11. community politics in northern ireland

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The speaker at the meeting on 6 June 1997 was the Irish writer and journalist, Fionnuala O'Connor who spoke about the role of community groups in the politics of Northern Ireland. Her talk took place at a critical period in Northern Ireland politics between the break-down of the earlier IRA ceasefire with the Canary Wharf bombing in February 1996, and the renewed ceasefire announced in July 1997.

Present at the meeting were: Christina Arber, John Brierley, Howard Clark, Annie Harrison, Albert Hunt, Bob Overy, Ruth Overy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank, Andrew Rigby.

Presentation - Fionnuala O'Connor [2]

Fionnuala said her starting point in this talk would be what she understood to be Bob's proposition during the early period of the Troubles when he was working in Belfast, namely that people from the Falls and the Shankill needed to get together and cut out the middle man, and particularly to cut out any governmental attempt to direct politics. She would trace what she as a journalist had seen of the development of community groups into community politics and what that had done over the years to the wider politics of districts. From the other end, she would trace the attempts of the political system to control and in some cases to try to absorb community groups and community politics. Basically what she had seen at various phases was people in the most troubled parts of Northern Ireland, namely working class areas, which were also the areas of highest unemployment, trying to develop some kind of bottom up politics - even if they often didn't call it that. Most of the attempts had gone astray from the original notions people had of them, and had clashed with intermittent attempts by government to shape and direct them.

She wanted to make clear at the outset that the terms Catholic and Protestant in the Northern Ireland context should not be taken in a narrow sense. On the Catholic side, there were groups in which nobody had a kind word to say for their religion or would be anything but scabrous about the Church institution. And on the Protestant side there were many people who had never had any fondness for, or interest in, the reformed faith or theological debates. Catholic and Protestant were labels. We had to make do with them because they were the only labels we had. Moreover they did still apply to vast swathes of the population. However little many people had to do with the Church they were baptised into and which their parents might still go to on Sundays, the majority were still bound by family loyalties and communal ties to one or other group.

Groups working under great pressure in Northern Ireland had provided a dynamic laboratory for producing and testing all sorts of ideas. People's ideologies had been tested in the most direct way, challenging pacifists, for example, to decide how their pacifism was to be maintained when someone was threatening them with a gun. In fact the term pacifism was not used now in a public way by anyone still involved in Northern Ireland politics because it was such a problematic term from the start.

The term 'community worker' was also a loaded one, often used with derision. Most often it was taken to mean a cosmeticised former para-military. People either thought of them as having risked everything for the community, or as unvarnished murderers. But in the areas where they operated, people for the most part believed that what they were doing now was far better than what they had been doing before - whether or not they approved of what they did before. There were also people who were cynical about this development. Gusty Spence, one of the earliest of the loyalist para-militaries, was an example on the Protestant side of someone who had changed along the way and had become something of a father figure of today's loyalist fringe politics - a member of probably the most pragmatic, and certainly the most forward-thinking, of any grouping on the unionist side. Appropriately he was chosen to announce the loyalist ceasefire.

Generally, the groups that were most explicit about trying to form a community politics had been the shortest lived. The Peace People sprang to mind here. She was a young journalist at the beginning of her career when they had emerged. The media in Dublin at the time was tired of the story in Belfast and the word went out that the Peace People was a good story and was to be treated with due respect. However, from early on it was obvious that it had

to be examined in a more critical way. For a week or so it looked as though it represented an emotional outburst against the violence. But up close it had a wide and ambitious agenda and was developing a philosophy, largely the product of an ex-journalist Ciaran McKeown. He began to push very early for the idea that the Peace People should be about community politics and people power. He was saying this in the first couple of weeks to the two women whose emotional power people saw manifested on their screens in the rallies and marches. For some time after that there were three things going on with the Peace People: the big public outpouring of all kinds of good emotions; a lot of public gooiness and icky sound-bite stuff which the media loved but which had very little substance; and finally the attempt to develop something more deep-rooted within the community.

In Ciaran's wildest political dreams, the last was something that would replace the existing political system, and certainly replace all the old-time politicians who had led Northern Ireland into such an appalling situation. There was much truth in what he said, and much that was noble in what he proposed. And if the movement, like all such movements, was full of intrigue and personal interplay and overheated melodrama, none of it was too important when you looked back. However, the suggestion that there could be a different kind of politics was one that the republican para-militaries and the republican movement, and in time also the loyalist para-militaries, began to work on.

A worrying feature at the present time, after more than 25 years of the Troubles, was the imbalance in the level of organisation and involvement between Catholic and Protestant working class communities. In the former, and more widely in the nationalist community, people had been politicised to a greater or lesser extent. They had become involved either in the development of a community, or in a personal way by getting education and making a place for themselves in a sometimes modest, sometimes not so modest, middle class.

The Catholic community had developed political machines, namely the SDLP and Sinn Fein. The SDLP had been a rusty machine for a long time and existed largely in the person of John Hume; people who voted for it did not demand much more of it than a public face and a public voice. Sinn Fein was different. It had changed and was still changing. It absorbed a lot of people over the years who were, or had been, in the IRA. And there were people in it who, all along, were trying to develop the political side of republicanism. There was also a large section of the Catholic community who had never been in either Sinn Fein or the IRA but who talked passionately about the subject the whole time: how the struggle between Sinn Fein and the IRA would end up, how it stood vis-a-vis Unionism and vis-a-vis the British and Irish governments. It was second nature to a lot of Catholics, and had been for a very long time.

On the Protestant side, it was only in the last five or six years that there had been a comparable development - and even then it was largely restricted to a few working class areas - the Shankill and its outposts in East Belfast, a little bit in Derry, and a few other places in Lisburn. It was a small phenomenon by comparison with what had occurred on the Catholic side. Apart from that, the unionist political world comprised a great moribund establishment which had collapsed in on itself at the beginning of the Troubles and ever since had been intent on fighting off the inevitable as it saw it - namely Britain doing the dirty on it, and the risen nationalists supplanting it. The name of the game for the unionist political establishment - divided into two parties with but a single thought - was to delay the inevitable. This had not encouraged people to talk and argue, debate and fight as Catholic families had done. It was unnerving in the last five or six years to hear Protestant friends who had become interested in the new small and thinly based fringe parties saying that it would take another twenty years to achieve a wider politicisation, and get people to think that politics belonged to them in the way that so many Catholics had taken for granted for ten, fifteen, or more years. These Protestant friends worried that they hadn't got that long to get established and that the imbalance meant that there was not the common ground for people to work together across the divide. This unevenness of development was now widely accepted and acknowledged on both sides.

The great thing about the ceasefire period, in the first months especially, was the flowering of debate. A series of conferences took place all across the North in all sorts of venues, from community centres to universities, from church halls to leisure centres. To these came for the first time a vast amalgam of odds and sods - from the paramilitaries, from the community work agencies, hardly-disguised civil servants. There were cops - and definitely robbers! - foreign visitors with doctorates in conflict resolution, not to mention the hacks. You had Swedes, and naturally you had to have a batch of South Africans and Palestinians. It was wonderful, marvellous - not even taking into account the extra-curricular activity which surely must have gone on.

It was great in all sorts of ways. At the simplest level it meant people could sit and talk to each other in wider fora than before, and that they could go into places they had been unable to visit for 25 years, sometimes simply because their own fears prevented them from doing so. Even better, when they did go to these areas, they could

get up and speak, and, better yet, they could say what they felt. It was fading now but the situation could not go back to exactly what it had been before. It was a bit like a gay person coming out, getting half-way out and then losing their nerve. It was impossible for them to go all the way back in again. The people who had gone across the wall to the other area and met friends there - sometimes people they had been meeting covertly for many years in tiny community group settings - were not prepared to go back completely and never come over again.

However, some of them were very scared because they had declared their past paramilitary allegiances and the fact that they still had friends within them. These were things that people had been hiding for years, sometimes with masks and balaclavas. It took a lot of courage for them to reveal themselves in this way. The people who did it best and with the least anxiety were those from both sides who had been in jail together. They were the wall smashers, and the ones who were going to miss most the possibilities for greater openness and freedom of movement across the divide. They were now more likely to meet their friends from the other community in South Africa than in Whiterock. It was a bit like the kids from both communities who were taken away to holiday camps in America and when they returned were in tears for months because they couldn't see the friends they had made unless they could go on another camp the following year.

The false-dawn of the ceasefire - as some people were now beginning to regard it - exposed the gap that needed to be bridged in some way between the levels of development in the two communities. It was here that the wider political world came into the picture. The British government over the last ten years had been trying to do things, such as encouraging integrated education, sometimes for the best of reasons, sometimes for more mixed motives. She and her husband had been involved in setting up a non-sectarian primary school. Some people immediately assumed this was a government sponsored initiative to help dilute the differences between the two communities and traditions in the hope they would come together to provide a middle space which would be neither nationalist nor unionist. It was difficult for her to get involved in something like that while having to write about it as a journalist. You were hoping the government would fund your school, but at the time wondering why it was doing so.

There were added difficulties in seeing the community work field whole. First, you had to figure out whether the part of it that came from grass-roots organisations was dominated by people who were solely paramilitary in origin or was genuinely a mix of people with all sorts of perspectives. And even where the latter was the case, had the organisation nevertheless become simply a tool of the local para-militaries, or had it developed its own agenda? Almost always it did so because the para-militaries had other work to do. Those who went into community work, like those who went into party politics like Sinn Fein on the councils, had been changed by the experience.

Second, you had to figure out what lay behind government involvement in community-based projects. The government would try to direct the funds they injected towards people they could be sure of rather than the paramilitaries - and in Catholic areas that meant initially the Church. Tussles frequently ensued between the Church and local groups which tended to comprise people whose politics had already led them to taking on the Church in those areas. The Church, meanwhile, had its own problems. Priests had had other things to do, some of them bad, some of them not so bad, and so many had now gone that they were thin on the ground. This had affected the Church's ability to maintain its position in community work.

Third, there was the difficulty of assessing the situation where community relations and community work had come to occupy the same space. This occurred where the government set up bodies with a remit to attempt to bring the communities together and minimise aggression between them. These bodies had gone about this in various ways because those involved had come out of different units of community work, and represented different strands of political thinking. In the early stage when the first Community Relations Commission was set up, there were people involved who thought they could act at arms-length from government and encourage grassroots organisation without putting limits on it. They genuinely tried to encourage independence locally and strong local figures, regardless of their party political allegiance or of how republican they were. It was mainly in the Catholic areas that this development took place at that time.

However, there was a tension from the start between the people who genuinely wanted to encourage local development whatever that should turn out to be and whoever came to the fore in it, and those who were thinking of this as a world in which professionalism should be all, in which you learned conflict-resolution skills, you taught them, and you developed community politics in a way that involved professionals. In its own way this too was aimed at supplanting the political parties - or at least reshaping them.

The latest version of this was the training programmes for politicians. These might be useful where people went in to counsel groups, and got them to talk together in a non-contentious way. But there was a curious and difficult line

to hold because the training programmes originated from and were funded by a government machine the other arms of which were controlling spending on community groups and schemes of various kinds. It was all part of a macro-political project to sponsor talks and oversee what might turn out to be the early stages of negotiations - negotiations in which the government itself would be a major player. This was what was most worrying about the community relations world. It tended to blunt the picture of the British government as the main player in the political field and as having a major responsibility for whatever emerged. The fact that it was simultaneously organising or sponsoring initiatives, at whatever distance, and at the same time encouraging, or allegedly encouraging, another kind of politics, was something you had to be wary of and to regard with a cool eye.

NARP Discussion

Britain's Agenda

Fionnuala said that she started off writing her book[1] thinking that by and large British governments did the best they could in their muddled way - but by the end she was feeling very anti the British government because she found herself thinking of all the occasions when they could have governed and held firm but failed to do so. This was the case in 1974 after they themselves had helped produce the model for a political settlement. Whatever the British government of the day happened to be, she did not think there was one simple reason for staying in Northern Ireland. It was a whole complex of things, but the one that went to the heart of the matter was a dread of leaving a total conflagration. Within that she thought British governments had often behaved very badly, and for much lesser reasons.

Another factor which had affected all British governments in their dealings with Northern Ireland was a fear of destabilising the majority. Labour was easily as vulnerable to this, or even more vulnerable, than the Conservatives. Any British administration depended on the majority to govern in Northern Ireland, most clearly and brutally in the shape of the police. Ninety-three to ninety-six percent of the police were Protestant, and part of the unionist community. In some ways they were becoming separated from it, yet they still came out of it, and if any policeman feared that civil war was coming and that he with his legally-held gun was all that stood between his family and the ravenous republican hordes, he would be behind his own window shooting out rather than holding some embattled line in the middle. That was the big fear that any British government had about a political settlement that might destabilise overnight a vast swathe of the infrastructure.

At Drumcree, perhaps the authorities were afraid of police mutiny. And perhaps they were afraid that to bring in the army would have caused bloodshed. But Catholics watching the situation, and many Protestants too, asked why they hadn't intervened at an earlier stage. Why didn't they prevent the Orange marchers from being constantly reinforced, or take all the other steps they would have done in the case of any nationalist/republican gathering of this kind? One reason may have been that they thought the police would not obey orders. But there were some less charitable explanations. There was a large element of British government machinery, principally in the Intelligence Services, who had their own vested interest in the situation. They screwed up royally, and had done so previously during the Troubles. The spooks who were demobbed at the end of the Cold War had sought to reinvent themselves as anti-terrorist experts but simply weren't up to the task. They had been fighting it out with lots of little turf wars in Britain and they had interests in Northern Ireland and scores to settle.

Military Intelligence - if that was not a contradiction in terms as it often had been in Northern Ireland - were less involved and maybe less to blame in all of this. She didn't think the army had any interest in being there any longer, or had had any such interest for a long time. In the early days it was a useful exercise ground, but they had learned all the lessons they needed to learn long ago. It was boring and it tied them up. She thought there had been more army mutiny, and fragging incidents, than had broken cover - soldiers who had shot themselves or shot officers. There was also the Tory element, and indeed a Labour element too, that just hated bloody Ireland and what it had done to British politics, and did not want to be seen off by what they regarded as ex-thugs or smart-arsed nationalists. They had some vestigial loyalty to unionists in that they saw them as part of the same body politic as themselves.

Decommissioning and the breakdown of the ceasefire

The government's mismanagement of the ceasefire, Fionnuala said, and its ultimate breakdown was due to a mixture of things. Initially it was bad intelligence. They didn't know it was coming. People could smell it on the streets - but they did not know. They were left blind-sided and were then running to catch up. They genuinely weren't sure how real the ceasefire was because they didn't know how it had evolved. It took some time to develop a policy towards it. The policy kept changing and it began to focus on decommissioning as a precondition. And at the beginning it didn't sound as though they really meant that or had thought it out.

Albert recalled being harangued in the middle of Derry by a republican who shouted - 'Just look round you and see who has the guns!' And when you looked round in the main square there was the police with the guns, and the army with the guns. There was a military presence everywhere. Fionnuala responded that the guns you didn't see could blow just as big a hole in you. It was the paramilitaries' greatest asset that they could do their stuff invisibly and thus avoid most of the odium while reaping the advantage of the fact that the visible guns were in the hands of the police and the army.

Nevertheless, Fionnuala said, there were two sides to the decommissioning argument. For the government to have talked as though decommissioning was only about para-military guns, and to have made it the centre and first feature of negotiation, was either a mistake or sprang from a determination not to negotiate. Probably it had to do with Major's dependence in Parliament on the Unionists.

Some of the republicans who had come out and identified themselves during the ceasefire in all kinds of community groups, and who took very big risks politically - who went to Stormont and talked to ministers, who went to conferences and risked being dismissed as sell-outs, and also exposed themselves to loyalist attack - were amongst the angriest with the IRA for the breakdown of the ceasefire. They thought it was largely the British government's fault that the situation had eroded, but there was no doubt who placed the bomb in Canary Wharf. Albert added that friends of his in Derry had rung up in despair the day after the Canary Wharf bombing as it impinged directly on their lives. The police were back on the streets again with guns after having vanished for months and months following the ceasefire.

Fionnuala said this was also the last thing the police themselves had wanted. The disappointment in their faces was striking after Canary Wharf - and it still took several days before they put back on their flak-jackets. Some people suspected that they wanted to hang on to the overtime they had got used to earning during the Troubles - and certainly they had been worried about how they were going to manage if their incomes crashed. Nevertheless nobody wanted the ceasefire to last more than they did - except arguably the people in West Belfast and the Shankill. Even amongst most conspiracy-ridden republicans, you would not find many who believed that the police deliberately sabotaged it. They tried their damnedest to keep it in being - from the people at the top who said 'Don't push on decommissioning' to the people at the bottom who turned blind eyes in umpteen directions.

It was true that there was a whole section of the unionist world which was utterly colonised by police families. They were almost a separate segment now of that society and cut off in a whole lot of ways. There was a tragic side to the situation of the police. They tended to drink far too much, and there was a high incidence of wife-beating, gun suicides and other problems. It appeared from what they and their families said that the principal cause of this behaviour was not fear of IRA attack, on and off duty, but the comparatively high incomes, a fast and hard lifestyle, and the fact that they were increasingly divorced from their own community, to a large extent because of money.

She also thought that part of the reason for the break-down of the ceasefire was that the general level of community politics that had developed in whole areas of the nationalist world, didn't permeate the hermetic little world of militant republicanism. They had a lot of the right language and the buzz-words, and often their people went in and out of community groups. But when it came to the crunch it might be that they still held a militarist view of the world and would do anything rather than split.

Failure to talk to Sinn Fein

Albert said that as long as a British government of whatever colour continued to refuse to talk to Sinn Fein, there could be no progress. Sinn Fein people he knew in and around Derry had been trying to talk for years, but always the British government found excuses for not doing so. The ceasefire had lasted 18 months, yet in that time there had been no move whatsoever to talk to Sinn Fein. There was no simple goodwill on the government side. Much of

what Sinn Fein people were writing was extremely reasonable and worth discussing. They had participated in conferences and meetings where unionists and others were present - but still the government was not willing to talk with them.

Fionnuala said the exception to this government refusal to talk was when Sinn Fein and government officials met individually, something which had been going on for years. This made the official refusal to talk even more bizarre. She wondered about ministers like Michael Ancram whose day-job was to handle at one remove the go-betweens with Sinn Fein and who would go out to functions around the North and run into Sinn Fein councillors and occasionally have conversations with them. What did more alert and intelligent people like Ancram say on returning to their office after such encounters to their civil servants who wouldn't talk to Sinn Fein. Would they say that they thought the Sinn Fein people were for real - or did they even feed back their impressions at all?

However, Sinn Fein too had developed its bureaucracy over the years, its own way of distancing, and dealing with, the real world. At present it was impossible to read what was going on there. The frightening possibility was that we might be witnessing the disintegration of the politicisation and development in the Catholic nationalist community. This made it difficult also for people in community groups who did the best they could with all the members of the group and with their own political development only to discover that the organisation that was the dominant force in their area was not behaving the way they thought it had been.

Community-based politics and government sponsorship

Expanding on her reservations about government sponsorship of community projects, Fionnuala said it seemed to her that the aim was to encourage and build up local groups but simultaneously to direct them towards a kind of politics that did not refer to the clash between unionism and nationalism. There was a praiseworthy attempt to emphasise what the groups had in common, and also an attempt to build up single-issue work - which was what some of the community groups were doing anyway - and an increasing willingness to work within a European context and to look for European funding for projects. But, deliberately, this had very little to do with tackling the issue of how the conflicting unionist and nationalist agendas might be brought together or of where a compromise might lie.

She was wary of this government involvement, not because it was the British government as such and because they had not behaved particularly well in Northern Ireland, though that was an additional element. If it was a question of developing pet projects which were clearly party-political to that government, they should be clearly defined as such. She would feel this way about any government - for instance if she lived in the Republic and the Dublin government was providing sponsorship to various projects. She would want to question what they were at, and would want them to talk about it in Parliament and to define their objectives. She was suspicious of them, and would always be so, because whatever the colour of the government she would assume there were more arms to their involvement than the one she could see. Government in Northern Ireland had been so multi-tentacled that it was hard for one bit to know what another bit was doing. She was not a conspiracy theorist, and had seen far more cock-ups than conspiracies. But she did want to know what was happening in another part of the forest.

Bob said he thought that in Northern Ireland the first wave of community development projects backed by the Community Relations Commission had run up against the political process. The question was where the legitimacy of community representatives lay when they started to clash with the elected politicians. When that clash occurred, the politicians pulled the rug from under the community projects. On this side, too, the government had closed down community projects started in the 1960s and 1970s, especially when they developed a marxist analysis. Fionnuala responded that the curious thing in Northern Ireland was that that had not happened in anything like as neat a way. The oddest groups had survived while others had gone to the wall for no obvious or straightforward political reasons.

Bob said the line he would have taken during his period in Northern Ireland in the 1970s was that through community politics you could build up a different infrastructure and as the old structures withered away you could perhaps arrive at a different solution. A second position would be to combine community politics with an anti-state, anti-government position along anarchist lines, and a third was to combine community politics with republicanism - in other words to see the development of community politics as a way of building up opposition to the British government or of threatening the politicians.

However, there was also the issue of the British government being used as a lever in the situation to try to achieve a peaceful solution. We tended to think in terms of unionists and republicans, but in fact both sides saw the British government as a lever, as did many of those who looked for a peaceful solution rather than being stuck in the old positions. The Civil Rights campaign used the British government as a lever to demand British standards of civil rights in Northern Ireland. The argument was that if it was to be part of the Union, British standards should apply. When things went wrong, and the pogroms started, many Catholics initially welcomed the arrival of British troops to protect them. Within that situation he would still have said - naively - that they should work within community politics, basically following the Civil Rights strategy which was to regard the border as irrelevant. The idea was that if politics could be built up in this way within Northern Ireland, the border would just wither away.

Since then, however, there had been a much more government-dominated process - through the Anglo-Irish agreement, power sharing, the Downing Street Declaration. The aim was to bring pressure to bear on the situation so that the two sides did not fall out too badly or the violence become too severe, and eventually we would stagger through to some kind of solution. That was what the Anglo-Irish agreement was about to a large extent, and the Downing Street declaration. The British Government were saying it had no strategic interest in Northern Ireland - which he believed was the case. At the same time it stated that the government wouldn't do anything until the unionists agreed with it, which was a stupid position. But many Catholics in Northern Ireland were still looking to the British government to sort out the Protestants on their behalf. It seemed to him perfectly legitimate within that concept to develop a community politics strategy, and a community relations strategy, in which the British government would have a role. He was not clear why Fionnuala was so opposed to British government involvement in community politics if she supported the role of the British government in keeping the lid on the situation and not walking away from it.

Fionnuala said it came back to a matter of confidence. She was not opposed per se to the British government being involved in community politics. She was just suspicious. Where they could be involved to the good, that was fine - where people could go ahead and have their own agendas, work on the ground and have all sorts of people involved without the government withdrawing from them and saying - 'We've vetted you again, and we don't like the look of your man there at the back!' She was wary because she saw the government waxing and waning on the macro political front. At some stages they would put a lot of effort into the Anglo-Irish approach, at others they would tear it up. And they would tear it up for the mixture of reasons she had talked about earlier. It seemed at times as though they were following the old strategy which was to maximise the middle ground where coincidentally, by great surprise, there would be no interest in the political clash - where they would boost safe things like integrated education and hope that people would stop bothering them to do something about the difficult things like the policing, keeping the Anglo-Irish process on course, and doing something for real on fair employment legislation.

Bob said the larger strategy which most people in Northern Ireland seemed to be into was to ensure that the British government went carefully since everyone knew that they would go. Fionnuala said she was not so sure they would or that they should do so, except perhaps over a very long period. All she wanted to know was that they were doing their best for Northern Ireland and not just for whoever happened to be in government at the time. She did not want them to screw the unionists, and she thought that there were now quite a lot of republicans who realised that this would be neither moral nor sensible.

Grassroots leadership on the unionist side

Bob referred to some of the emergent grassroots leaders on the unionist side who were confident and articulate, and willing to talk to anybody, yet continued to retain support in the protestant community because they insisted that they were unionists. Fionnuala welcomed this development and commented that they could only do this because they had been para-militaries and had served time. The main reason for their change of direction, and for the change in their counterparts on the republican side who were pursuing a peace policy, was that they had come to realise that para-military violence was not achieving their goals. It was striking too that most were in their forties and had children of para-military age, and another thing driving them was that they did not want the same thing for their children as they had experienced. The full admission of what they had done, and how futile it was, would have to wait until after a settlement. Yet effectively this was what they were admitting.

Andrew asked what vision these people were holding out for the future. Fionnuala said the most articulate and the most visionary acknowledged that they had screwed up. David Irvine had said it beautifully at a Shankill conference

on identity during the ‘conference season’: ‘We nearly wrecked the Union by maltreating the Catholics - and we must never do it again.’ That was more than any other unionist had felt able to say. And he went on to say that they had to show the Catholics that it could be a union for all.

That last point was far more effective coming from him than from David Trimble, the leader of the Ulster Unionist party. When he said it, no-one believed him for a second because he had never said anything else to suggest that he meant it. She was not expecting, and nor were most people in the Catholic community, a public apology from unionists. But they did want them to accept that there was a problem, and that the problem was not a small bunch of criminal gangsters. So the vision these new people held out - though she should emphasise that we were talking about a handful only - was for real power-sharing within the United Kingdom, good relations with Dublin, cross-border institutions, and some way within Northern Ireland of recognizing an Irish identity which gave people a sense of co-ownership of the place.

>Role of the Women’s Coalition

Howard said that one of the things pacifists here had long been looking for was the development of some kind of alternative politics on the Protestant side. Occasionally you had glimpses of possibilities, for instance at the time of the Ulster Workers Strike when a different generation of leaders emerged like Glenn Barr. Barr, from the Protestant side and Paddy Doherty from the Catholic community in Derry were seeing each other throughout that crisis. Again at the time of the ceasefire, things seemed to be on the move. But this had not led to the development of common politics around issues that transcended the national divide. Bob, during his period in Northern Ireland in the 1970s had hoped this might happen around such things as the ring road in Belfast; and socialist groups argued that it could happen around the class issue.

Fionnuala said women’s groups had been most successful in this respect, but they too had fallen back with the end of the ceasefire and concentrated on single issues. She thought the emergence of the Women’s Coalition couldn’t but be positive. However, her friend and fellow-journalist on the Protestant side, David McCittrick, suggested to her that they were not a women’s group at all but community workers. It was an overstatement, but he had a point. They were of course all women and many were involved in feminist groups and feminist thinking, but a lot had come out of what many saw as a third community, the community worker world where unionism and nationalism were subordinate because all of them were professionals together talking the same language, knowing how to approach Europe for funds and to handle civil servants. In the absence of a live political forum in Northern Ireland, this community had exercised a lot of power. They were mainly ‘thirty-somethings’, the generation that should be doing things and making things happen. But some were inclined to be very dismissive indeed of all the existing political parties, at times unfairly so. Although all the existing political parties were defective, some of them appallingly so, a lot of the people in them had put in hours and hours, and years and years, of hard slog - and in accountable ways which these critics had not.

Pacifism and nonviolent action

Carol asked about Fionnuala’s observation that people no longer used the word pacifist, and wondered to what extent nonviolence was a dirty word even though at the same time there seemed to be a widespread revulsion against violence. Fionnuala said it was not a dirty word, or something that people would even mock. It was just that the pacifists had gone underground a long time ago. The Peace People too had not done much for the notion by the way they disintegrated in a welter of recrimination. Their grandiosity did for them, and it took with them all that willingness to talk ideologically about pacifism and how it might make a contribution. So now you had the Peace House on the Lisburn Road with a big banner across it which proclaimed: ‘A Gun-Free Zone’. People would just look wearily at it and say - ‘Yes, we know there are no guns in there, and there weren’t ever any guns in there.’ She agreed with Carol when she added that nonviolence did not seem to be taken seriously as a plank for a political approach.

Bob said there had been a major nonviolent struggle in Northern Ireland, the civil rights movement, which contributed very much to what we now had. The nonviolent struggle broke down and evolved into a violent struggle. So now people were afraid of any sort of aggressive conflict because of what its implications might be, and because it could escalate so quickly. Fionnuala said that if you raised the banner of nonviolence, people

thought you could unpeel it to reveal the Peace People idea, with fine words and airy promises - or the hopelessly long dead idea of the Civil Rights movement - which anyway few Protestants believed from the start was for them.

Annie asked whether the harshness of the judicial system, and the fact that people did not expect to be treated with fairness or justice deterred them from becoming involved in nonviolent direct action. Fionnuala thought this had a deterrent effect though wariness about being involved in direct action had more to do with the fact that the forces of law and order had come to mean an armed body and that the courts operated without juries. People tended to feel that the courts were there to deal with terrorists and they were reluctant to put their heads above the parapet and be identified with anything that might bring them into conflict with the law. However, it was not just the sanction of the state that people feared but being visible and identified with a group.

You could see this in the Garvaghy Road in Drumcree where the big clash occurred the previous year between the Orange marchers and the local residents. The unionists said they wouldn't talk to residents' groups if they continued to have ex para-military, ex republican representatives. However, it was precisely because Brendan McKenna - the foremost representative of the residents' group - was ex-IRA and had little to lose that he was willing to take on this role. Probably he also enjoyed it and was more resistant to compromise than other members of the group, but she did not think he was a tool of Sinn Fein. The person the residents had previously been using was a Jesuit - and the unionists certainly did not like that and made capital out of it. Some people in the Garvaghy road might want to get involved in the residents group which was trying to revive the community but held back because Brendan McKenna was in it. They would be afraid of Portadown Protestants knowing they were in such a group. These considerations were probably more important than the judicial system as such.

Annie referred to a book[2] which showed how petty criminals got caught up in terrorism charges out of spite. Fionnuala said this did happen but that it worked the other way too. When a car was taken for a bombing in very republican areas, almost invariably that car was taken from a family which supported the SDLP. Then in the early hours of the morning the police would call and say - 'Your car was used for such and such, and why didn't you report it missing?' But of course they couldn't because they knew if they did they'd be gonners. As it was, they would be charged for withholding information and next morning when their name was in the papers if they had a good job it would be gone. And they were more likely than their republican neighbours to have a good job as they would usually be less afraid than them to work in a mixed area. She personally knew of several families that this had happened to and had heard of many more.

Growing confidence of the Catholic Community

Christina asked Fionnuala if she could summarise the benefits which greater politicisation of the Catholic community had brought to them and to Northern Ireland. Had it enabled them to express their views, or discover new views, or put greater restraints on their paramilitary constituencies? She also wondered whether the difference in the level of involvement between the two communities was due to optimism on the Catholic side that it was only a matter of time before things went their way, whereas on the Protestant side there was a sense of putting off the inevitable - not a prospect that encourages people to leap into action.

Starting with the second point, Fionnuala said Christina had got it exactly right. There was not the same incentive for the ordinary member of the Protestant community to get involved. They saw it either as involvement in party politics - and they didn't like what they knew of that - or as involvement in a pretty hopeless situation. They were either critical of the political parties which represented them because they were incapable of change, or they thought it was impossible for them to change because the future was so uninviting.

The greater optimism on the Catholic side was partly a matter of crude numbers. To talk any more of a majority and minority was pretty misleading. It was a fraught field because the experts bitterly disagreed, but at the recent elections for Westminster 40.2 per cent of the vote was nationalist. You had to allow too for the people who didn't vote, or couldn't vote. This was another sighting of an animal that had been galloping around on the horizon for some time - the larger Catholic proportion of the population. The demographers argued about what size the animal was. Was it the Bodmin Tiger or was it a wild cat? It was beginning to look as though it was the first since the Catholic population now stood at about 44 per cent or more of the overall population - and rising.

Protestants had reacted to this in various ways, as had Catholics. The mainstream Catholic reaction had been to say - 'We knew this was coming. Let's be relaxed about it. It could be awfully messy over the next ten or fifteen

years, but in the long run it's going our way.' People were either more or less triumphalist about this. The worst scenario of all was that there would be a 50-50 split, or a tiny Catholic majority which then started arguing vociferously that the decision should rest with them since all this time the unionists had been saying that they were the majority and that Northern Ireland would stay British because they wanted it to do so. It had been a palpably stupid thing to argue for some time.

As for the question about of how far greater politicisation had advantaged the Catholic community - she thought we were still in the middle of that process. In her book, In Search of a State she had attempted to chart a shift of Catholic political identity. One of the things she noted was the increased Catholic assertiveness. True they were never a tongue-tied people! - but they had always been big on victimhood. That had been steadily in retreat in one large part of the Catholic community though it was still there in large measure in the republican community. Arguably the IRA had been behaving like angry victims lashing out aggressively because they said they had no alternative and this was the only way for them to pursue their political aims.

What had this assertiveness, and politicisation brought the Catholic community? Her Protestant husband had put it to her - 'How come if they are so confident they still feel the need to blow the legs off people?' That was what the argument was about inside republicanism as well - whether they should not in the fullness of time consider if there was perhaps another way of doing it. Many people inside the nationalist community had been saying to them for a long time that their methods were not only immoral but counterproductive. Their reply essentially was that they did not trust the unionists and the British. Over the last 25 years there had been a long internal nationalist argument to the effect that they had to try a different approach and that they would have enough international support if they did so to make the argument unassailable. The goal would not be to vanquish unionism and subordinate it or make the place wholly nationalist. Nor would there be a united Ireland because they now recognized painfully that the rest of Ireland didn't want that. There would not be a united Ireland in any recognizable, simplistic form as fought for by the IRA over the last two and a half decades.

Essentially then the argument was about another way of doing it. In 1974 this was tried with the power-sharing Executive. The IRA went right up in the air, as did the loyalists and between them they brought the thing down. The compromise that was suggested then was very close to what the Framework Document had now proposed as a blueprint for any negotiation, a document drawn up by the British and Irish governments together. The baffling thing was why John Major should have agreed to drawing up such a wide-ranging and potentially dynamic blueprint and then scupper the first real chance of the IRA taking this argument on board and getting it into their militaristic bones that this might be a better way - not to achieve the goal they had both killed and died for but a recognizable variant of that. It implied cross-border institutions that could grow in the fullness of time, and a Northern Ireland that would become British and Irish simultaneously in some public and symbolic way. A difficult concept certainly, but not entirely impossible. She had concluded her book, after much deliberation, by saying that people were torn between the yearning for the IRA to stop and the dread that if they did so the British would let the unionists walk all over them again.

She had thought that that fear was an example of paranoia and that nobody would allow the unionists to behave like that again. And then last year it happened at Drumcree when the police were turned at the behest of unionism against nationalists despite the fact that they had earlier decided that on this occasion they had to protect the nationalists and direct the Orange march another way. And the British government not only stood by and let this happen but arguably told the police to do it. Overnight it wrecked the arguments of a whole lot of constitutional nationalists who had said for years that Britain would never do this again. They did this for the unionists - and yet unionists knew very well that it wasn't out of loyalty to them.

Reasons Catholic community more politicised

As to why the Catholic community had been more politicised, Fionnuala said that one factor was that Catholics had been 'agin the state' for a very long time, and had been building up an alternative system amongst themselves to what they never saw as the legitimate authority since the formation of the state. Many believed that Britain had no right to be in Ireland and that they had been ditched in this unionist state by the British government and by the rest of nationalist Ireland. This made them initially a bitter little introverted, anti-authority community - sour and bitter and turned off politics. This was the community she had grown up in.

Albert intervened to say that their perception was a fairly accurate one and their response was nothing to be

surprised at. Fionnuala said her point was that out of that came the tools for beginning to lift off. First of all there was the questioning of authority and questioning the state - which Protestants didn't do because it was their state, and because even those who got least out of it were satisfied with it. She was not imputing any particular virtue to one community, or a particular failing to the other. Each reacted to the situation in which they found themselves. They were actually the same people and intermingled by blood and everything else.

The saddest thing of all was that they had managed to stay in two separate communities even though they had intermarried and lived in the same place. You couldn't imagine a more emblematic Irish Catholic name than her own. And yet in her wider family, among her great-grandparents, were a Giles, a Booth and a Marshall. The Marshall would probably have been Scottish Presbyterian, the Giles and Booth were probably Cromwellian, and certainly all were Protestant. Her husband's name was Mcvea - a Protestant spelling of an Irish name or a Scot's gaelic name. So probably his ancestors were Scot's Catholic, or else Irish and Catholic. Catholics were much keener to advertise their mixed blood than Protestants, and again this was a function of their confidence.

Ruth said she understood what Fionnuala was saying about the difference between Catholic and Protestant communities as far as involvement in politics was concerned. However, she had worked at a community level in Protestant areas in Belfast, in Sandy Row and the Shankill, and did not find this to be a problem when it was a matter of working on small, concrete issues. These people were far more active in political thinking about their own communities than anyone on this side of the water. Fionnuala agreed, but added that where they pulled back was in talking about their own political parties. It was not so much a reverence or respect as a feeling that politics was what those people did, and what they had voted for them to do.

Howard said he had been encouraged by what Robin Percival – an English radical pacifist who had been living in Derry since the early 1970s - had told him about the negotiations that had taken place in Derry between the Bogside residents and the Apprentice Boys following the Drumcree incident. Although the talks had ultimately broken down over the issue of the marches starting off from lots of different points, many in Catholic areas, they had managed to reach agreement on every other issue. The Bogside residents, too, had been prepared in advance of the negotiations to make concessions that in the event the Apprentice Boys had not even demanded. So there were some hopeful signs.

Future Prospects

Finally Andrew asked whether Fionnuala came out on the side of optimism or pessimism as regards the future. She said she was now very nervous. She had not been so until about a week ago, and had felt that if the IRA saw the government behaving firmly over Drumcree this time round, and, better still, if the communities reached some kind of accommodation over the marches, we might expect a ceasefire round about September. Now she was not so sure. The fact that the IRA planted a bomb in a big Catholic area three days after their second meeting with government officials on Blair's initiative - something they had been asking for years - was puzzling and depressing. Fortunately the bomb didn't go off or kill the police they were apparently trying to lure in to deal with it. However, it might mean they had lost their own internal argument about summoning up the nerve to go into negotiations out of which they clearly would not get anything like their original demands. Despite that fact, they had been willing to enter the talks. Perhaps the planting of the bomb indicated that they were no longer willing to do so. Michael suggested that if there was so much disillusion among both republican and loyalist paramilitaries about what violence had achieved, there must be some hope that the ceasefire would in time be reinstated. Fionnuala agreed this had to be the hope and said she did not think there were the attitudes to sustain violence over the long haul. She still believed, and fervently hoped, that we were seeing the last phase of the violence and that it would not last too long.

Note:

1. Fionnuala O'Connor, *In Search of a State: Catholics in Northern Ireland*, The Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1993.
2. Sister Sarah Clarke, *No Faith in the System*, Mercier Press, Douglas (Cork), 1995

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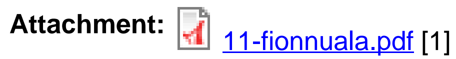
Attachment:  11-fionnuala.pdf [1]

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