there was photos all over the place. So I came back to Ireland, where finally I was caught and charged with the attempted murder of three policemen. So next thing I was back in England – in jail.

But it's like you're aware you have a certain status within the Nationalist community, and you're aware that a whole lot of people look up to you, and the only people who don't look up to you is about five or six people who are above you. You just go and do, and the fact that you just go and do makes the people above you look up to you and say: "well, at least you can rely on him" – so there's this sort of pressure. And it wasn't until you went into jail that you had time to reflect on everything.

Time for Reflection

For many, the shock of imprisonment would require a long period of adjustment.

We were taken into Castlereagh. What happened was there was a swoop in Dungiven and they took about 30 people, some of whom talked, and one told all about the Proxies, the other about the INLA, so the rest of us were all scooped a couple of days later. And being taken in there was a bit of a shock to the system I can tell you. I hadn't been prepared for it at all, there was no interrogation training or anything like that. So we ended up in Crumlin Road, it was about two weeks before Christmas and all that. And at that point the Loyalists weren't getting out at all, and the Republicans were out all the time. Then about March the Loyalists attacked two or three Republicans and there was a meeting between the commanders of each side and they decided to go day in, day out. I was quite happy that some arrangement had been arrived at, because every time you went to the loo you were looking over your shoulder waiting for a couple of Loyalists walking behind you and all that. So it was always a bit nervy there for a while. It was also very, very boring after about six months, it was a grim place, with three of us to a cell. We had radios and all that stuff but it was still a boring place. But you were still very much a part of the organisation, and very much the talk was about continuing the fight on the inside – at that point it took the form of refusing to wear prison clothes once you were sentenced. So we had to decide whether or not to go on the blanket protest which had just begun a few months at that point. Anyway, I got sentenced to ten years and went onto the 'blanket'.

The first three years inside are very sketchy for me. I didn't know how to cope, I was on Valium three times a day, I was always on the punishment cells. For me personally when I went in, my life was as if it still belonged outside on the Shankill. Your life was lived to please other people, I never made no decisions for myself, everything that I had done was for other people, for the paramilitaries, and then it was just falling into the same routine when I went into the prison. And it was only many years later that I could make decisions for *me*, to do things I wanted to do and not just do them for other people. In the beginning I was always getting punished. I couldn't read or write and I couldn't articulate an argument so the easiest way for me to deal with someone was to give them a dig in the chin. And I kept on getting punished for a long, long time; for nearly the first three years when I went in I was always getting into trouble. If anybody wanted anything done in the wing, if they wanted a prisoner or a screw beat up I would've done it. But I done it because I was stupid and I let people use me, but I didn't understand that at the time.

I went to Longlarton Prison in '76 from Wormwood Scrubs, and there was already an IRA structure within the prison. The first day there I was sitting outside in the playing field and somebody was telling me about some of the other prisoners, saying that's a good guy over there and things like that. And I said: "he's an English bastard, they should all be shot!" To be honest, that was my initial reaction. So this guy took me aside and said: "look, see at the end of the day, we have to survive over here, you can't come in with that attitude." Somebody brought me in a *Guardian* newspaper and I says: "I don't want to read that there." Somebody had even brought me up the *Andy'town News* and here's me: "I don't come from Andy'town, I come from the Lower Falls, what would I want to read the *Andy'town News* for?" And all I looked forward to was *Republican News* /*An Phoblacht* to keep up with what was going on.

My first experience of prison was Internment, which was what many people regarded as a holiday camp for much of the time, because when you were in the cages, there was 30, 40, 50 men all with the same background. However, you had no release date; you could have been there a year, two years, five years, some were there for that length of time. It didn't do anything to change my attitude in any way, except for make me more determined to fight against the Brits. But everybody helped each other out. You had a lot of lectures and things like that going on, and a lot of escape attempts going on as well. I was moved into three different cages all because of escape attempts. There was one in particular in Cage 5, which was where we had a tunnel dug and it was almost complete. And they found the soil, they found it in other huts, it had been transferred by people visiting different cages. But eventually they got round and discovered there was a tunnel in Cage 5, but they spent about eight hours before they found it. The reason they didn't find it sooner was that the sappers or whatever had set their tool-boxes right on top of the trapdoor! But eventually they did move the tool-boxes and found it and we were all evacuated because the tunnel was so massive. It was 30 yards long. Then after that I got out about April '74 and was out six months when I was arrested down South and spent ten years in Portlaoise prison, which was in total contrast to Internment – it was a real prison, like, being locked up every night. And it was rough, there was a lot of riots going on, a lot of trouble. The policy of the prison system down there was that any prisoner in there was going to get the hardest time that they could possibly get so that they wouldn't come back.

It was inevitable that confrontations with the prison system would ensue. Some were of a very personal nature.

When I went into Winchester Prison this priest came up to me the very first night – and I was still a Catholic at that time – and the priest said to me: "you can do me a favour, don't be going to chapel, I'll come up here and I'll give you communion here." And I said: "go and fuck yourself" – and that's being quite honest. He wanted to keep me away from the chapel 'cause it was too much trouble for the screws – 'cause I was a 'Cat A' prisoner, I had to be

escorted on my own. Then I met this other priest who I asked to do a simple favour – send a wedding anniversary card out for me to my girlfriend’s parents. And he came back to me and said: “I can’t do that.” And I said: “are you a priest or a screw?” “But I have to work within the system,” he said. A load of shite! I’ll tell you another incident to do with him. I goes back there [Winchester] in ’79 on ‘patches’ and Giuseppe Conlon was dying at that time. And what they were doing with Giuseppe Conlon, they were taking him in and out of the jail, they were saying that the IRA was going to try and spring an escape, and the man’s lying dying in the hospital and they went in with the security van and grabbed him by the back of the neck and took him out. So I’m sitting in the block and the same priest comes down and he’s talking a load of shite to me, and I turned round and says: “what did you do for Giuseppe Conlon?” “Let me tell you,” he says, “that man was well looked after in this jail.” That was an innocent person he was talking about! So I says: “see if you don’t get out of this cell I’m going to kick you out of it, and see when you go don’t bother coming back, ’cause I’m no longer part of this religion.” To be honest, the only priest who I met in England who was in any way decent was actually an ex-British Army captain who lost both his legs over here. And see the humanity that he gave me, it was unbelievable. While I was in Winchester Prison I was in the block and at that time in the block, because you were a ‘Cat A’ prisoner, they actually put you in what they called a ‘strong box’, and all you had was a concrete thing, a mattress sitting on top of it, you had no furniture, no nothing, and it was all white walls, and the crickets would be going mad, and you were in there 23 hours a day. If it rained you didn’t get out of that cell, your food was brought to you in the cell. So I’m sitting there with only a pot to piss in, but no radio, no cigarettes, or what have you. Anyway, there was a guy came from Parkhurst and he said to the wee priest, the British army captain: “that wee lad’s down there and he’s no tobaccy, take him down that wee half ounce of tobaccy.” And see if you had’ve said it to any of them other two dipsticks they wouldn’t have done nothing. But he came down with a half ounce of tobacco, and he started talking to me about his experiences, what happened to him, how he lost the legs, what he felt like about it, you know. I don’t think he was trying to convert me at all, but the whole thing was that he used to come down and sit with me for an hour or two, just talking. He was a crackin’ fella, one of the nicest people I ever met in jail.

Other confrontations were part of a much large protest, such as the ‘blanket’ and ‘dirty’ protests, which embraced hundreds of Republican prisoners.

At the start of the blanket protest the screws had beat up a lot of boys coming on, but eventually there were so many coming on the beatings stopped. On the blanket protest we had all our furniture, our religious magazines and all that sort of thing, but it was decided after about three months that we had to escalate it into a refusal to slop out and wash and all that kind of stuff – to try to create a lot more pressure on the system. And it gradually built up from that to smashing the furniture and smashing the windows, then throwing our shit out the windows. But as I went up one day to put it out the window one

of the orderlies was walking past and I hit him at the side of the head with it! Not long afterwards I heard the boots come up the corridor and they took me out with a towel around my waist. I was taken into the centre of the H-Block and there was 'lock-up' called and all the screws came in and I was put into a corner and I was told to turn round and as I did so the brother of the guy I had hit whacked me in the face. I went down and then there was a sea of boots came in on me at that point. Eventually, I was taken to the punishment block and I was feeling really miserable after getting such a beating. And that night too I felt very hungry, but they only gave you one round of bread in the evenings. And there was an old warder there with a white beard, who must have seen the hunger in my eyes and he fired me in another three or four other rounds. His act of kindness after that day of aggro was enough to pull me back from the brink. I was going into a seething hate and all that kind of stuff, but that one act was enough to pull me back and make me think they're not all like that.

One thing agreed by all the ex-prisoners involved in the Think Tank was that the prison experience engendered a process of analysis and reflection.

When I was involved in the armed struggle I hadn't had much time to reflect deeply about things. But in prison I was more detached from it, so I was able to think about things more objectively almost. Because you were away from it all you could see things a bit clearer.

That such a process of analysis and reflection might occur was not always evident right at the beginning, however, especially to Republicans.

Republicans knew why they were in; there was no questioning for us. We were fighting against a foreign power, whereas Loyalists were fighting against Republicans, and not against the state which put them inside; they seen their own people locking them up, whereas we were being locked up by the enemy. Even in the South most republicans would call the screws 'West Brits', you would treat them as Brits.

This assertion was confirmed by the Loyalist ex-prisoners.

I agree, I think the experience of going into prison was vastly different for Loyalist and Republican prisoners. It reinforced Republican beliefs about being oppressed, whereas with Loyalists we were getting imprisoned by the very people we were supposedly defending. That began a painful process, examining why you were in there.

The day that I was sentenced the screws were beating me out of the dock and all I could think was that I was fighting to remain British yet all I can see around me, abusing me, is people wearing British Crown uniforms. It was then I asked myself: what's this all about? But I was actually afraid to ask it openly, because that was somehow treacherous. The questioning actually built up a greater confidence in what the fighting was all about. My British identity was reinforced, but I was able to recognise that there were flaws in our society which needed to be challenged.

I think everybody used that time to reflect, but obviously you don't do that as soon as you go through the door. You needed time to reflect and eventually people would say: hold on, why am I here?

One aspect of the prison experience which started many on the path to analysis and reflection was, ironically, the contact made with those from the 'other' community. At first such contacts came about from necessity, to enable former enemies to survive within the same environment.

In the compounds there was an unwritten agreement. Under Gusty Spence an agreement had been made with all the camp OCs that there was to be no kind of fighting and that made things a lot easier and there was levels of communication.

So there was a process in jail where you built up your experiences and contacts, planned escapes, just to fight the system all the time, like. So the first ten to twelve years in jail that's all I really was involved in: whatever the system threw at you you fought against it – that kept you alive and gave you something to aim at. When we were trying to get better food and conditions within the Kesh there was contacts made with the Loyalists, and we set up a Camp Committee to fight for better conditions. I think everybody realised at that time that we faced common issues and that a joint approach was the best way forward. The Loyalists might have felt strange to be facing the same problems as Republicans, but it didn't surprise us. Most Republicans realised that the Loyalists were being used by the Unionist politicians. They had been manipulated, their own people had put them inside and now they were the same as us – Paisley and the other Unionists had rejected them just the way they rejected us.

Sometimes the contacts made across the communal 'divide' resulted in a reassessment of former certainties.

I think I only began to understand Loyalism in Magilligan prison when I befriended a couple of guys who were in the UVF. And as I listened to them talking I realised how much the British identity was part of their psyche, and it wasn't something which was going to vanish just because a border would go, it was very much there. Up until then I hadn't realised the depth of it, I thought that this 'Britishness' was just a superficial thing which would just disappear, but at that point I began to realise that it wouldn't. It gave me a great insight into the depth of feeling that had to be dealt with and how many people in the Republican side hadn't a clue about Protestants, especially people who live in ghetto areas. They just don't know how the other side thinks. And, of course, we were never encouraged to understand them. I remember the parish priest coming into our primary school and telling us about all the Catholics who were martyred by the Prods, but there was no mention of any Protestants being martyred by Catholics, so there was a kind of a false picture of things. It was only when I had time to look into things that I realised we had only been getting half of it. Same for them about us, I would imagine.

Other relationships stemmed from an acknowledgement of the shared nature of the prison reality.

When I was in England this Loyalist got sentenced to twelve years. But when he came on the wing that night, my natural reaction was that he's an Irish person, he's sitting in an English prison, there's ten IRA men on different wings and he's the only Loyalist. So I goes down to the wing and I called him out and I says to him: "come on out and meet all the lads." And he probably thought I was taking him out to fucking do him, but I introduced him to everyone, and I says: "this is a fella who's in for different allegiances but at the end of the day he's a political prisoner, regardless of what he done he's a political prisoner." And there was a good relationship built up. Then in Gartree in '78 there was another Loyalist came in, and I did the same for him. Though I remember one time he made a complaint in the incident book about the toilets not being cleaned, and to Republicans any relating to the screws like that was considered grassing, so the boys came running up to me saying "he's a tout, we're goin' to do him!" And I said "you're not", and I kept him with me that whole night, for at the end of the day I realised that when you were Irish in England you were a 'Paddy' to them whether you were Republican or Loyalist. And one time we're going on the roof in Gartree in solidarity with the boys in the H-Blocks, and some dipstick was supposed to throw blankets out when we were on the roof, but didn't have the bottle to do it. So this Loyalist threw the blankets out for us instead!

Some relationships which were forged, arising from this shared prison experience, were initially unsought for and even deeply unsettling.

The strange thing for me was that every time I was on the punishment cells it was actually Provies who looked after me; they'd have give me part of their food parcels, they'd have smuggled me tobacco, they'd have threw me cigarettes in underneath the door, taught me a wee bit of Irish so that I knew how to ask for things so that the screws didn't know what I was asking for. And I couldn't understand this, 'cause some of the Prods wouldn't share with you, and here's guys who are supposed to be the enemy and yet of all they'll take a risk of throwing you a cigarette in underneath your door, making sure you got a light, and giving you part of their food parcels and stuff. So obviously it started to make me really think. I suppose when you were lying in the punishment cells the enemy was the system, so you done what you could to survive and you helped each other. Like I can remember there was a guy in the next cell to me and he used to swing me in tea at about half nine at night, in a plastic bottle with a shoelace tied to it – swinging in the bottle of tea, outside the window. Alternatively I would have swung *him* in tea, 'cause when it was 'night about' when *you* got out you had access to the boiler to get the hot water. That was part of the thing which started to change in my life, I realised for a start that not all Catholics were in the IRA. And even the Provies, who I always perceived as monsters, as people who were attacking my community, when you go into prison you realise that, although they're still your enemy, they're also human beings just like you, that they have feelings just like you. At the end of the day, there's many many nights

you're lying in the prison cell saying to yourself – see the guy across the landing here, he's lying here in exactly the same conditions as me, he's probably got tobacco but despite our differences this guy is prepared to share with me. So obviously that's going to change your perception and it's going to knock everything on the head that you believed for years.

While there were, undoubtedly, many such moments of a specifically individual nature, at other times a collective questioning also developed, often encouraged by particular individuals.

I'm fighting to remain British and yet I'm getting put away by them, so why am I here? But I only voiced such thoughts in my head, I was afraid to say these things openly 'cause it was treacherous. And it was only when I went into the compounds and Gusty Spence encouraged us to ask such questions that we were able to begin to analyse the situation.

For a few, the prison experience engendered a new spiritual awakening. Although these would have been in the minority amongst the prisoner population two members of the Think Tank had such an experience.

During the blanket protest there was no reading material available except for the Bible, we weren't allowed out except for Sunday mass, half an hour Sunday morning, one visit a month. It was all a bit monotonous, you had a long time to think. I thought for a while it was like being in the world but not being in the world, you were separated from it and were able to see it from a detached kind of view. And I began to think about the meaning of life, about everything really, 'cause I had a lot of time to think. And I shared with Kevin Lynch, and we used to argue about faith. I classed myself as a young Marxist and didn't believe in God and all that. He did and we used to argue away. He began to convince me a bit with his arguments but we were still very much Republican and all that. And we went on to read the Bible and pray, and I began to think a lot deeper. I remember one incident, Narrowwater, when there was fourteen paratroopers killed and Lord Mountbatten was killed the same day. We got the news that afternoon and we all cheered and clapped, it was a big thing and all that. Yet when I sat down in my cell that night to reflect on the day – I used to reflect every night on the Bible readings I had read – I prayed for the souls of the ones who had died, and then I thought: how can I do that and cheer for their deaths during the day? There was all those kind of contradictions coming in. And I read parts of the Bible – like love your enemy, be good to those who hate you and bless those who curse you – and I thought this stuff is a lot more radical than any Marxism. How do you love your enemy and all that? It was especially hard to think like that because of all that was going on. Being part of the blanket protest we were getting moved every couple of weeks so that they could clean up the dirty wings and then move you back into them. And you just went round and round and most times there was beatings going on. I got my nose fractured over a table; I was pushed down over it when they looked up your backside and I felt a hand on my head and my nose got cracked and I went over to the cell and was spitting blood up on the wall. I had to go to the hospital for a

week or so. So there were a lot of contradictions in my thought process, but at the same time I knew I would have to decide at some point whether I was 100 per cent behind the cause or I would have to go for the spiritual side and leave the cause behind. I couldn't have both, and yet I wanted to have both; I wanted a foot in each camp, the best of both worlds, if you like. But I knew deep down it couldn't be done and I would have to go one way or the other.

To most other prisoners, however, the analysis was less 'spiritual' in focus, and more pragmatic and political.

At least once a week in the wings Bobby Sands or one of the others would have led a debate on, say – 'is Irish Republican Socialism on the right road?' – and they would have picked one side of the wing to take one side of the debate and the other to debate against. But each one had to think up their arguments and obviously there was that edge to it where they tried to win the debate, but it was about things like that. I remember once they discussed the Catholic church in open debate and they were saying that it was too rich and had too many treasures in Rome and all that, while half the world was starving. At the end of the debate, Bobby Sands wrapped it up and he said the sooner the Church got back to the Acts of the Apostles where Christians held everything in common and shared with one another the sooner they would get themselves together. I think prison did give people a lot of time to think and that deepened a lot of them, 'cause I know a lot of ones afterwards who didn't really get back to the military side of things, they got into the political side, and a lot of those have been to the forefront of the move towards talks and ending the armed struggle and all that. So I think people had a lot of time inside to reflect on what they were going to do with their lives when they got out.

I think that most Republicans, though not all, have moved on. One of the things we used to talk about on the blanket was that we were now into a Vietnam situation where it could go on for 30 years, but we will eventually wear down the Brits and they will eventually pull out. Terence McSwiney had said: "it's not those who can inflict the most, but those who can endure the most", and we were told to endure for up to 30 or so years and eventually we would win. But I think some of us realised after a while that that was not going to happen. There was a lot of thought inside as to what was the way to proceed and all that. So I think the penny was beginning to drop then, that things weren't all rosy and that we weren't going to win militarily, but it took a long time to admit that, and there have been a lot of voices working for change, and a lot of people have been working for an alternative quietly in the background. I think it's all those people working away who have also helped engineer a climate where people had the freedom to think differently, a freedom to question their ideologies and all that. Debate was always encouraged on the H-Blocks but most people wanted to debate on the side of how were we going to get the Brits out of Ireland and that sort of debate, but even at that it made people think –was it possible or was it not possible? Some of us arrived at the conclusion that it wasn't, at least not in the way we

were going about it. So when we had time to think and talk in a serious way the mind can move on a bit and begin to see that things are not as clear-cut as we thought. But it's a long slow haul, it could slip back into conflict I suppose, though I don't think it will – people have moved on too much, it would be hard to get back to the way it was. There are a few diehards in the Real IRA and that who want to keep going militarily but most of them know they can't win that way, they have to come to an accommodation.

I think that everybody goes through stages and experiences and there was always debate and discussion about where we're going and things like that. I mind one instance in the Crumlin Road, like, one Friday night we heard there was a big explosion in Loughgall and our boys were roaring and cheering and banging the doors, and the next thing we heard it was Republicans who were dead. It just showed you that it didn't make sense some times. I have to admit I fully agreed with the military campaign, but you began to see different ways of doing things. Like the elections, if you see a way of getting in the door then you make use of it. I felt that at the council level at least they were taking control back off the Unionists and giving it to our own people, like. I was still talking about a military campaign as an option. But this last five years I've come to believe that there is no use for it, no excuse for it now.

I was very narrow-minded when I went into jail. It was my experiences in jail, starting to see people as real people and then seeing me as a person, which changed a lot of my thinking. I had a very deep experience in prison, although it wasn't Christian or religious. I'm not a religious person, I don't believe in it; to be honest, I think it's a cop-out.

The intense struggle taking place within the prison between the prisoners and the prison regime could impact profoundly upon those individuals already undergoing a deep spiritual journey, as one Think Tank participant recalled.

What with the blanket and dirty protests going on for so long, we just had had enough really, nerves were beginning to go, so it was decided to call a hunger strike to try and force the issue, try to break it, without giving in. That failed, so Bobby Sands called the second hunger strike. He told us to think about it for a couple of days before putting our names down – that is, if we wanted to put our names down for it. There was bits of cigarette paper stuck together which came down through the pipes – we had wee holes scooped out round the pipes and we all had pens stashed away. The first two guys – Kevin [Lynch] and I were in the second cell from the top – the first two put their names down. Then Kevin put his name down, and I was next in line, the fourth. And I said to myself that I'll either be the first to refuse here or I'll go for it, for I couldn't make up my mind, and thought about it for a couple of days. Because I was feeling at that point that I wouldn't be involved when I got back out again anyway, I had begun to move away from things. But I decided that since I was there and part of it I would see it through, so I put my name down and about half the men on the wing put their

names on for it. So, I was fourth in line for it on the INLA side. Patsy O'Hara died, then Kevin who was in the cell with me he went on, and he died after 71 days, I think. And I knew I was next after him for another guy Michael Devine was already on it. So I had to prepare myself, I knew he was going to die, so I had to prepare myself by shutting everything out of my mind and thinking: I'm going on hunger strike, I have to see it through and mustn't let anything distract me. Whatever mental or physical pressure comes I had to focus in and think to myself: no matter what comes I have to see it through. So, I went on it. The first few weeks I had a lot of hunger pangs but nothing too serious, and I moved up into the hospital wing. Then after about 44 days I began to feel the effects then. Up to that I was walking round the yard for an hour's exercise every day and taking association in the evening. But now my eyesight began to be affected and my balance went a little bit. By day 50 I went blind and I was throwing up a lot. I had been throwing up a lot because of my eyesight bouncing about all over the place and I felt I couldn't take much more of that – on the worst night I felt that if this kept on going I didn't know how I was going to cope – but the next day I went blind and the sickness stopped and I kept going for another four days. And on the 55th day, it was a Saturday, I woke up and I felt a lot weaker from the night before. I knew I was on my last legs, as they say, I wasn't sure whether I would waken the next day or not. There was ten dead at that point and the hunger strike had begun to fracture. The two guys before me, Pat McGeown from Belfast and another guy from Tyrone, had been taken off by their parents and then there was a gap before I was expected to die. And Fr Faul on the outside saw that the only weak link in the hunger strike was the parents, so he tried to talk them into taking their sons off it. My mother came up on the Saturday morning – well, first of all the local priest came in to try and talk me off it but I didn't allow him to. Then my mother came in and said she was going to take me off as soon as I lost consciousness, which I thought would probably be the next day. And that if I kept on going I might lose my sight permanently. At that point I thought I had no choice; if I kept on going I was going to leave it in her hands, she was going to have to take that decision so it would be better if I took it on my own head rather than leave it on hers. So I stopped at that point. I experienced a mixture of emotions I must say. Relief at not dying... it's a hard way to die, 'cause you're thinking of things like the seashore, or walking through fields, things you haven't done for years, just ordinary things, seeing your family... and you don't really want to die. So it was hard to let go; I was prepared if I had to, but I was hoping that I wouldn't have to at the same time. So I came off it and during the hospital time – I was in Musgrave Hospital – I was making slow recovery, my balance was badly affected, my eyesight took about a month to get back to reasonable level. And all that time I thought to myself: I went through all this and if I've come this far now, when I go back down to the prison I am going to have to be an ex-hunger striker full of Republican zeal and the cause and all that stuff, or else I am going to have to stop and come out on God's side if you like, the spiritual side. So, I wrestled with that for weeks on end, thinking I was turning my back on all the guys who had

died, the boys on the blanket and all that. But finally – I think I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown – about eight weeks after the hunger strike I decided to go for God, and more or less said to myself I would try and go God’s way and leave aside all the other stuff. So that’s what I did and I got a great sense of peace then. A few months later I was moved to Magilligan and I sent out messages to the outside that I had resigned from the INLA. The story that went round at the time was that the hunger strike had affected my head.

This disbelieving reaction by one’s comrades was confirmed by the Loyalist prisoner who had taken the same path.

Yeah, the first thing everybody said was: well, you must have turned Christian to get out quicker. But the reality is that no prisoner has ever been released because he has turned a Christian. In fact they keep you in longer, ’cause they think you’re trying to work your ticket. I remember when I made my profession, when I got to the stage where I knew that I needed to do something, I knew that everybody respected me because of what I had done both outside and inside the prison. But when it got to the stage when I said “right, I’m a Christian”, they said “his head’s away with it, give him a week and he’ll be back to his old self.” Now, for me what made me actually leave the Loyalist wings and go to the mixed wings was a wee verse in the Bible which says God is no respecter of persons. So I knew for the first time in my life that I’m going to have to love these people who I’ve hated all my life. But that was the challenge and you had to take your stand, you had to dare to be different, and say: well if this is what it says then you’re going to have to do it, and you can’t do it here, you’ve gotta go and be with the people that you don’t like. And when I went and asked the governor to transfer me to the mixed wings he says: “what are you up to?” I said “I’m up to nothing.” And he says: “you’re not going down to the mixed wings for nothing”, and I said “I am.” And I went down into the mixed wings and they had me watched 24 hours a day because they didn’t trust me.

The fact that the prison experience could be instrumental in engendering a deep personal reflection was also confirmed by the Think Tank participant whose parents had moved him away from the conflict in Northern Ireland back in 1969 only for him to end up as an ‘ODC’ in an England jail.

I was in Bedford prison which was a Victorian remand prison and as YPs [Young Prisoners] you were locked up three to a cell, a cell that was twelve foot by eight, no toilet in it, slopping out, piss pots, and it was a bit of a shock when I first went in. In another sense it was very familiar, because out of 36 cells on my landing, in 24 of them there was at least one guy from the town that I lived in, which was only a town of 84,000 people, and many from my estate. So I began to develop the theory that society created its own criminals, and I was one of those people who were being grown and developed as a criminal and I didn’t like that idea, and I thought I don’t want to be a criminal. But I didn’t understand society and how it worked, and I didn’t understand power, and how it operated, because I was quite politically naive.

I just thought it was very unfair that I was there, and I thought that the whole system was loaded against us in a way, there was no chance that we would ever get a decent job, we would always be in poverty and debt. So I began to educate myself through reading, trying to educate myself about why things were as they were. I read *Ulysses* in about three days in jail; I remember being up at all hours reading Joyce and all sorts of stuff and then that got me more interested in how society was structured and why.

A part of that journey of self-discovery had been occasioned, however, by an extraordinary coincidence which had brought the Northern Ireland conflict right to the cell beside him, with far-reaching impact.

I had been sentenced to three years for violence, and there was this IRA guy on hunger strike in the cell next door to me. As a YP I had to deliver food to his cell, even though he wasn't eating it. At that time I was still filled with resentment at the whole Northern Ireland thing, and the way I had been stigmatised at school as a 'Paddy', and my first thought was to scald him or to cut him with a razor or something. But then when I saw him I just felt complete pity for him. He was wasting away, he weighed about five stone and he was just lying on the floor on newspapers, dressed in his yellow stripes, with nothing in his cell except a pisspot and a Bible and the full tray of food which I brought in and then took out. And although we only had a few moments of conversation each time, I began to have a dialogue with him and he told me that I should educate myself because I didn't know anything about my own culture. And I think he was absolutely right. And what struck me about this guy was that here was somebody who was doing something that he believed in, which he was absolutely and totally committed to, and he knew all about *his* culture. At that time I was ashamed of being from Belfast and I was confused about who I was, so he kind of inspired me, for I could see that what gave him his strength and pride was this knowledge about his culture and his community and country and personal identity. And it was after that that I just decided to educate myself, and just started studying in prison and then when I got out I continued it and didn't go back to Corby.

Looking to the Future

What prison meant on a personal level to the Think Tank participants was different to each individual. One Loyalist was quite open about the impact it had on him:

I'm glad for the prison experience, for I think it's made me into a real person, I've learnt to make decisions for *me* and not for somebody else. I found myself, I found my true identity, who I was, and I think that makes me a better person. Obviously I regret the circumstances that lead me to be there, and I regret the things I have done in the past, but I think I am a better person now. And I am prepared to take risks to work for peace, I'll go into any area if I think my being there will help encourage dialogue. I really want things to change. And I suppose I'm thankful too that I ended up in prison, 'cause it basically kept me alive as well, it was only a matter of time.

And one Republican, whose bomb had killed six innocent civilians, was equally forthright about such regrets.

I will always deeply regret killing those people and all the hurt and suffering I caused their families. I gave a warning and a warning should be heeded, but it still doesn't matter, it was my actions which caused the deaths of them people. It's something I still live with yet. But I can't turn back the clock; I done it, and although it wasn't my intention that's still no excuse for it. I gave a warning, and it was adequate, and it would be easy to turn round and blame the RUC, but I planted the bomb – it was my actions which killed those people. I had no intention of hurting them or their families. It wasn't an attack on the Unionist people, it was economic. At the time we thought the Brits would eventually pull out it we kept up the pressure, it was as straightforward as that.

But it would be wrong to assume that a feeling of regret or remorse was an inevitable product of giving men time to reflect on the deeds which led to their imprisonment.

Because many ex-prisoners are now involved in community work there is this public perception that ex-prisoners are into community development 'cause they are sorry for what they done in the past. That's a load of old bullshit as far as I'm concerned. If people lifted up a gun, they did it because they cared for something, and I'm talking about within both of our communities. The people who cared strongly enough to lift up a weapon, also still care strongly enough to try and develop their community – socially, politically, culturally, whatever.

Not surprisingly, a major concern prisoners had about the communities they came from had its primary focus on their own families, whose hardships were

not often immediately appreciated during the initial stages of imprisonment.

When I think about it, most families of people in jail were really doing prison themselves, because of the effort they had to make to look after the ones in jail and the travelling up and down they had to do. It took a long time for many prisoners to realise that their families were actually doing prison as well; especially wives with maybe two or three children and the husband locked up, that's a terrible burden. And families were always preparing for the next week's visit, and many prisoners didn't realise just what went into one visit, didn't realise that it took a whole day's effort.

After I got out I remember going up one time to see my brother, and I was the only bloke on the bus, there was a lot of women going up to visit their loved ones, husbands, what have you. And their wee kids were there with them. And I listened to them talking about what they had had to do without that week – like making do with sausages instead of meat – because they had to buy their men all this stuff for their parcels. And they were all talking away about what they were doing without. But see on the visits later, were they talking about all this to their men? Not a bit of it, they were all just smiling and laughing – and they probably didn't have a fucking dinner to go home to!

The families were always faced with numerous everyday needs. But what needs did we have inside? It was: have you got a roll-up, have you a half ounce of tobaccy, have you a tea bag – all very minute things. Sometimes I think prisoners could be very selfish. I used to describe the visiting room as a bus station: there was never any problem, the bus was always there on time – the visitor was coming up – and if the woman was starting to talk about debts or whatever, it was: “ah, don't talk about that, what's the craic, let's have a good time.” And yet the families coming up would have immense problems at home to cope with.

Others, however, were well aware of the impact being felt at home.

You were always mindful of what they were going through, even making up parcels; at one time there was four of us in jail, and my mother was asking if we had warm socks and warm underwear, but it always played on your mind and to this day I would always respect my mother and I would 'phone her every day, or go over and see her. Maybe it's a guilt thing too, you'd give her a fiver or a tenner for the bingo or whatever, do whatever you felt you could do, 'cause she was the one who suffered most. We were in there and it was like a family, a second family till me. But she was on the outside and had to put up with the hardship, of getting up to jail to see you, and she suffered most. The whole thing was a shock to her, she couldn't understand it, like. We are a very close family and still would be to this day, brothers and sisters, and it was like a chain reaction: Dominic got involved, I got involved, Paul got involved . . . this type of thing.

During the supergrass trials the families of the prisoners, through necessity and shared hardship, began to come together and relationships were built up. But while the support mechanisms which eventually emerged were initially put in

place to tend for the needs of the families, there were other needs which for a long time went unnoticed – the needs of ex-prisoners themselves, especially those who had served long sentences.

I was at the Peace Forum in Dublin Castle, I was out on release, and I heard a well-known Sinn Féin spokesman turn round – they were talking about prisoners – and say: “you are talking about reintegration here, but our prisoners don’t need reintegration, they have political beliefs, what do they need reintegration for, it’s only criminals need that, political prisoners don’t need reintegration.” So more or less what he was saying, and I have a lot of respect for him, was that because we were political prisoners, our political beliefs should have helped us when we come out to overcome everything that society would throw at us. There was no acknowledgment that we might need help with debt, mortgages, relationship problems and what have you.

I agree. Within the Republican psyche, there is this problem of the macho image: I don’t have problems, I don’t need to be reintegrated, I don’t need to adjust, ’cause I’m a political prisoner. For you to come out and say: “I’ve got a problem, like, or I’ve this here or that” – it goes against you in Republican circles, it also goes against you in the sense that a lot of people start talking about it who have no right to talk about it. When you put your trust in someone they should maintain confidentiality. You have to build up trust so that you can say what you have to say, and sometimes all people need is a sounding board. But if you don’t have confidence in that sounding board, what do you do? You bottle it up and then it starts affecting relationships; you start to become secretive, and you say to your partner – “I can’t really talk about this.” Even me saying all this now... I didn’t really mean to open up here, I didn’t realise I was going to open up like that.

Not surprisingly, ex-prisoners invariably found that it was only ex-prisoners like themselves who fully appreciated the reality of those needs, even if they came from the ‘other’ community.

The more that you would come into contact with each other the more that you can identify not only the differences, but also the commonalities. The issues are all the same, we all face the same problems when we come out of jail. We all face the same pitfalls. If you went into jail when you were 21 and are coming out at 41, or in at 17 and coming out at 36 or 37 you actually have to start learning how to live again, you have to start learning how to interact again, not from a political perspective but on a purely personal level.

I soon came to realise that all the problems which would confront ex-prisoners, all the large and small restrictions, which come up day after day, would ultimately force Loyalist and Republican former combatants together more and more.

It was this confirmation of shared needs, coupled with a desire to impact upon the developing peace process, which saw many ex-prisoners take the lead in developing dialogue between the two communities.

Many ex-prisoners, from both communities, really did stick their necks out. A wee example of something that did happen gives an insight into the way in which you needed to be careful when you worked across the divide. And that was the series of talks that Billy Hutchinson did in West Belfast, mostly in St. Thomas's, which most people I talked to thought was a very courageous step forward. Then around the same time there was another sectarian killing by Loyalists and the INLA mischievously distorted what Billy Hutchinson was up to as being a thinly veiled guise to get into Republican West Belfast to get information, and therefore Billy Hutchinson became a target for the INLA. It was nonsense; I mean, the INLA knew that as well as anybody, but because Billy Hutchinson was prepared to come into our community others were putting him at risk by what they said about him.

A major force in moving politics forward in this country has been former combatants, former prisoners, people who have been at the coalface in some fashion. It sticks in my throat that you have all these politicians running around now as if they invented the 'peace process', and the community is only now seeing the fruits of all their hard work. I'm also very sensitive to the fact that most of the real groundwork that was done by people, stuff that involved breaking down barriers and stepping over boundaries, needed a large degree of trust and confidentiality about it, because it could be so easily misinterpreted or deliberately misrepresented.

As well as helping to establish support groups to assist the reintegration of ex-prisoners, many ex-prisoners have been deeply involved in the wider needs of their communities.

All we have to do is look round us in Belfast alone and many of the most energetic community workers are ex-prisoners, and a lot of good work has been, and is being, carried out by them. And not just prisoner-related stuff, they're heavily involved in all aspects of community development.

That involvement, that desire to move things forward, started a long time ago. People aren't generally aware just how many of the progressive things you see happening now were influenced by the efforts of people in the paramilitary organisations. Even some aspects of documents like the UDA's *Beyond the Religious Divide* and *Common Sense* have often ended up in other documents written by the mainstream political parties, though they'll never admit it – there has been a subtle usage of all that creativity and energy.

A lot of the people who were motivated to get involved by whatever was happening either in '69 or whenever, when they came back out they responded in accordance to what they seen as being the new imperatives and the necessities of the time, and used their influence – their street 'cred' – to promote progressive politics.

I think there is a consistency there. I mean, let's face it, you were involved in a destructive campaign to protect your community, and now some of us feel

that there is a more constructive way of protecting that community. But we're still primarily involved for our community's benefit.

I think the community now accepts what we're trying to do. I was on my way down the Shankill this morning and there was this guy who is well involved in the organisation and in the past he would never have anything to do with cross-community work, but he called me over and said: "we're starting a football team for a load of kids and we're prepared to do cross-community work now, will you be able to help us get a grant?"

There is perhaps a tendency for ex-prisoners, because of the high-profile impact their political representatives have made on the political scene in recent years, to forget that many courageous individuals and community groups struggled over the years to hold their communities together, often having to confront paramilitary organisations in the process and take as many risks in the 70s and 80s as the ex-prisoners found themselves taking in the 90s.

I can accept that, and I can appreciate why some community groups looked at me suspiciously at first when I came out. Initially you were still a paramilitary person to them and while they wouldn't necessarily have been standoffish they would have been cautious about you. Until they heard you had a different point of view than what they had expected. Once they began to hear your viewpoint, once they heard you challenging established elected representatives on some of the social issues in the area, then the community people began to say "yes, he's okay", and would have assisted your development and directed you onto different committees, into different community groups.

But what about the ex-prisoners' role within the peace process which began in the early 90s? Some feel that the seeds of a 'political' approach to the conflict here, rather than a purely 'military' one, began as far back as the Hunger Strike.

My own personal view is that 1981 rejuvenated the whole Republican struggle, and I think the impact of '81 has even been greater than the impact of '69. 1981 helped to really politicise the Republican movement. There was never any going back. 1969, the Curfew, Bloody Sunday – all had contributory parts to play in the Republican struggle, but I think the landmark, the turning point in this struggle, was the Hunger Strike, it was the biggest mistake Maggie Thatcher ever made. But at the same time everyone was in agreement that there was a military stalemate and something had to be done to break that stalemate. And there's only two ways you were going to achieve it, and that was either through really ruthless war or else looking for another strategy. But I do believe the hunger strikes were the beginning of what we have now.

The move towards peace actually came from both outside the jails and within the jails, and the thing that you have in jail is time to reflect and time to look at things, and there may be some instances that make you turn round and say: hey, there's gotta be other ways of doing this here. I can remember saying in 1988 that there has to be another way forward here and I was called a traitor because I was actually saying that. I was saying that there had to be a more

peaceful way of doing things, that I believed the armed struggle had come to a conclusion, and what we had to do now was be strong in ourselves, and what we believed in, and if what we believed in was right then we should be able to convince by force of argument rather than by force of arms what the way forward was. But people didn't want to hear that at that time.

I think as well that Sinn Féin's move into politics after the hunger strike has helped them to meet with Loyalists and Unionists on a one-to-one level and all that, and a lot of them will have realised by now how much their Britishness is part of them, that it wouldn't just happen that once there's a United Ireland things will all be rosy. So they began to realise that there had to be another way of achieving a United Ireland.

The truth is the paramilitaries have been key motivators in bringing the peace process about, but there's people in the Protestant community, particularly certain Unionist politicians, who try to sow distrust about our intentions, or try to tell us that we shouldn't be getting involved in politics. But *why* shouldn't we be part of the peace process, *why* shouldn't we be involved in our communities, *why* shouldn't we be getting involved in politics? I think that it's *their* political agendas which should be questioned.

When I was inside I think that everybody would have loved to have had another way of resolving the conflict but everybody thought it was going to be impossible; that *we* were never ever going to come up with an alternative, better leave it to our politicians. But at the same time we had started to get disillusioned with those same politicians; after all, they had used us to defend Ulster and then disowned us. Then a few strong individuals began to say: no, we can try to do something for ourselves here. And if you look at the state of Northern Ireland today, it's in a far more hopefully state because of all the dialogue that's going on everywhere. And ex-prisoners were among those who assisted that dialogue to take place.

One Loyalist felt that there were still dangers ahead.

We have the credibility – for the moment. The difficulty is that there is another generation that's coming through and they're looking for someone to give them direction. Because we're giving a different direction to that of some of our more hardline political leaders they're getting two different messages and they're confused. It comes down to who's the most genuine, who's got the most credibility. At the moment they're prepared to listen to us, but if we fail on this occasion I can't see us succeeding after that. If the political process is stalled by political dinosaurs or goes in the wrong direction, then people will see us as having misdirected them. And there are dangers in that, for if ones like us with the credibility cannot succeed in gaining the trust of people at the grassroots, then who can?

Nevertheless, there was a feeling that things had changed irrevocably.

I know in my family there is a feeling that they don't want to go back. They

would still be staunchly Republican but at the same time they want to move away from the physical force approach and move onwards. It's the young ones of 18 who you have to watch.

Because of the political process, because the likes of Sinn Féin and the PUP and the UDP have begun to engage in debate, even if only through the media at times, an appreciation of the commonality of people's needs has developed which is very hard to walk away from. One of the philosophies of Republicanism was that this is the generation that's going to do it, it's not going to be passed onto another generation. But if you look back over the last thirty years, how many generations has it been passed on to? And there does come a time when you have to realise that you don't have the sole right to dictate how things should be done. I believe the community have that right, to decide what way they want to move forward and they should be consulted on that. And you have to identify with *their* needs.

One real fear in Republican circles particularly was the risk that too much debate might unleash emotions which could split the Republican movement.

I don't think it's a policy within Sinn Féin to stifle discussion, it's not, 'cause I'm sure they would rather there was debate and people were in there putting questions and giving feedback. Many people who go to public meetings mightn't want to be seen to question some senior person, but that's not the fault of the leadership, that's the fault of the person sitting there. People should ask constructive questions, not nit-picking ones, to get the debate going. I think that's where prisoners would have the confidence to speak up, like. And if you had a few prisoners there they might start a good debate – I've seen it happen. And if people have different strategies we also have to ask them where those strategies will lead us. I was at a meeting in Dundalk soon after the Good Friday Agreement was signed and this certain person was going on about how much of a betrayal it was to the Republican ideal and that it should be rejected. And I got up and told the audience who I was, and said to her: "I respect your opinion, I don't doubt your Republicanism, but where does your analysis lead us? Do you want to send your son, and other people's sons, out to restart the war? Is that what you really want, 'cause I don't see you giving us any other option."

And what of today's realities? Where do the ex-prisoners stand on the current 'peace process'?

First of all, I think that the Republican movement has given their people another option. Ninety per cent of Republicans don't want to see any more suffering, they genuinely want peace, they don't want to see any more young boys go out there with weapons. Personally, I think there's no reasons for it now anyway. Up to three or four years ago maybe, but not now. There has been a lot of changes, and you can see that in the way the Unionist community have had to sit down and negotiate and they are not used to it, although that's still giving some of them big problems. And the marching thing is part of it, they see it as part of their identity and culture being done away with. But I

think this whole society is slowly changing. It *has* to change. There's a long way to go, but it's starting. A lot of people have changed. I have changed. Everybody has to change: the Loyalists, Sinn Féin, the Unionists, the churches, everybody. You just can't expect to dig your own hole and stay in it for ever, you have to give and take.

One Loyalist firmly agreed that *all* levels within this society were required to change.

There is a serious level of sectarianism in the middle class that never gets dealt with, or even acknowledged. They have been able to retain a distance in some way by saying that it's *us* fighting with each other and they've had no part in it. But even while they were calling us the scum of the earth many of them were egging us on privately. And those of us who did get involved, when you go back to what got you involved you come to reassess things. But those who never got directly involved never analyse it, and for many of them – these middle class ones – their attitudes haven't changed one bit.

It's not just the middle class who are egging people on from the safety of the sidelines. I was in Dublin yesterday and I actually heard two people sitting in a cafe talking about Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness and one guy was saying that Adams was like Michael Collins and he hoped he ended up the same way. And these are people who are living comfortably in Dublin, who haven't experienced all that our communities went through, who are saying that!

There were still recognisable dangers inherent in the current situation.

People are still feeding on the other community's emotions. You have the likes of Paisley and his lot doing it, and, if I'm being honest, our side too. I mean, I believe the Garvaghy Road and Ormeau Road residents have genuine rights but I think they often go about things in ways which just create even more tension. And you leave your own community vulnerable and open when you do that – you should always be thinking of how you can protect your own community.

What I want for my children and what most Nationalist people want is fair and equal treatment. Personally I don't want fifteen Orange bands marching up through the town, like, and I have to admit that. But then again you have to see where they're coming from, that they feel they're being driven into a corner. So you have to get in and try and talk them out of that corner. But also they've had control for 50 to 60 years and it's hard for them people to accept that they have to sit down and argue their case like everyone else. Before, they didn't have to do it. I think that's their biggest fear. But we must face realities. I think that over the last few years there has been massive change, and next year there will be more. People need patience.

A wee lad I once helped get off going to prison, by telling him to fight his charge, said to me recently: "youse are all oul men now, why don't the IRA just give us the weapons and let us get on with the war?" And the reality is

that although there is a peace process, although we are moving forward and although there is a lot of trust being built up between various political parties, there will always be an element, regardless of where they come from, who want to turn round and say that violence is the only way to achieve things. And what we have to do is put something in place that doesn't undermine these people as such but exposes the weakness of their analysis.

And what about the future of the paramilitary organisations themselves? On that question opinion was divided.

There is an assumption out there that as things move forward the paramilitaries should just become defunct, and I have a problem with that. My view is that all of them played destructive roles throughout the conflict but they believed in what they were doing and because we are coming through a transformation I think that society should be assisting the paramilitary organisations to make that transformation as well. Because the danger is that if you just shut up shop and disband, people will feel, okay, we did our bit and now we're ditched, and there'll be resentment there. I think that rather than people trying to destroy them, they should be redirecting them into constructive ends. If you try to break them up now you will just have all kinds of disjointed people and there's no knowing what would happen then.

No, I think we would need to get rid of paramilitary organisations as quickly as possible. Because the fear that I have relates to what was said earlier, that there are young lads saying: youse are the oul lads, give us the gear and you clear off and let us get on with it. I think if you can try and enhance the process of dissolvment I think that's the way forward. Certainly there are people on the Shankill who would love to be out there fighting, who would love to take up a gun to fight the IRA. And I think the danger would be that if you still have the organisations there, then people will still want to join, and if we're trying to build a normal society then all those things have to go.

If they go then there'll have to be some other support mechanism put in their place. If you look at it realistically, and look at an IRA or a UVF volunteer or whatever, and some have been involved in this here conflict for 30 years, some from they were 17, some in prison once, twice, what have you, and you are now entering, as you say, into a situation of transformation. And some of them have no trade, no education, nothing –the only thing they have is the skills that they had when they were in the IRA, UVF, or whatever.

I agree. I can understand former activists who have learned a skill which benefited their organisation turning round at some stage if their organisation ditches them, and if society rejects them, communicating with each other and saying: here's our skills, let's go and use them for ourselves. This is why the network has to remain, because the discipline within the organisations can prevent them using those skills for themselves. But if they feel ditched they'll be getting into the black market or crime. And there's a lot of people out there who believe that it's part of the government's normalisation policy

to let people do this type of thing – it serves to reinforce their view that “we told you they were criminals all along”.

There is another side to the coin, in that the wider community out there has to begin to accept these people, acknowledge that they do exist, that they have to become a part of normal society. 'Cause at the moment you have all these barriers, especially when you go looking for a job.

And what about the ‘Seeds of Hope’ project itself?

This is a group which is non-political, non-partisan, not involved with any political party, and yet one of the government people we met with when we were discussing funding was suggesting that we should go to the PUP or the UDP or Sinn Féin and get them to write a letter to Adam Ingram on our behalf. But why? If we went to any of them they would rightly turn round and say: why should *we* write a letter, we already have our own organisations there who are going to facilitate that development, what do we need you for? The whole thing is that we are not going down the political road in any shape or form, what we’re looking for here is something which is inclusive, something that people can buy into without feeling threatened, where they can still be entitled to hold their own political beliefs. We don’t want to be dependent on any particular political party. Because the only road that that will take you on is a road you’ve been down before, where barriers go up and we don’t need that.

And as for final thoughts on future prospects?

It has to be said that there’s still a lot of people out there who are still 100 per cent committed paramilitaries but who have had the courage to turn round to politicians and say: “go ahead, let’s see what you can do.” And that needs to be acknowledged as well, that they’re prepared to let politicians get on with it.

There’s also a lot of people who are glad to see the peace process, although they’re often afraid to admit it. But privately they turn around and say: “well, I’m glad that my son is not going to have to go through this, or my daughter is not going to have to live through this the way we had to.”

‘Seeds of Hope’

The impact of the last thirty years of violence upon this society, the terrible toll it has taken, in human terms, and yet the potential which exists for renewal and hope, was nowhere better articulated than in the contributions made to the Think Tank discussions by my co-chair Anne Gallagher. The bewilderment and pain that many people experienced was something she felt very deeply about.

I remember Internment vividly because I was nursing in the Fever Hospital and there was this little baby I had nursed for a few weeks and it was getting more and more dehydrated and it died that evening. The father went absolutely berserk and I remember thinking that this was such a cruel moment. And I had to do the little baby up, and there was a certain way we were taught to fold the little sheet, and I remember as I was covering his little face just feeling absolutely devastated about death, and then I got a 'phone call that the matron wanted to see me. She informed me that my father and three of my brothers had been lifted. And I just couldn't relate to this at all. Matron had organised a taxi to take me into Belfast city centre from where I got a bus home. And I'll never forget that night, for Bellaghy was all lit up by the light of the Army jeeps and my mother had been heavily sedated. Now nurses are taught that there's a cause to every disease and quite often a cure. And I remember thinking that, just like the infection which caused the death of the little baby, in some way another type of infection had engulfed this whole society, but that somewhere there must be a cure.

Her experience was at both ends of the spectrum: her brothers were heavily involved in the ongoing conflict and yet she, as a nurse, was confronted daily with the devastation this conflict visited upon *all* those who were numbered among its victims.

Because I was trained as an infectious diseases nurse I probably saw the extent of the suffering at a very profound level, because the patients who had lost limbs were in a long time and as a staff nurse in neurosurgery I was nursing policemen, soldiers, civilians, paramilitaries . . . all sides of the conflict. At visiting times especially I was always taken by the tears of the patients and the relatives at the bedside and I used to think: my God, the same tears, the same grief. And I was thrown into this terrible anguish because I had four brothers in prison who I loved deeply and yet I was constantly confronted with the results of the conflict which they were a part of. And yet I always had a tremendous compassion for everyone affected by it all, I held no bitterness towards anyone, not even towards the soldiers who would have raided our house every second or third weekend. I remember having to have my dressing gown at the foot of the bed because quite often the door wouldn't have been knocked and all you would have heard was:

“Out, out, out!” Then the house would have just been taken over. I suppose the one thing I remember most is my mother; mammy was always very gentle and quiet and she used to cry, or pray. Whenever you heard the door going I’d hear my mother praying out loud: “Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in You”. And there was one night I went over to a policeman and said: “why do you have to keep raiding this house?” And he says “it’s our duty, but believe me, in the police station here we have great respect for your mother; we don’t want to have to do this but it’s our job”. And I appreciated that but it still didn’t . . . I just felt my poor mother was worn out, but she would never curse them, to her they were still somebody’s sons, and I think that’s what I probably learned from her, that this was their duty, but she never would have talked in an angry way.

Anne also felt that while it was easy to hide from any responsibility, or easy to sit in judgement upon everyone but oneself, each person in this society was faced with choices to be made every day, and some of the ways we responded to those choices only prolonged the agony for us all while others helped us to begin the healing process.

My best friend, who lived opposite us, was a Protestant, and it was only when Paul was arrested for attempting to take the life of her uncle that her mother stopped speaking to my mother. And my mother was absolutely devastated ’cause the woman would have been *her* best friend and had been in and out of our house for years. Then, on the day of my father’s funeral Paul got out of Magilligan for the funeral Mass, and the whole town was closed off and there was a lot of security. And I remember before they came to take the remains away I looked across the road and thought: oh, God, I just couldn’t let my father’s remains be taken from the house without going across to this neighbour. And when she came to the door I just put my arms around her and said: “I just want to say thanks for coming over to mummy yesterday ’cause it meant so much to her.” And she just said: “I know it’s not your dad’s fault.” And from that day to this mummy and her have become friends again. The reason I’m saying this is because sometimes there is a risk in ignoring something that is very hard to do. I knew that that was maybe the worst day to do something like that, but it was also the best day.

It is her trust in the basic goodness of people which sustains Anne’s own belief that each one of us in this society can nurture ‘seeds of hope’.

I used to give talks on justice and other issues. And I was asked once to speak in the Mansion House, Dublin, on ‘learning to forgive’ So I got up and gave my talk and then the next speaker got up. Her only daughter had been murdered by the INLA and at the end of the talk both of us got a standing ovation. After that we became very good friends and she invited me up to her house and once I stayed overnight. I was in the daughter’s room and all her little bits and pieces were still there, and I was lying in that bed thinking that to that woman I represented, through my brothers, the organisation that killed her beautiful daughter, and yet she was reaching out to me. I think that’s where progress lies, when little seeds like that are planted.