

Republicanism in transition

(4) The question of 'armed struggle'

compiled by

Michael Hall

Published April 2012 by
Island Publications/Farset Community Think Tanks Project
466 Springfield Road, Belfast BT12 7DW

© Michael Hall 2012
mikehall.island@yahoo.co.uk
<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

ISBN 978-1-899510-92-4

Cover photographs © Michael Hall

The project wishes to thank all those individuals who participated in the discussions and interviews from which this pamphlet was compiled

This publication has received support from the
Northern Ireland Community Relations Council
*which aims to promote a pluralist society characterised by equity,
respect for diversity, and recognition of interdependence.
The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Council.*



Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

Introduction

This is the fourth in a series of pamphlets† on the theme *Republicanism in transition*. The individuals who participated in the discussions from which these pamphlets have been compiled are either current members, or were former members, of a number of different republican groupings: Official Republican Movement, éirígí, Republican Network for Unity, Irish Republican Socialist Party, Republican Sinn Féin, 32 County Sovereignty Movement, and Sinn Féin.

The discussions for this pamphlet explored a range of views surrounding the use, and non-use, of armed struggle to achieve Irish Republican goals. While it would have been preferable if everyone had been able to attend the same round-table discussion, this was not feasible for a variety of reasons. As it is, three separate discussions are summarised here.

The first, and primary, section of the pamphlet is an account of a discussion held in Farset International, involving a broad spectrum of republican thinking.

The second section is an account of a discussion held with members of the James Connolly Society Béal Feirste.

The third section is an account of a discussion held with a number of republican community activists working in North Belfast.

The wide range of opinions expressed in the three discussions serves to highlight the disparate nature of the views currently held by Irish republicans. Furthermore, the tenor of some of the opinions expressed might seem to indicate that these opposing viewpoints are unbridgeable. Nevertheless, the fact that the republicans who participated were willing to enter into such an honest dialogue must be viewed as positive, and this ‘pamphlet debate’ will remain open to all those who feel it worthwhile to engage in this way.

Lastly, one aspect which is often ignored in any debate around armed struggle is the personal cost to those individuals who, for whatever reasons, find themselves involved in it. The fourth and final section of the pamphlet describes how some of those individuals – as well as their family members – have reflected on the impact armed conflict has had on their lives.

Michael Hall *Farset Community Think Tanks Co-ordinator*

† The first three pamphlets – Island Pamphlets nos. 96, 97 and 98 – are available as pdfs from <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/islandpublications>

The question of armed struggle

Main Discussion

A dozen individuals, representing different strands of republican thinking, participated in the discussion.

- The focus of this discussion surrounds the use, and *non*-use, of armed struggle in the pursuit of Irish Republican goals, including the establishment of a united Ireland. Now, while many republicans tell me that they are opposed to the current armed actions, an ambivalence also exists: some of those who don't support it at the moment *might* support it if the political environment changed. I would be interested to know if there has been any analysis undertaken within the republican movement as to whether, *even if* the political environment changed, a resumption of the armed struggle could actually take the republican project forward?
- The position of the IRSP – especially given that the INLA has called a ceasefire and has decommissioned – is that while we wouldn't condemn people who carry out violent acts, or say it's morally wrong, nevertheless our political analysis is that armed struggle is not going to achieve anything or is not the way forward, especially not at this period of time. However, we would certainly see the prisoners as political, although we might disagree with their actions. I suppose this sounds like a contradiction. But then we all live with contradictions.
- If we look back through our history, and ask just where armed struggle has ever got us along the road to a united Ireland . . . then the furthest it has got us is for Irish nationalists and republicans to be treated as equals. We have never actually got further than that – otherwise we wouldn't be sitting around this table today. When people say 'this isn't the time for it', the question arises: okay, when *is* the time right for armed struggle? Is the time ever going to be right again for armed struggle? What do we want to achieve now, today? Can anything further be achieved through armed struggle than where we are at the minute? Those questions have to be addressed, and people who are currently supportive of the armed struggle have to ask themselves: how much further can armed struggle take us than where we are now? Is armed struggle the only option? And what are the other options?

[Those] currently supportive of the armed struggle have to ask themselves: how much further can armed struggle take us than where we are now?

- You are asking how much further armed struggle can take people towards a united Ireland. Perhaps another question is: in what way might it actually serve to *prevent* that objective from being realised? Could it be seen as self-defeating?

- I am not here to speak for Sinn Féin, I am here as a member of Coiste na nIarchimí, and we are very clearly in favour of Sinn Féin’s current project, and where we are with that. In terms of armed struggle, the position we arrived at was that armed struggle, like anything else, could only take us so far. Whenever the armed struggle kicked off in the late sixties, people hadn’t reached for the guns right away. People went out onto the streets and they protested, they campaigned, but were confronted by the violence of the state – a state which, for whatever reason, felt threatened by the demands for ‘one man, one vote’. And the Northern state, backed up by the British, unleashed the forces of Unionism and the British Army against the nationalist people. And whenever that happens it is very clear that people will reach for the gun. It is the same right across the world. And that was it, we were locked into that until, I believe, the world began

to change in the 1990s, and the British began to change. If you look back at that period you had Peter Brooke, the British Secretary of State [for Northern Ireland] saying that the British military could not defeat the IRA; and he said, in the same speech, that the British had no strategic, economic, or political interests, whatever, in maintaining the Union. And basically that was a game-changer, and a challenge to republicans. Because if you

As far as I am concerned, armed struggle can only be justified if there is no other alternative. If you have an alternative then you shouldn’t even consider it.

believe that armed struggle is the option of last resort, but then you’re challenged to see whether there is another way of pursuing your goals, you have to step up to the plate and accept that challenge. Once the Brits declared that they were prepared to facilitate a move towards something different, then you are further challenged to move onto that ground. As far as I am concerned, armed struggle can only be justified if there is no other alternative. If you *have* an alternative then you shouldn’t even consider it.

- I would have to be very up-front in regards to what is going on at present in the North with these micro-groups. And not just in the North, we saw it in Donegal last week.† This business of people deciding that they are some sort of revolutionary vanguard, having no real input or contact with ordinary people, feeling themselves to be above any censure of any sort, and simply choosing to shoot whoever they want, to rob whoever they want... it just seems so crazy. And for what? Who are these groups targeting? I was at an event recently where people

† A reference to Andrew Allen, formerly from Derry, who was shot dead at his home in Buncrana, Co. Donegal, on 9 February 2012. Later claimed by RAAD (Republican Action Against Drugs).

were being interviewed about the history of the conflict. Jackie McDonald of the UDA was there and the interviewer asked him what he felt about the actions of these groups. And he was quite blunt: he didn't see them as any type of threat to the Union. He viewed what is going on as being targeted primarily against Sinn Féin. They are the principal objective in regards to all this, and not the state and not the British.

- Within republican history, especially militant republicanism, it is common for us to say that there was 'no alternative'. In fact, there were *plenty* of alternatives – we just didn't like them. We could have continued with peaceful protests while we were getting beat off the streets: it was at least raising a new awareness on the mainland about the nature of Unionist rule in the '6-Counties', and forcing a momentum for change which could have been pushed even further. So, it is not true to say that it was the last resort when it broke out into armed conflict. I do believe there were alternatives. Okay, as someone who got involved in the conflict, and who went to prison, I believe it was the *best* alternative. But people in the seventies who *didn't* resort to violence obviously didn't see it as a last resort; many people had different views of what was needed and what wasn't needed. So then when you come to today's political violence and say to these groups that it is not wanted and not needed, you are open to the criticism that there were plenty of people saying the same thing about *our* violence in the seventies. It's just that back then you *thought* that it was the best alternative. Other people within the nationalist community would have said: no, there is no need for violence, we can achieve things peacefully, through civil protests and stuff like that.

Within republican history, especially militant republicanism, it is common for us to say that there was 'no alternative'. In fact, there were plenty of alternatives – we just didn't like them.

- With regard to this linkage between the armed struggle and the Civil Rights period... During our discussions for the first pamphlet the assertion was made that 'the changes in things like gerrymandering and housing were brought about by an armed campaign'. Yet, on 12 October 1969, at a People's Democracy meeting, PD leader Michael Farrell said that 'Now that all the civil rights demands have been met...' This was two months *before* the split within the IRA from which the Provisionals would emerge. So, was the Provisionals' armed campaign primarily to do with achieving civil rights, or because the republican movement had decided to make another effort to bring about a united Ireland?

- Farrell meant the disbandment of the 'B-Specials' and the gaining of 'one man, one vote' and that sort of thing. I think that what led to the escalation of the Troubles wasn't the lack of these civil rights alone, it was the complete lack of representation of nationalists in the Stormont regime. We [the Official IRA]

involved ourselves in a campaign of violence against the state for a few years, and then realised that it wasn't going to succeed. At the time we thought it was part of a worldwide socialist revolution and that within ten to twenty years the capitalist system would collapse. It is hard for people now to believe that, but we believed it at the time. But we soon realised that what was going on in the North was not revolution, it was not revolutionary. Although we decided to stop our campaign, there was no moral objection to violence – what we planned to do was prepare arms and finance for a *future* socialist revolution which we felt was going to come. Now, of late, I am beginning to have grave doubts. Personally, at this minute I can't see – as much as I might like to – any opportunity for revolution, especially through armed conflict, to bring down the state, I don't think there is the support out there for it.

- Mention has been made of equality, which is a very important point. I think that once the nationalist community in the North gained equality, which they more or less have now – by which I mean political equality, not socio-economic equality – I think that the majority of them are content with that. The terms 'United Ireland' and 'Republic' seem interchangeable to many people, but they're not interchangeable to me. If the Dublin government took control of the North, to many that would satisfy their hope for a united Ireland. But that's certainly not what I struggled for – an extension of the 'Free State' government into the North! The term 'United Ireland' doesn't really mean anything to me – I struggled for a *socialist republic*, which is a different concept entirely.

- There's a lot of misconceptions as to who is, and who isn't, 'correct' in their analysis about the current use of armed struggle. But one thing needs to be stressed at this and any other discussion: there has to be equal respect for each and every analysis that's out there. Everybody can sit in an ivory tower and say, 'I'm right, and you're wrong,' but it doesn't get us anywhere. The fact of the matter is that armed attacks, armed resistance – whatever you want to call them – have been with us since the invasion of this country by the English. And on that basis, in my personal opinion, anyone who resists British Imperialism in Ireland, whether they do so in an armed or unarmed way, is justified. Because part of this country is occupied, and as long as it is occupied there is going to be armed resistance. People can call them 'dissidents', people can call them 'hoods and criminals', people can call them whatever the hell they want to call them, but while British control still exists in any part of this island armed resistance is always going to be there. That's a reality that people right across the political spectrum have to deal with.

While British control still exists in any part of this island armed resistance is always going to be there. That's a reality that people right across the political spectrum have to deal with.

- I can understand you saying that people have the right to resist, but does it necessarily have to be an *armed* resistance?
 - Ask that of the 1000-plus British troops who are stationed in the Six Counties and who are armed. Ask that of the police force who are political, and are armed.
 - Yes, but what I am trying to ascertain is whether republicans feel that a continuation of armed struggle could actually undermine control from Westminster – or might it not in fact serve to strengthen it?
 - You have to take the reality that since there has been British occupation in Ireland there have been outbreaks of armed resistance, campaigns – whatever you want to call them. From the guerrilla attacks of Hugh O’Neill right up to the guerrilla attacks of the IRA, the INLA, the Officials – the reality is that that has always been the case.
 - Yes, that’s the reality of Irish history, but what I am trying to determine is to what extent lessons, if any, might have been learned from that history . . .
 - Can I say something. I am here representing Tar Anall. I think that what you need to bear in mind is that armed struggle is a *tactic*. Armed struggle does not exist to feed the armed struggle; it’s a weapon in a very big arsenal that you should have at your disposal if you are serious about what you are about, which is the establishment of a socialist republic. Once it no longer serves a purpose, then park the armed struggle. I fought the armed struggle for practically its duration, from as young an age that I could. But I wasn’t handcuffed to it, I wasn’t handcuffed to an Armalite or to a bomb. I saw them as useful tools, but I didn’t see them as exclusive. Also, with any deep analysis of yourself, you have to ask: is it justified to bring a war upon your own people, on your community – because that’s who ends up paying for it. So when people engage in these actions, they need to ask themselves: just who they actually hurt? If you cannot sustain a military campaign, with the hope or expectation of defeating your enemy, then find another way to fight that enemy.
-
- You have to ask: is it justified to bring a war upon your own people, on your community – because that’s who ends up paying for it.***
-
- But when the IRA leadership in the seventies decided that it was going to be a long war, they were well aware that their communities would suffer, yet they went on with it anyway.
 - We didn’t *go* to war, *war came to us*. At that time we didn’t believe we had any option. But what I am saying is that the political landscape today is *not* what it was back then, and you can’t use an argument based on past history and say, well, because Hugh O’Neill did it, that makes it okay today. If you’re talking about fighting the ‘war of the flea’ and you think this is going to lead anywhere

I would be interested in hearing your analysis of where it's going to go, I would honestly like to understand what the present armed actions are all about.

- What I said earlier was that there has to be some kind of mutual respect among republicans. I can respect all the positions taken by every person in this room, and where you come from, but the problem is that that respect isn't a two-way thing. Dissident groups are continually accused of doing this and doing that, and condemned because what they are doing is 'wrong'... Now, to me, that's not mutual respect.
- But it's true.
- Okay, give me your facts then.
- Well, there's a guy in Coolnasilla, a businessman, and somebody goes to his door, smashes it down, takes seventy-odd grand out of his house. He's just an ordinary businessman in his community. What is all that about? How is that going to get the Brits out?
- Who did this?
- Members of one of these groups. Another example: a guy who was a member of one of these organisations decided to lift some weapons and set up his own organisation, and some of his erstwhile comrades take him out and cut his head off with a shovel. What is that about? Do you know what I mean? Once you lose the impetus of armed struggle, once you lose the objective of getting the Brits out of here, you're simply an armed group who are running about. The people who pay for the majority of the pain and suffering for this campaign, or these different campaigns from all these various groups, are our own people. And the Brits are sitting laughing, and the loyalists are sitting laughing. The way I see it with the way it is happening is... Johnny Adair† run about this place and created this image of himself and his 'C-Company' – 'Simply the Best' – and because he killed Catholics he was tolerated. And what did he do? Drugs, rape... whatever. Basically for people like me sitting looking at the way things are going, this is where we are heading with these micro-groups. You're heading into 'C-Company'-type territory. How do you judge whether your people have an appetite for this kind of stuff? You need to put your analysis before people at elections, and get people to endorse what you're trying to do. There's no other way.
- Let me deal with those points. The guy in Coolnasilla, I know nothing about it, haven't a clue who was involved, and if they took money off him that was wrong. The guy in Ardoyne who got his head cut off with a spade – disgusting. What else do you want me to say about it? As for equating republicans with Johnny

† Johnny 'Mad Dog' Adair was a notorious UDA leader based in Belfast's Shankill Road. He was expelled from the organisation in 2002 following a violent internal power struggle.

Adair, or with his ‘C-Company... I mean, how is that giving respect?

- You can’t come in, sit at the table and say ‘I demand respect’. Because respect is *earned*, it is not a demand that you can put on the table. And it is how the community views the ‘alphabet’ groups that are growing up, reproducing and splitting . . .

- And who is the community?

- The community are those people who openly endorse the mandate of those they vote for.

- And what percentage of the electorate do you think would have voted for the IRA’s armed campaign in the seventies?

- Could I come in here? I think we are moving into an area which could just bring a quick conclusion to our whole discussion today. I think that we should try and stick to the question of armed struggle itself, not who’s doing it or how they are doing it. As a member of an organisation which was involved in armed struggle, then called a ceasefire, I can understand the feelings on both sides, but I don’t think it will help the situation. I think this discussion could come to a quick end if we continue like this.

- Look, let’s go back to the thing about Civil Rights and the lads lifting the weapons, we all know that history. The thing about it is that the wheel had begun to spin, and the arms were lifted, and that was it: we were on the road to fight for a united Ireland. And I said at the beginning that the time has to be right, the setting has to be right, the support has to be there, all those things have to be in place before there can be an armed struggle. And the thing about it was that people felt during the time of the bombing in England that eventually the IRA had got things right.† Not to fight the war here in the North, but to fight it in England, and to fight it where it hurt England the most – their economy. At one point the Chinese banking sector said, ‘One more bomb and we’re pulling out of England.’ And everyone here was going: now we’ve got it, we’ve got it right at last! And then, all of a sudden, no more bombs in England, and we’re on the road to a compromise peace. Now, whether Sinn Féin like it or not, there’s a lot of people that don’t support the way that they’ve went or the way they are doing things now. And there was a lot of people lied to by senior members of Sinn Féin and the

People felt [with the Canary Wharf] bombing that eventually the IRA had got things right. Not to fight the war here in the North, but to fight it in England, and to fight it where it hurt them the most – their economy.

† A reference to the IRA’s bombing of Canary Wharf, in the Docklands financial district of London, on 8 February 1994, in which two people were killed and an estimated £100 million worth of damage was caused.

IRA. And unfortunately now there has been a vacuum left, where people don't support Sinn Féin, don't support what they are doing, definitely don't support the way they are headed, and that vacuum exists. And them groups are now there. And I'm not saying that I support these groups, or what they are doing... I'll support the prisoners who are inside. I understand where M_____ is coming from: if this country is still occupied, I am not going to ridicule a man who lifts a gun to oppose that occupation. I personally don't believe that this is the time for it. As I said, I think we *had* the time for it, but we were hoodwinked out of it by Sinn Féin and the IRA. That has left us with a vacuum.

- But in that vacuum, you still have choices to make. What you do in that vacuum is either going to *advance* the attainment of your goals or is going to *hinder* it. That's part of what the debate about the use of armed struggle should be about.

- But do you understand what I am saying? Now, most people would rather not see war of any kind, if it was at all possible, but when we got to the time of the Canary Wharf bombing the fact is that people felt that this was the furthest we had ever achieved in our struggle. And then it stopped. And people were angry at that. I'm going to say now, that right from the start I was a 'No' man for the peace process. And why? Because one of the questions I asked as a volunteer, when we were engaged by the leadership during the peace process, was: 'In twenty, thirty, forty years' time, are our grandchildren and great grandchildren going to have to fight this fight again?' And unfortunately I think they *are* going to have to fight it.

- Two points. I mean, we can bate about the bush and debate whether armed struggle is justified or not, whether it is morally correct or not. But Sinn Féin took a particular road. The Workers Party, the Officials, the INLA... whoever, have taken particular roads. Which is fine. That's their analysis, they're entitled to that. But as soon as people began to oppose the Sinn Féin analysis things changed. Some of them have been taken from their homes, pillowcases put over their heads, threatened, beaten... and on one occasion shot dead.† By the Provisional IRA. These were 'political' opponents, not necessarily people who wanted to get involved in armed attacks, or an armed campaign, but people who genuinely and legitimately opposed that particular analysis. People have suffered as a result of that. S_____ has talked about communities suffering. There's children in the homes of those political activists, wives, partners, wider families involved. There is a campaign of serious demonisation against political opponents, serious. To the extent of being called informers, or MI5 agents, or alcoholics and wife-beaters... you name it, people like myself have been called these things. What I am saying is that how can somebody *politically* – I am not talking about militarily – oppose a particular analysis, or politically organise, if they are being mistreated in such

† A reference to Joe O'Connor, a Real IRA volunteer, who was shot dead outside his house in West Belfast on 13 October 2000.

a manner? We were talking about respect. If there is no respect for different republican positions, then where will that lead us?

- There's a much over-used phrase – 'whataboutery' – and we have introduced it here. 'What about when you lot did this... or what about when you lot did that?' Now, there is nobody here who has any moral objection to the use of force for political ends or none of us would have engaged in it. So, let's get that out of the way first of all. We are supposed to be discussing the use of violence as a *tactic*. But if it's going to be between you lot and Sinn Féin, the rest of us would be as well leaving, for we have no role in this discussion. We could all go back to the internal splits and feuds and start blaming everybody else: the reason *our* group took a particular course of action was because *they* did such and such. We need to get past all that. We are all where we chose to be. So, let's concentrate on the topic at hand. You are correct about the Canary Wharf bombing; that was the height of the campaign – but is it ever going to reach that height again? No, not in my opinion. It is questions like that which we should be discussing.

- Again, setting aside questions regarding the legitimacy and the morality of armed struggle, should people not also debate its *effectiveness*?

- As far as I am concerned, armed struggle can only take us so far. And people have to realise that. I went to jail when I was sixteen. I'm sitting in the Cages watching the Vietnam War unfold on TV. And whenever the Yanks were scampering for the boats and for the helicopters to get out of Saigon, we were saying: that will be us, that's what we are going to do to the Brits! But you get older, and you get a bit wiser, and in the 1990s a discussion started within the republican wings [in the jails]. How do we get from where we're at now – hunkered down in the trenches – to a position where we get the Brits out of Ireland? How do we do that? There's only so much damage you can inflict, and when you realise that you're not going to be able to drive the British into the sea, the way the Viet Cong did, then you need to ask: how does this end? how do we bring it to an end? And that's when the discussions start, that's when the thinking starts. And the point about it is, that in effect we fought our way to the negotiating table. It doesn't matter how many bombs there would have been in London at the end of the day. We were never going to be able to drive the British into the sea the way the Viet Cong did. Because what had to happen here was that we had to bring the Brits to the negotiating table, we had to bring them to the realisation that they could not defeat the republican people, and that they were going to have to start thinking about changing their system in Ireland. And basically the problem for us was that if the Brits had've pulled out in 1994 the loyalists and ourselves would have went at it hammer and tongs. So you have all that. By us doing what we did we hope that we are moving towards a position where the idea of a new republic is something that we can offer people who are currently unionists, people who come from Protestant working-class areas – that we can

get them to buy into this notion that by working together we can run this place better than what the British can. And also get them to buy into the notion that as a sizeable part of the six and a half million population of Ireland they stand to have more control over their lives than what they can ever have sitting as a small minority in Westminster. That's the task that we're involved in and that's the way we are going. And I'm fairly confident that it will be a lot easier to do than what we have been involved in up to now.

- I accept that the armed struggle, the republican violent campaign, definitely drove Protestant working-class people away from Republican politics. Over the last lot of years working with people from that community, yes, they certainly weren't trying to listen to the message of republicanism and our vision of what a united Ireland would be, because they just seen our violence. As S_____ said, I don't think it is up to the British government to convince the unionist population, it is up to republicans to convince them. And, personally, I believe that republican violence scares the unionist population away from the republican message.

I don't think it is up to the British government to convince the unionist population, it is up to republicans to convince them. And I believe that republican violence scares the unionist population away from the republican message.

- To me Ireland is one of the most unequal countries in western Europe; not on Protestant/Catholic lines, but on the social issues: the divide between 'the haves and the have-nots'. An 'Ireland of equals' to me would mean people being equal in the whole island of Ireland, on social and economic terms. If you are going to live in a capitalist system which still looks after the few over the many, then even getting the Brits out of the North you will have achieved nothing. Absolutely nothing. For we will still have all the same housing, education problems, health, jobs. . . You now realise that getting the Brits out of this country isn't an achievement if you don't do something about the system we live in.

- It was mentioned earlier about loyalists not feeling that the Union was threatened by current armed actions. I'm reminded of the comment made by Unionist Party Leader James Molyneaux, when the 1994 IRA ceasefire was announced. He said, 'This is the worst thing that has ever happened to us.' Because while there was armed conflict he felt the Union was secure, because all the focus was on defeating the IRA. But the minute it stopped unionism had to defend itself politically, and that was a much harder task.

- Yes, he did say the ceasefire was the biggest threat to the Union. It is when the violence stops, you then need to be quicker on your feet. Because you are then going to be really challenged by your opponents. They're not shooting guns at you any more, they're shooting questions. And what you hope is that

by the rationale of your politics and your beliefs, you will be able to convince them. Let's face it, we were never going to succeed in shooting and bombing the Protestant, unionist community into a united Ireland.

- If anyone thinks a united Ireland will sever the links with Britain, they're deluded, the Brits will always have some links with here. Even if the soldiers pull out, the whole infrastructure is there. The Brits have pulled strings in Ireland for centuries. I would make the point – and this is not an attack on Sinn Féin, for I support the current political process – that in my opinion a lot of people voted for Sinn Féin for fear that if they didn't put them into power the same thing would happen all over again. More years of bombing and shooting.
- I worked on four election campaigns last year, in the North and the South, and I never heard people say: 'If we don't vote you in, is the IRA going to start killing again?'
- Well, I have heard it.
- I accept that you have. But I have never been faced with it, or had to come up with a response to it.
- The main reason people vote here is to have the strongest voice for their own tribe. Hopefully that will change. It is a sectarian war by another means. I agree with what Sinn Féin is doing, and the peace process, but that's the reality – we are still enmeshed in sectarian politics.
- We're getting away from the idea and the concept of: is armed struggle right or is it wrong? At one stage everybody in this room believed that armed struggle was right. And why did we go into it? We wanted to change the political system. Because Britain's system was wrong. And the justification for armed struggle from 1922 onwards was that we have been ruled by Stormont and it has not been fair. It was unjust, and was pure and simply damn bad governance. Now, today we have the 'folks on the hill'[†]; to have a good political system we need an effective opposition. Today there is no opposition among the folks on the hill. D_____ made the point whether his grandchildren have to do the same in the future. He says he thinks it's a possibility; so do I. If we don't get it right now, we're going to have to go through it again. There are people in this room who maybe believe in the concept of armed struggle at the present time, I personally don't. But I can understand why they feel that, because at one stage I was there, I felt that too. I am not there any more. But it *will* happen again if we don't get this right. To have good governance you have to have effective opposition. What we have is a joke. Whenever you have bad governance there will always be people who believe that the way to change the system is through armed struggle. I am not saying they are right, but that is there.

[†] The politicians in the Northern Ireland Assembly, residing at Stormont Hill.

- There are things going on at the moment which make it difficult for many republicans to support the current political process. Security was taken away from the PSNI and given to MI5, because the PSNI was no longer trusted, especially with the influx of Catholics joining it. And MI5 is accountable to no-one. In some of the cases up before the courts it has been revealed that tracking devices were placed in people's cars, and people who don't believe in the political process are being targeted by the state. Then there is the whole issue of strip-searching of prisoners. We have been told by all sections of the political establishment that we have to accept the PSNI. I agree that we do need policing, I am not against policing, but it depends on what type of policing the community needs, and gets. They can't come into your community at four o'clock in the afternoon and rescue some old dear's cat out of a tree and be seen as a 'community police', then come back at four in the morning and kick somebody's door in and trail them off for maybe up to 28 days' detention and questioning. There is a contradiction there. There are difficulties in trying to sell the political process to those who think it's not working, because there are still things from the past resonating today.

In some of the cases up before the courts it has been revealed that tracking devices were placed in people's cars, and people who don't believe in the political process are being targeted by the state.

- But do you not think it's a Catch-22? I believe the argument could be won at Stormont against repressive legislation and things like that if there was no violence going on, or very little going on. That's why I would speak out against the use of armed struggle at the minute, because you're giving the state the excuse to suppress *all* opposition because of the violence being done by a few.
- Just to correct the figures M_____ gave earlier. It's actually 5000 armed British soldiers here. You have those 5000 armed Brits, you have cops who have got greater powers than they had when the war was going on, such as the 'stop and search' powers. They're still carrying out their raids, only we don't hear about it any more, it has been censored. When the war was on we had plenty of information coming from *Republican News*, *Andy'town News*. . . we don't have that any more. So you have all that going on, and you have those frustrations among people, some of whom still feel that the armed struggle is justified. Now, I don't personally think the time is right for armed struggle, but I do understand those frustrations that those things aren't being sorted out. I personally don't think these groups can achieve anything through armed struggle, for they don't have the support that the IRA had, and you need massive support on the ground to make progress politically.
- If you believe that the current use of armed actions is wrong, well then, if you are not actually prepared to speak up and tell people it is wrong it is actually moral

cowardice. And it can be taken as ambivalence. That's what needs to be said, and for me that is why I would be so forthright about it. You see two Brits getting shot dead in Antrim† and some of the people I would socialise with would say: 'I don't agree with what they're doing, but here, that was a good 'op'?' It *wasn't* a good 'op': what is the point of killing somebody if you don't have a political objective at the end of it? There is an ambivalence among those who say they don't believe in armed struggle but nevertheless don't speak out against it.

- If you are taking a position you have to be showing your own community leadership. I mean, it is not right for us to say: well, I know the conditions for armed actions are not there now, but because I once did it I am not really going to speak out against it. That just creates confusion within our communities. We need to be as unequivocal as when we were at war with the British. I was at war with the British state for most of my youth and all of my adult life. I have *no* regrets whatsoever, and I still don't, but I will also be as clear today in saying that, in my opinion, the situation today does not justify armed rebellion. We need to be telling our communities where we stand.
- And where do *you* stand when you invite the PSNI into our communities? Are you people too not giving out mixed messages?
- The argument against all this is that there is still Partition, there is a regime at Stormont still implementing British rule. The political parties claim that it gives us local control over our own affairs, but any English county council has more local power than our Assembly. The Brits won because they have achieved a Partitionist state with nationalist involvement in Stormont. But that doesn't mean I believe a return to armed conflict is justified. I agree with what was said about the two soldiers. I remember drinking in St Paul's and when the PSNI cop, Ronan Kerr, got killed some young lads thought it was great.†† And there was a row after it. Someone asked me what I thought about it, and they probably expected a certain response, thinking, 'Well, he's an 'erp', he'll agree with it.' But I said I thought it was wrong, it wouldn't have achieved anything. And there was a silence, and then someone said, 'We weren't expecting that from you.' But if you do search inside yourself and feel that something is wrong, then say it's wrong. At the same time, I feel it difficult to say something is wrong because I then sound like a hypocrite. And when you are talking to young people, it's almost as if you are saying that it was okay for you to do these things, but not okay for them. I try instead to take a political and a military analysis, and get them to ask themselves what armed action could achieve, and I don't see it achieving anything, And that's why I would say to them that politically, militarily and strategically, that it is wrong. But I would have difficulty in criticising it on moral grounds.

† On 7 March 2009 the Real IRA shot dead two soldiers at Massereene Army Barracks in Antrim town. Two days later policeman Stephen Carroll was shot dead by the Continuity IRA.

†† PSNI Constable Ronan Kerr, a member of the GAA, was shot dead in Omagh on 2 April 2011.

- There seems to be a kind of a Partitionist attitude to armed struggle. In the sense that: ‘We got equality, we got this legislation passed at Westminster, we got an Assembly, we got whatever, we’re happy enough type-of-thing; we can now move to a different phase, a different way of doing things.’ But no matter what people think they got, we still have the reality of Partition.

- There’s a lot of talk among people about a united Ireland. In my opinion it was never about a united Ireland, it was about a 32-county democratic socialist republic. What happened to that particular objective? The point is that the struggle was about the socio-economic equality of *everyone* on the island of Ireland, not just those in the 6-Counties.

- But do you feel that the continuation of armed struggle could advance that?

- I am a former volunteer in the Provisional IRA. My generation got involved in the republican movement because of the 1980 hunger strikes. I was fourteen years of age and a lot of my school-mates got involved together. I am not going to sit in an ivory tower and proclaim that armed actions are now wrong. I was involved in the armed struggle, and it would be totally wrong and hypocritical of me to condemn anybody who engages in armed actions today.

I am a former volunteer in the Provisional IRA. I was involved in the armed struggle, and it would be totally wrong and hypocritical of me to condemn anybody who engages in armed actions today.

- People have come through a similar experience, and everyone here has said that they agreed with armed struggle during the Troubles. But I cannot seem to get those who believe in armed struggle at the present time to outline *in what way* they feel it can advance the republican cause. For those who feel armed struggle remains an option – do you also feel it is a realistic one, in terms of advancing republican goals?

- Well, it’s a realistic one so long as Partition and the occupation continues, yes. It’s realistic because there exists a living, breathing, occupation; there’s a living, breathing Partition of the island, and it’s against everything that Irish republicans stand for. It’s totally against real democracy on this island. People pretend that Leinster House† is a democratic institution, that the Stormont Assembly is a democratic institution, but the reality is that they aren’t.

- But there is also an argument which says that more was achieved through civil disobedience than armed actions: the likes of the Land League, Catholic Emancipation, Hole Rule even. Now these things might not have had republican objectives, but with the mass movements under Parnell and others, we could say

† Leinster House is the name of the building housing the Oireachtas, the national parliament of the Republic of Ireland.

that more was actually achieved, and, if anything, armed actions held progress back. Throughout Irish history there has always been a struggle, but it hasn't always been an armed struggle, there have been longer periods of non-violence, with civil disobedience, for want of a better way of putting it. Just because you don't envisage armed resistance as a way of achieving your goals doesn't mean that you have changed or watered down your aspirations.

- Whenever a war ends there has to be a period between the end of the war and the achievement of the goals you fought it for. Especially with the way our war ended – because it didn't end with victory. So there has to be a period of moving from the end of the war until you get what you set out to achieve.
- The thing about the idea of a republic, key to the republic is *people*. The term itself comes from the Latin 'res publica', meaning 'affairs of the people'. So it is centred on the people and civil society. It doesn't mean a small group of individuals can take on to themselves that they know better, like the Bader-Meinhof, or the Brigata Rosse, or Action Directe in France... where 'we' know better than the people and we're going to show them how.
- Talking about 'the people', can I act as devil's advocate here and refer to an analysis which was brought to my notice. The barriers to the realisation of a 32-County Irish Republic were always seen as two-fold. One, the British presence, and, two, the hostility of the Protestant/unionist community in the North. . .
- I would have a third in there: the conservative politics of the Southern state.
- Granted. Now, you will all have different opinions on the Good Friday Agreement and the fact that there were two referenda instead of one, but some academics have commented that what is actually in the Agreement represents a 'significant' movement in international law.† To quote: 'It is an enormous leap for a state to shift control of its territorial identity to popular electoral mandate.'††

† 'The Frontiers of Legal Analysis: Reframing the Transition in Northern Ireland', Colm Campbell, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Colin Harvey, *The Modern Law Review*, Vol. 66, May 2003, No. 3.

†† *Campbell, Ní Aoláin and Harvey wrote:*

'To give a sense of how far the territorial principle has been shifted in the Anglo-Irish process a brief look to the decision of the international commission looking in 1921 at the status of the Aaland Islands is instructive. The Commission recognised that the vast majority of the people in the Aaland Islands would choose union with Sweden over their existing attachment to Finland. However, their right to secede was denied. The Commission held:

To concede to minorities, either of language or religion, or to any fractions of a population the right of withdrawing from the community to which they belong, either because it is their wish or their good pleasure, would be to destroy order and stability within States and to inaugurate anarchy in international life; it would be to uphold a theory incompatible with the very idea of the state as a territorial and political union.

The Good Friday Agreement represents a break with this historical legacy in its provision for possible change of sovereignty. Now it seems possible to articulate a new criterion whereby a state can contract out to its own citizens the right to decide their territorial status vis-à-vis a neighbouring state. [This] represents a distinctive movement in international law. The status of the jurisdiction, currently

- Exactly.
- Which means that, if a majority of the population of Northern Ireland demonstrate a desire to form part of a united Ireland in a border poll, then the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is required to give effect to that wish.† So, if the reality is that Westminster’s authority over the North has been redefined within new legally-binding parameters, should the onus then be on republicans to focus on removing the *other* barrier to Irish unity: the antipathy of the Protestant/unionist community. They need to be convinced – or at least a section of them do – of the benefits of unity. Given this situation, is an armed campaign going to push the British government further than they have already gone in international law? That seems highly unlikely. Secondly, what is it going to do to the Protestant/unionist community in terms of trying to bring them on board? What do people think?
- You’re talking about the ‘triple lock’ which Sinn Féin have tied themselves into, in these two votes: a 6- and a 26-county vote, whereas it should have been a 32-county vote.
- Okay, I accept that people have disagreements on the fact that there were two separate referendums, rather than one, all-Ireland referendum. . .
- And they were on different issues; the referendum in the Free State wasn’t the same as the one in the North, it was on constitutional issues. . .
- Yes, but *irrespective* of the problems people have regarding the two referendums, the reality still remains that the British are now legally obligated to give effect to movement towards a united Ireland if that becomes the expressed wish of the majority of the people in the North.††

Irrespective of the problems people have regarding the two referendums, the reality still remains that the British have accepted that they are now legally obligated to give effect to movement towards a united Ireland if that becomes the expressed wish of the majority of the people in the North.

confirmed to be a part of the legal territory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is subject to a potential shift of allegiance subject to the stated desire of a majority of the population. It is an enormous leap for a state to shift control of its territorial identity to popular electoral mandate.... This is a significant contribution by the Agreement to international legal development.’

† Northern Ireland Act 1998, s1(2) and Schedule 1.

†† Article 1(ii) of the British-Irish Agreement sets out that:

...it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

- Yes, and previously it had been asserted that this place was ‘as British as Finchley’ . . .
- I don’t even believe Thatcher herself believed that!
- But if that is true; if there is an internationally-recognised, legally-binding obligation on the British to implement a majority wish for a united Ireland, then surely the onus is on republicans to focus their energies on removing the second barrier – by convincing the Protestant community that their future would be best served in a new Ireland. And the question I am asking is: does the continuance of the armed struggle assist that, or hinder it?
- Well, I have already said that it would hinder it.
- Of course it will hinder it.
- All the victories in Irish history which G ____ listed: Daniel O’Connell, Catholic Emancipation, and all those things, were nationalist demands, they weren’t republican demands. The only time that republicans have advanced in Ireland in a military campaign is when they have harnessed nationalism onto it. Even in 1798 they harnessed the forces of nationalism. The same I think applies to the Troubles which have just ended. The term ‘socialist’ might have been tagged on to the struggle, but the average volunteer wanted to see the destruction of Stormont, the removal of the Brits. It was nationalist emancipation. And I think that nationalist emancipation has been gained. I think that the northern nationalist population have been emancipated, they have their voting rights, they have rights in jobs; the middle-class Catholics have been victorious in their upward movement within society. So, therefore, any talk of a ‘socialist republic’ has to be started from the ground up again.
- People have to be convinced, and we have to go out and convince them. As far as I am concerned, if you don’t convince a section of the Protestant community towards republicanism then unity will fail. *Even if you got a majority in an all-Ireland vote the people in the south are not going to embrace unity unless they know that a significant number of Protestants will be willing participants.* They will say: we don’t want to put the Protestants into the same position that you were in in 1922 when you were locked within a state that you didn’t want, and things festered for fifty years before they boiled over. The South are not going to say: right, we’ll rule these unionists and give them what we think is good for them. It won’t work that way. A section of the Protestant population has to be won over to some sort of republicanism before we can advance at all.

- And that's ignoring those Catholics in the North who want to stay with the Union. I think that, given a straight choice between the UK and a united Ireland, there are people who maybe vote for nationalist parties today but would probably vote to remain where they are. People are frightened of change. Even if, for argument's sake, you were able to get 25% of the Protestant/unionist population, there's no guarantee at all that you would have 100% of the Catholic/nationalist population in the North.

- When I talk about a united Ireland it's the socialism which is my priority, And when you talk to the man in the street – or more particularly the woman in the street – about a united Ireland, they're not sure at all. They'll say to you: 'It might mean I'm going to be paying £50 to go and see a doctor.' That's the first thing they'll say. There's no [health] system like there is up here. And they don't want to be paying £500 to be staying in hospital overnight. If we had a new Ireland in the morning those are the type of things we would need to be changing. The first thing Connolly called for was socialism, before he shouted about any rebellion. Things have to be well thought out, we need to know what type of system we want to go into, and one that most people would find attractive.

- They say all politics is local and you can't get more local than your own house. And if there was a border poll people would be asking: how might this affect me and my family; will I have to pay for all this health care; will I be worse off?

- It has been said that if the people of Britain were involved in any vote, they would vote to get rid of the North, it's just a nuisance to them. But the truth is that if you held an all-Ireland vote, there is a strong possibility that the vast majority of the people in the 26 Counties wouldn't want the North either, because of their fears – whether regarding potential loyalist violence or the whole economic strain. 'We would like it – but not just yet.' So we're maybe deluding ourselves in thinking that if we ever get a 51% vote in the North for unity that the Free State will welcome us all with open arms. What if the Free State turns round and says: 'Hold on, youse can vote all youse want, but we will be taking our own vote on this ourselves.'

- I have relatives who vote solidly for Sinn Féin, at every election. But when I asked them one time if they would vote for a united Ireland not one of them said they would, because they have mortgages to pay, they don't want to have to pay for their kids' second level education. The whole economic structure down there is in a far worse state that we are in. Turkeys don't vote for Christmas. They don't want it.

- If a border vote was taken now, you're right, it would not succeed. We have a lot to learn from Alex Salmond in Scotland. When he won the right to hold their vote he knew not to hold it right away, he knew he had to convince the Scottish people that they could survive independently, that they would be better off. And

he knew that he couldn't do that overnight. He needed at least a four-year period. We would have to do the same thing. We would have to work on how we convince people, the Catholic community as much as the Protestant community.

- One of the things the Protestant working class have said is that we [republicans] argue the case that as working-class guys we would all be better off together in a bigger working-class entity in a united Ireland. And they say, well, actually, we're already part of an *even bigger* working-class group, which is with Britain, which gives us even more clout. Our working-class interests, they argue, would actually be *diminished* within a united Ireland, whereas our working-class hopes and aspirations are better served by remaining with Britain. That's what they are arguing.

- But they're represented by conservatives.

- But so are the working-class people in the South.

- I remember being asked, not long after I went into prison: what if the United Kingdom became a socialist republic, why would you want to go into a united Ireland which still had a capitalist system? And I remember thinking: but it's British, I wouldn't want to be that. But at least it started to make me think.

- Aye. Some of us claim that our socialism is far more important than our sense of national identity, but is that true at the end of the day?

- Could I throw in one final point. While certain people within the republican community continue with this idea of labelling and demonising people who disagree with what is currently being promoted by Sinn Féin, there will never be republican unity. What is so wrong with the concept of dissent? People should be *encouraged* to dissent. If dissent was permitted, even encouraged, things might improve between the different republican positions. If it isn't, I foresee only more and more internal conflict ahead of us all.

What is so wrong with the concept of dissent? People should be encouraged to dissent. If dissent was permitted, even encouraged, things might improve between the different republican positions.

- Yes, the vacuum which exists, and which D_____ referred to earlier, can only be removed by dialogue and debate.

Discussion 2

This discussion involved the members of the James Connolly Society Béal Feirste, one of whom had also participated in the main discussion.

- For this discussion, I would ask people to explore the question of armed struggle – both its use and its non-use – in the pursuit of Irish Republican goals.
- The phrase ‘armed struggle’ has a very broad meaning. It can be anything from total all-out warfare to a number of armed actions over a specific period. Basically, armed struggle is a tool which is used to manipulate the political arena. We also have to remember that *revolutionary* Irish republicans have always been in a minority within republicanism. I mean, the 1916 Rising was totally against public opinion. If revolutions were put to public opinion there would never have been a shot fired in 1916. They were in a minority after Partition, when you had the Free State executing 77 republican POWs. They were in a minority in the thirties and forties and during the fifties campaign. They were in a minority in the seventies–nineties campaign. They are still in a minority now. But – is armed struggle justified? Well, while Britain remains the occupying power in this part of our country, it can never be less justified than at any other time in our history.

***[Revolutionary Irish republicans] have always been in a minority....
If revolutions were put to public opinion there would never have been a shot fired in 1916.***

- Aside from the question of whether or not it is justified, there is the question as to whether or not it is effective. I.e. does it take republicans *towards* their goals or is it possible, as some would contend, that it actually assists the State in preventing republican goals from being realised? It is questions like that which I would like us to discuss.
- You can’t really make a judgement on its overall effectiveness, you have to take it in the context of what is happening politically at any particular time. The fifties’ border campaign wasn’t particularly effective, but it kept the flame going, kept the aspiration alive of a 32-county socialist republic. And I think again, coming into the sixties, the Civil Rights campaign was put down by the use of force and the only way to respond to that was with force.
- But in moving from Civil Rights agitation to an armed struggle for a united Ireland did the republican movement lose something that it might have gained through mass mobilisation?
- I would say that the armed struggle has brought us to where we are at the

minute, which is that we are now treated as equals, or as close to equals as we've ever been. Although in saying that I mean equals in a failed state. And while this equality is far short of what republicans are looking for, would mass walking on the streets have ever got us to this position? I don't think it would have, I think it was the armed struggle which got us to where we are now.

- I totally dispute the premise that we have equality. We don't. What we have is parity of oppression, but not parity of esteem. All we have done through the IRA's campaign is ensure that *everybody* suffers the same police state. It is not as devoted to only oppressing Fenians as it once did – but everybody. We still live under all the temporary laws that have been there almost a century. Diplock courts. Internment. You can rhyme off a whole list of them. Armed struggle is as legitimate – or as illegitimate – as sending young lads and young women over to Afghanistan to kill a few Afghans, or to Libya to kill a few Libyans, or Iraq or anywhere else. Does it work? Of course it works! And the height of irony is that some of the people who now sit and tell us that it doesn't work, only have a political voice because *they* were involved in armed struggle. Would anybody in positions of power have listened to Gerry Adams or Gerry Kelly if they hadn't thought they had an influence over the IRA? So yes, of course it works. And if you'd like confirmation of that, the Sinn Féin leadership and journalists like Barney Rowan only want to talk to those 'dissidents' who support armed struggle; there is nobody who has come to the James Connolly Society, or the 1916 Societies, to say: listen, we want to hear your arguments, your analysis.

Does it work? Of course it works! And the height of irony is that some of the people who now sit and tell us that it doesn't work, only have a political voice because they were involved in armed struggle.

- And the media continually make the assumption that all 'dissidents' are of the same mind. I did an interview with the BBC, and the first question the interviewer asked was: 'Okay, what is it you want through killing people and blowing places up?' I said, 'I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about.' I said, 'I will tell you what I want as an Irish Republican: I want the democratisation of Ireland to begin with.' Judging by the media response alone, the killing of Ronan Kerr hit a button that no amount of marching on the streets by us will ever hit – and why shouldn't people go down that route? So, yes, armed struggle has been proven to work, and there will be armed actions so long as there are contradictions within this state which cannot be resolved democratically. And the chief contradiction is the continued existence of Partition. However, personally, I am no longer in favour of armed struggle.

- What happened when the BBC realised you weren't in favour of armed struggle?

- Well, they said: ‘But you were in jail for killing somebody?’ And I said, ‘Yes, and the biggest battle I have had, and I fight with it day and daily, is around the morality of armed struggle.’ Unfortunately for me I had the misfortune of reading a copy of a lecture a prominent Sinn Féin leader delivered in Cage 9 about the morality of armed struggle. And it was one of the most impressive documents that I had ever read in my life. And I believed his argument. I fully accepted that when a people are faced with overwhelming oppression, then you have a moral responsibility to look to the use of force to fight against that oppression. I don’t like seeing people having to suffer or lose their lives, but I accept that the type of world we live in leads people to the position where they often have no choice. But, and I say this as somebody who was in the IRA, I now believe that armed struggle is a last resort, and should only be used when there is absolutely no other alternative.

- Would you condemn it?

- No, far from it! It is unfortunately an historical occurrence that will carry on being repeated.

- After the two squaddies were killed in Antrim I listened to one of their parents talking on TV about the brutal, inhuman republicans who slaughtered their son at Massereene, just as he was on the eve of going to Afghanistan. I wonder how they would have felt if the British Army had ordered their son to slaughter poor Afghans, who had never done anything against their family in their entire lives. Afghan parents, and Irish parents, will grieve every bit as much as *they* will when they lose loved ones. I am totally opposed to armed struggle, I am totally opposed to anybody losing their life. But we live in a state where the use of violence is part and parcel of the politics of that state.

- Someone recently asked us: has armed struggle got us any further forward than we were at Sunningdale?† I don’t think it has. All those who died, or spent time in jail, did so for nothing. Because we have settled for ‘Sunningdale Mark II’.

- I can understand that, but it’s not true. What is *different* between accepting Sunningdale in 1974 and accepting the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, is that 1974 didn’t offer a political career for senior Sinn Féin members in an Executive. To me, that’s what the intervening period was all about. And, whether you like it or not, that in itself is a validation that armed struggle gets you political results.

- I think the armed struggle, if it had’ve been pushed on could have got us a bit more. I think the IRA ceasefire was called far too soon. They didn’t actually

† The Sunningdale Agreement was the first attempt to establish a power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive and a cross-border Council of Ireland. The Agreement was signed at the Civil Service College in Sunningdale, Berkshire, on 9 December 1973. Unionist opposition, and a loyalist general strike caused the collapse of the Executive in May 1974.

have to do too much, just the threat of the odd bomb would have been enough to push things on a bit more.

- Yes, I too think we finished the war prematurely. I said to the other [discussion] group that I believe that the IRA had at last got it right: the fight wasn't here, the fight was in England, and directed at where it always hurts them: in their purse. And when the Chinese banking sector said that they were going to pull out if there was one more bomb, that was a major, major development. Those one or two bombs at Canary Wharf threw the British establishment into more disarray than all the bombs put into the town here [Belfast]. So I think the IRA eventually got it right, and I was dumbfounded that we never produced another bomb after that, for I think we could have got far further than we are now.
- See the likes of Baltic Exchange†, to my knowledge there was fourteen major financial companies pulled out of England because of that bomb.
- When I told a senior republican that I believed the war could have been continued he said, 'But what would that have gained us, in terms of getting us round the table?' But who the f**k wanted round the table! We wanted the Brits to say they were leaving!
- But what do you think would have been gained if the armed struggle had gone on longer? What were the goals that armed struggle could have brought closer?
- A Declaration of Intent. That would have completely changed the political landscape in this country. Even if the time-scale was something akin to Hong Kong.
- That journalist asked me: 'Okay, say you got your all-Ireland referendum and the Irish people said "no", what would you do?' And I said, 'Well, I would like to think that I would have the energy to carry on campaigning to change their opinion through democratic means. But, bottom line, if the Irish people said we don't want the 6-Counties as part of our republic, I would emigrate.'
- I think, if we can believe the alleged choreography of it, that the Brits came forward and said: 'We are ready to talk, what do youse want?' Do we take it that that's what was said? If it was, it's obvious then that they were looking for a way out. Our problem is that republicans were out-negotiated, and were left with a lot less than what could have been agreed. But it was the armed struggle which got us to the stage where the Brits had to negotiate. Could we get there again?

A Declaration of Intent would have completely changed the political landscape in this country.

† On 10 April 1992 the Baltic Exchange's offices in the City of London were extensively damaged by an IRA bomb. Three people were killed and 91 people injured. It has been claimed that the bomb caused £800 million worth of damage, £200 million more than the total damage caused by the 10,000 explosions which had occurred during the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

- I'm not so sure that's the way of it. It is hotly debated as to whether Martin McGuinness sent a message to the Brits saying: 'The war is over, help us end it', or whether it was the Brits who were of that mind.† I am more and more convinced that it was the former – that the war is over, help us end it.
- I don't think more bombs would have gained us any more. At some stage you have to call a halt to any campaign, because of sitting down around a table. The problem is that those who were negotiating on our behalf were outmanoeuvred by the Brits. The Brits never moved one inch from their position. They came out with the Principle of Consent, which allows Britain to remain in the 6-Counties.
- In terms of *present-day* armed actions, how do you feel they impact on ultimate republican goals? Do they just, as was said earlier, 'keep the flame alive', or do you think they also advance – or perhaps hinder – republican objectives?
- If you look at Massereene, when two squaddies were shot dead on the eve of going to Afghanistan. Now, most people at the time had assumed that all British soldiers had departed; they were surprised to learn that there were 5500 still here. So what did that armed action do at that stage? It focused people's attentions on: they haven't gone away, you know – they're still here. So, is there a time and a place for it? Yes. In that particular instance it had a political impact.
- Unfortunately it cost two lives to show people that the Brits were still here.
- But in terms of promoting the republican ideal among the wider population, not just among the Northern Catholic and Protestant communities but right across the island, as you say there were two things came out of Massereene. On the one hand it alerted the world to the fact that the British Army was still here. On the other hand two people lost their lives. But *which* of those two outcomes do you feel would have had the stronger impact on the willingness of the general population to embrace republican ideals?
- Our country is being held by force of arms, and we have the right to resist that force of arms with *our* force of arms.
- Yes, that might be the historical rationale for armed struggle, but the armed struggle is surely directed towards the attainment of specific republican goals. And to *fully* realise those goals you will have to bring on board a large section of the Irish people, and I just wondered how republicans handle the contradiction which exists. Armed struggle might certainly 'keep the flame alive' among republicans, but on the other hand, as has already been acknowledged, the vast majority of the Irish people are opposed to violence. So what impact will armed actions have in terms of bringing them on board the republican project?

† According to journalist Brian Rowan the words attributed to McGuinness came not from him, but out of the middle of the so-called 'back-channel' and was designed to achieve negotiations between the British and the IRA. 'It was many years after 1993 before [mediator] Denis Bradley finally admitted the true origin of the message.' (Rowan, eamonmallie.com, 01.01.12)

- First of all, you're starting from completely the wrong premise. You refer to the 'Irish people', but you need to be talking about that section of the Irish people who happen to live in the occupied 6-Counties, and whether armed struggle does, or does not, bring *them* along. It is clear to me that republican sentiment, not just in the 6-Counties but right throughout Ireland, accepts that the contradictions created by 'perfidious Albion' will sooner or later result in people losing their lives. It is better if that means British soldiers or members of the British police rather than Irish republicans. That's unfortunately the reality on the ground. If I am wrong, and people, particularly people in positions of power in the British administration, think I am wrong, then call my bluff, and end it once and for all. Have a one-Ireland, one-vote, 32-county referendum, and allow people to say that they don't want anything to do with this smelly 6-Counties in the North. Just allow it to happen once, and agree to abide by the result – for on the one occasion when it did happen†, the British refused to abide by the outcome, and they subsequently used physical force to get what *they* wanted. So, why should we not use force to get what *we* want?

- In relation to the question of armed struggle. . . Yes, in my opinion, as much as I think it was a waste of human life, for both the two young sappers and Constables Carroll and Kerr, as well as the hardship that it has so far caused the families of all those republicans who have been arrested, yes, but it had the desired political effect that armed republicans wanted it to have. And that will continue to be the case so long as the underlying contradiction of Partition cannot be addressed by political or constitutional methods. I mean, every one of us round this table has tried at some point to legally and constitutionally address the harassment we get day and daily from the occupying forces here. And we have failed totally.

- Force is still being used against republicans by the state. The harassment of republicans is a daily occurrence, it has never stopped. Me and F____ will shortly be getting threw into jail, for not paying a £400 fine for sitting on the Ardoyne Road. We're told that we have the democratic right to protest. But as soon as we do it we get fined or told we're going to jail. We're told that the courts will work in a non-biased fashion, and the key principle of that is that everybody is entitled to the presumption of innocence until guilt, and to be tried by a panel of their peers. None of us will ever go before a jury court. We'll be the same as Colin Duffy and Brian Shivers: we'll be stuck up before a Diplock Court where the rules of justice are just turned on their head, where *you* have to prove your innocence as opposed to *them* having to prove your guilt. So, with that as a backdrop then, yes, armed struggle will always work.

† The 1918 general election was the last occasion on which the entire island of Ireland voted in a single election held on the one day. Sinn Féin won 73 out of 105 Irish seats in the Westminster parliament. Rather than sit at Westminster Sinn Féin chose to assemble as a revolutionary parliament – *Dáil Éireann* – which was declared illegal by the British government.

Discussion 3

The following opinions were expressed during a discussion with republican community activists from North Belfast.

- Basically, what I would ask you to discuss is the use of armed struggle, particularly at the present time, as a means of advancing Irish republican goals.
- I think some people have a very simplistic analysis: the Brits are invaders who will only be kicked out through armed struggle – and it’s as simple as that. It’s as if there’s an absolute principle at work which can’t be questioned, and which isn’t impacted upon by changing circumstances. If you listen to the rhetoric of some of the armed groups, it’s like a throwback to 1970 or 1971. It’s as if they live in some sort of time-bubble, and nothing has changed since then.

If you listen to the rhetoric of some of the armed groups, it’s like a throwback to 1970 or 1971. It’s as if they live in some sort of time-bubble, and nothing has changed since then.

- I remember having a discussion with a guy who believed that a campaign of violence could only be justified if the society you were trying to achieve was going to be *fundamentally different* from the one you were living in. In his case, his goal was a socialist republic which would end capitalism in Ireland. But the global changes which took place following the collapse of Communism led him to believe that it was highly unlikely that a truly socialist society could be created in Ireland and hence there was no justification for waging an armed struggle for a goal which was no longer attainable.
- People repeatedly come out with this mantra: ‘We will fight on until we achieve a 32-county socialist republic.’ But do they ever sit down and ask themselves exactly *how* they intend to achieve it? How do they factor in the unionists? Or even the Irish people, who might like the idea of a 32-county republic – but a *socialist* one? Then you have the British, the EU and America – will they just sit idly by while a radical socialist set-up is established in Ireland?
- I agree. There are fundamental questions which don’t seem to get asked. When these people talk about ‘establishing a socialist republic’, just *who* is actually going to be doing the establishing? Is it they themselves? Certainly a few give the impression that because they were involved in armed actions this gives them a right to hold power of some kind. And, as was just said, how does the socialist republic actually come about? Do these people march in and take over the Dáil on behalf of the Irish working class? Or do they put themselves forward for election? And what if the first government the Irish people vote for in a new

united Ireland doesn't want anything to do with socialism? Do these groups then resume their armed struggle, only this time targeting Dublin?

- There are also emotional factors at work, on different levels. First of all, in the broad nationalist sense that, 'the Brits should never have been in Ireland and we have to get rid of them – and that's it!' The old Pearse thing: 'Ireland unfree shall never be at peace,' and everything that comes with that: the sacrifice of past generations, the martyrs. . . But emotional too on a personal level. Many people invested their lives in the struggle, they put their families to the wall, they put themselves to the wall. They spent huge amounts of time in prison, they maybe took lives – and they cannot come to terms with the way the struggle ended. They wonder what it was all for at the end of the day. They don't want to believe that everything they sacrificed for the armed struggle was pointless, so they continue with it, even though I am convinced that most of them realise it is futile.
- Now, I know there are many people who don't like the road Sinn Féin has taken, and I respect people's right to say so. I would be fair to anyone who I felt was being genuine, even if I disagreed with their analysis. But I also know a thug or a criminal when I see one, and many of us working on the ground look at the calibre of some of the people who are being attracted to these groups, and we feel that what is happening is dangerous for our communities. The truth of the matter is that members of these groups are involved in criminality, and are well-known to have been involved in criminality, yet they are now active in these groups. And those individuals who are either providing political leadership to these groups or are being ambivalent about their actions, have a responsibility for what these groups get involved in. Yet it just seems to me that they are ignoring that responsibility.
- Some people claim that they never wanted Sinn Féin to enter into negotiations, because the Brits are past-masters at deception and manipulation – they just want the Brits to give a Declaration of Intent [to depart at some date in the future]. Now, say there *was* such a Declaration – and I am assuming that no-one is naive enough or rash enough to demand that the Brits leave overnight – in the interim period which followed there would have to be many aspects thrashed out: changes to facilitate the incorporation of one million unionists; new economic, educational and health structures to cover the entire island; clarification as to the position of the Catholic and Protestant churches. . . the list is endless. And how would all this be done? *Through negotiations*. And inevitably the process of building a new nation would be a very slow and ponderous process. And British withdrawal wouldn't be finalised until those negotiations had been satisfactorily concluded. The irony is that this whole process would probably be *little different*, either in its duration or in its agenda, from the process of post-conflict accommodation we are *currently* engaged in. To me, the reason why so many people in the Republican movement supported the peace process was because they could see

that armed struggle could not take republicans any further, and that to actually progress things in any meaningful way we had to get round the negotiating table with the British and the Unionists, to see if we could develop a different path, one which *could* ultimately lead to Irish independence.

- I hear all this talk about ‘socialism’, and yet, apart from a few individuals who I know are genuinely involved in community action, I see almost nothing in terms of social activism from many of these people. Most of their energy is being spent, not even attacking the British state, but in attacking Sinn Féin, calling them traitors, or dupes of the British. The irony is that it stops Sinn Féin from being held to account over the social and economic decisions they make at Stormont. People are dissatisfied by the lack of socio-economic progress in their areas, and grassroots pressure should be put on Sinn Féin and the other political parties to speed up progress, but that is not happening, because the attacks directed against Sinn Féin by these groups have actually made people more defensive towards Sinn Féin rather than more critical of them. People are saying: ‘I’ll tell you what, Sinn Féin might have their problems, but see that other crew? The direction they’ll take us leads nowhere; it’s a cul-de-sac.’ I think we are still at the stage of bedding down the peace process, and by and large people in these communities support that, even if they can see all the contradictions. People are not happy that things are not being delivered on the ground, in terms of their socio-economic conditions, but they look at the alternatives and ask: ‘Well, who *is* going to deliver this for us? The 32-County Sovereignty Movement? Republican Sinn Féin?’

- And these people are constantly challenging community activists who are trying to do a bit of good on the ground. The level that it has descended to is that you cannot even have a proper conversation about people’s everyday needs – the same people on whose behalf these groups claim to be fighting.

The level it has descended to is that you cannot even have a proper conversation about people’s everyday needs – the same people on whose behalf these groups claim to be fighting.

- We have been engaging with the Protestant working class for the past ten years or so. It’s extremely difficult stuff, but one of the things they constantly bring up is their fear of the armed groups. They realise that these groups don’t haven’t the capacity to undermine the Union, but there is a fear of them stirring up a renewed sectarian conflict. Say they were to shoot a loyalist, other loyalists might reply in kind – and then where will that take us all?

- I do have respect for some of the people you have engaged in debate for these pamphlets, and I respect their views. But alongside those republicans who sincerely articulate their views, we see the emergence of armed groups who have

the capacity to do immense damage to our communities. And nobody is taking responsibility for how these groups behave. If you get into a row with anyone four men can arrive at your door and tell you to present yourself to be shot. And things can turn really vicious: one guy got his head chopped off with a spade! These things are happening.

- I heard of one incident where members of one of these groups arrived at the home of the family of a dead volunteer at midnight and tried to smash their way in – and all because they had taken the side of someone who had a grievance against the family. They never bothered to hear the family’s side of the story and when they did they realised they had made a mistake and apologised. But the family were left extremely traumatised.
- They will call you a tout, a traitor, if you try to engage with the police. But what we are trying to do is to hold all statutory agencies, including the police, to account for the delivery of services on the ground in our communities. If crime and anti-social behaviour is undermining the quality of life in our communities, and the police aren’t doing anything about it, what are we supposed to do? Do you say we can’t go near them because they are the cops? As someone said: ‘When a person in our community comes to us with a serious problem, who do we call? Ghostbusters?’ The only answer these groups have is to shoot people, but that has been tried over the years and never got rid of the problems. The only way to proceed is to ask people in the community what they want, and we know that while people still have a lack of trust in the cops they nevertheless want us to engage with them. We have to hold the cops to account.
- The emphasis so far has been on pointing the finger at Sinn Féin, or at Republicans who decided that compromise was the best way forward. I think the onus now needs to be on these groups. They should be asked: ‘Okay, if we’ve got it so wrong, explain to us how you people are going to achieve your objectives. We don’t want to hear about the Brits and what they did in Ireland. We know all about that. We know all about Imperialism, Partition, discrimination. . . . Starting from where we’re at *now*, tell us how you’re actually going to further your objectives, particularly through armed struggle. I believe that dissent, debate, and political opposition is healthy. I think Sinn Féin do need to be challenged over different things. But I wish that these groups would call a halt – even temporarily – to their questioning of Sinn Féin’s position and engage in a serious analysis of their *own* positions.
- The saddest part to me is not just the needless loss of life, but when I think of all the young people who are being led by the nose and will inevitably end up in jail, with their futures destroyed. And it’s all so futile. And what makes it worse is that I believe that many in the political leadership of these groups know rightly that these armed actions are futile, but either haven’t the courage to, or don’t know how to, pull back from the path they have embarked upon.

The personal cost of armed struggle

Subsequent to the discussions some of the participants remarked that although they had explored the political and tactical aspects of armed struggle, there was an important aspect which had not been addressed: its impact on people's lives. Not only on those who were killed or left bereaved by armed actions but those who were directly engaged in carrying them out. As some of the participants (and their family members) had previously explored this aspect in discussions for other pamphlets, it was suggested that a selection of quotes from those publications should be included here, to offset this omission.

- I remember one day my da said to me: 'If they kill you, I'll bury you. But if you go to prison I'll not come anywhere near you.' And neither he did. He didn't agree at all with what I was doing. His attitude was: you have one life, live it. I remember at the graveside during a relative's funeral, he said: 'This is all you get at the end of it, kid. What the f**k do you want to go to jail for, what do you want to die for?' That was his attitude and he tried to push that on us. But it didn't work, I think there were five of us went to prison.

- I started to see too many mistakes being made. Something like strapping somebody to a bomb and telling them to drive to a checkpoint! No way can that be right! There were some things like that which made you think: does the end really justify the means? Whether or not people want to admit it openly I think everybody went through a questioning process. Especially if you were doing a long time [in jail] you eventually began to ask yourself: what did I achieve by doing what I did? With hindsight, it's terrible when you think about the amount of people killed and what was done... including some of the things I myself was involved in. Some people were genuinely committed, but for others it was armed struggle at all costs. I think anybody who came through jail sooner or later asks themselves: what was the worth of it, what was the aim of it?

There were some things like that which made you think: does the end really justify the means? You eventually began to ask yourself: what did I achieve by doing what I did?

- There are times when I am not against the use of violence by those who are oppressed – but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't work for an end to conflict. In fact, I think it's critical that we do so. I think we need to learn how violence affects us, not only collectively but as individuals. I have seen good human beings, who started off in 1969 not knowing how to use a gun, yet felt a need to respond

to the actions of the state but who then in turn became destroyed by their use of violence. I have seen caring fathers, caring sons, become people who, because they felt that their cause justified it, resorted to violence and ultimately enjoyed killing. People change through violence, and begin to mirror their oppressors.

- I did a life sentence, for killing people and other things, and my nephew and I were once talking about the latest British Army deaths in Iraq and I said: ‘Look, he has a mother and father and family. No matter how I looked at a British soldier, whether I considered him a legitimate target or what, he had a mother and father, and maybe brother and sister, and it’s not just him that you hurt, it’s the whole family.’ You need to stress the seriousness of what people get involved in.

- Many of today’s young people have a romanticised view – they think you become a ‘freedom fighter’ and you do such and such and have high stature in the community. They don’t realise that in the process some of your mates have been killed, family have been killed, people on the other side have been killed. We need to get them to understand the dehumanisation which went on.

Many of today’s young people have a romanticised view [of the armed struggle]. We need to get them to understand the dehumanisation which went on.

- I will always deeply regret killing [six people in a bomb attack] and all the hurt and suffering I caused their families. It’s something I still live with yet. I can’t turn back the clock; I did it, and although it wasn’t my intention that’s still no excuse for it. I gave a warning, 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 if we kept up the pressure, it was as straightforward as that.

- You were always mindful of what your family was going through, even making up parcels; at one time there was four of us in jail, and my mother was constantly asking if we had warm socks and warm underwear. But it always played on your mind and even now 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, ’cause she was the one who suffered most. We were in there and it was like a family, a second family to 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.

- I joined the movement at about sixteen, because at that time things were hot and heavy in Ballymurphy – Brits coming in, breaking into your house, kicking doors down, pulling your brothers out. I can remember my ma going through a hard time worrying about all my brothers, as well as the Brits coming to the

door and saying: 'We're going to get your other son too and bring him home in a box.' It deteriorated my mum in a way because she knew at the back of her mind that one day she actually might get one of us back in a box. Then in 1975 I went into prison and my mum died after taking an overdose. She just couldn't handle it any more, any more pressure. That really hit me hard.

Mothers and wives had to struggle through their own personal traumas. . .

- My brother is a bit headstrong and my mother was glad the night he was caught and got eight years, because she felt he was otherwise going to get killed. And when he was in jail, it was the first proper night's sleep she actually had.
- I can remember right from the start of the Troubles and my sons were just coming up to an age when they could have got involved in the organisations. But I never thought that anything would ever happen to any of mine. Then one of them got a life sentence. I was heartbroken but at the same time in a way I was proud of him because he thought he was doing something for his country. But when I went up to see him in prison I had to tranquillise myself, because I couldn't accept where he was and the length of time that he was going to be away from me. To me, it was as if he had died. I went through a very bad time. I actually done a life sentence along with him. Even when I was putting out dinner plates for the other children I was putting a plate out for him too.
- Nobody knows what we went through; it was a constant strain. I was running to three prisons at the same time. I was running up to the Crumlin Road, to Long Kesh and to Magilligan. And there were nights when I knelt at the side of my bed and asked God to give me the strength to get through another day.

There were nights when I knelt at the side of my bed and asked God to give me the strength to get through another day.

- Now, I'll tell you the God's honest truth. I would have said to my sons: 'Don't let anyone ever come to my door and tell me youse have shot anybody. I'll have to live with it if somebody comes and tells me youse have been shot, but don't ever youse shoot anybody, I don't want that.' I'm very strong in my faith, and I don't believe in killing people, and I don't care who or what they are.
- Sometimes I think many of the younger generation think they have missed out. They imagine the conflict was something exciting. The reality is that they have had a lucky escape, for there is nothing romantic about going to jail, nothing romantic about the conflict. Yes, the prisoners might have had a close camaraderie and had some laughs inside, but most of the time it was tough going and many young men spent most of their youth inside. And that is now lost to them, it will never be regained. Yet the kids of today don't see this side of it; they think it must have been wonderful.

- I would ask young people nowadays to think of what they are putting their mothers and fathers through. We have to suffer for what they do. When I think of the nights we sat here in fear. . . I wouldn't like to go through it all again.
- Sometimes the story of the Troubles is a totally male-dominated one. Women played their own role throughout it all, and in many respects had it worse than what the men did, because the women had to cope with everyday life and try to treat everything as normal. Well, it wasn't normal. It's not normal to have to go on a visit to your husband or son in jail. It's not normal to live year after year in the middle of a conflict. And it's a lonely life. There's many a night you're lying in bed and you wonder: is this what's in front of me?

And it clearly had an impact on the children . . .

Whenever he did get out of jail it was dead weird in our house, because I wasn't used to a man being in the house with my mummy. And whenever he came home, like, he sort of took over; he made rules up and all and I wasn't used to it. I used to be really close to my mummy, and sometimes slept in her bed, and he just came and took over the bed. I says to my mummy, 'Who's he?' and she went: 'That's your daddy.' And I went: 'But I don't have a daddy.' And she says, 'You do, it's just he was in jail. That's the man you used to go up and visit.' I still don't really like him for coming home.

I grew up actually hating the 'RA', so I did. I didn't like them one bit. Because I felt that *both* sides took my parents away, not just the Brits, for I blamed the 'RA' as well. We had to move down South and live with a complete stranger, and at the time we didn't know why. We had no family life at all, we lost all that, because our ma and da were inside. So I grew up hating the 'RA', and I still do a bit, because at the end of the day they took my ma and da away from me, and I don't care what it was for.

If it all started up again I'd move away... I wouldn't get involved in it, I'd move to England, America, New Zealand – anywhere to get away from it. Especially if I had children there's no way I would want them to be affected the way I was. I'd just pack my bags and move the very next day it all started up again – and I wouldn't come back until it was over.

The quotes in this section come from the following Island Pamphlets, which can be downloaded from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications/>

Pamphlet No. 27, *Seeds of Hope, A joint exploration by Republican and Loyalist ex-prisoners*

Pamphlet No. 31, *Left in Limbo, The experience of Republican prisoners' children*

Pamphlet No. 57, *Reflections on Violence, A cross-cultural exploration of the N. Ireland conflict*

Pamphlet No. 74, *Still in Limbo? An exploration by young people from Tar Anall Youth Project*

Pamphlet No. 92, *Preventing a return to conflict, A discussion by ex-combatants*

Pamphlet No. 95, *'Time stands still', The forgotten story of prisoners' families*