

On the far side of revenge?

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Today Belfast is hosting the United Kingdom's formal commemoration Holocaust Memorial Day. What we do and say here, like everything else since its discovery, takes place in the shadow of Auschwitz. In the face of the Holocaust, all of our cheap platitudes about inevitable civilisation and the ascent of man fall apart. For in the heart of one of the most technically and culturally advanced nations in the world, violence seized power and determined to use it to eliminate its enemies using all of the technology at its disposal while citing the superiority of its culture. We know already that the catastrophe of the 1930s and 40s has not stopped mass murder in the name of nation or class, culture or politics continuing apace.

It is good that this commemoration is taking place in Belfast on the same day as this meeting. Because the question of what a shared future in Northern Ireland might be like has something to do with refusing the road towards Auschwitz. After 1945, the distance from the gates of Auschwitz became the moral compass, explicitly or implicitly defining our progress towards or distance from a humane society. The election of Hitler destroyed any certainty that elections and democratic constitutions alone would secure an inclusive political future. We had to do more than just agree structures. Alongside the institutions came values: Civic equality not racial superiority, the rule of law, international co-operation not national segregation and freedom of expression, religion and mobility became the definition of a humane society.

To live in Northern Ireland is to live in a place haunted by its own memories of violence and discrimination or fears of destruction or massacre to come. We know too much about each other, or perhaps more dangerously, they know too much about us for us to rest easily in our beds at the thought that they might control the apparatus of state.

Conflict in Northern Ireland has always been about communities and their relationship to each other and to the state. Controlling the state meant controlling its instruments for defence and force to our advantage. And so we have narrowed all of our public life to the question of control of the identity of the state. In doing so, we have compromised the very agencies of peace and security – civic equality, the rule of law and trust and co-operation. In our fight to defend or eliminate existing political arrangements all manner of cruelty and death has been justified, each twist making trust between them and us less and less plausible.

When we talk about the legacy of conflict in Ireland, we usually mean this complex residue of antagonism, threat, political action and violence which continues to poison any notion of sharing. Political communities, each seeking the shelter of their own state, have grown up in antagonism to one another. The struggle against each other has defined public life. Too often common sense meant preparing for war, even at times of peace. But for as long as we prepare to wage war against each other, the concept of a shared future is always likely to appear ever so slightly naïve. Our first aspiration is to protect ourselves, ultimately by achieving our political goals. Good relations could wait, nobody's aspiration.

And yet the problem of our shared predicament continues to return. Because, as the last thirty five years in Northern Ireland have proved, every attempt to deny our mutual interdependence locks us into a cycle of violence in which others are sacrificed to our aspirations while our own people are sacrificed to theirs. The predicament – that we are here in one place together – has not yet disappeared, and if we are to stay on this side of a holocaust or mass expulsion, this will continue to be the case, no matter what state we belong to.

The predicament of Northern Ireland is that we will share the future: the only question is what kind future we will share. The challenge is to reconcile the pursuit of our aspirations with this underlying fact: failure to resolve it leads us back down the road of killing and expulsion. And the pace of change depends to a large extent on the degree to which we accept or resist this shared predicament.

The historic fact that our political communities have grown up in opposition to one another has left us with a deep legacy of segregation and organised defence. In the face of threat, special laws suspending basic rights have been justified, culture was competitive not inclusive, discriminations large and small became common sense, paramilitaries gained support and sympathy while everything from politics, policing, housing and schooling to social life, friendship and love became infected with the virus of violent self-protection which goes by the name of sectarianism.

Even people arriving in Northern Ireland with none of this history got caught in its wake. New minorities found and find their concerns marginalised by the obsessive dominance of one question in politics, obliged to identify with one side or the other or, even worse, forced to hide and conform by the presence of paramilitary activity and a culture which has grown too tired to be shocked by violence and tolerant of ideas that protection means excluding those who are different rather than looking for renewal to those who bring fresh perspectives. In recent weeks, all of this has come tragically to the fore.

Against this backdrop, we have to acknowledge that learning to live with each other without thought of resort to force or threat against each other is something new in Northern Ireland. As TS Eliot wrote “the only wisdom is the wisdom of humility.” In a deep sense, it is learning to do what we don’t know how to do. We already know that it means undoing the culture of keeping weapons ‘just in case’, it means committing to work with each other without certainty that our aspirations will be fulfilled, it means designing the political and security order in such a way that everyone trusts that government belongs to all of us, is committed to civic equality, justice and inclusion and itself subject to law.

Clearly, working for the goals of the Shared Future review is not a miracle cure but a long process. While we have a direction and a compass, the process of healing and mending will be a necessarily complex process. Working from antagonism to presumed trust will be a programme for decades not days. Perhaps the most difficult task of all will be reconciling ourselves to the changes that will be demanded of us.

Arising out of the consultation, a number of issues are already clear.

- There is a need to define what work towards good relations actually is. For too long, Community Relations work has been equated with new age harmony, a kind of music of the spheres for paramilitaries. There is a lazy tendency to caricature community relations work as the search for a naïve harmony and wellbeing between Catholic and Protestants. The subsequent absence of harmony is then used as evidence of the ‘failure’ of all community relations work as such. But issues of historic antagonism, like politics, policing, parading or violence cannot be addressed without some short or even medium term risk to harmony. Where harmony is the goal, the easiest way to good community relations was the Tommy Sands strategy; Whatever you say, say nothing. The shared future process must signal an end to this rather silly game. Good relations work cannot be measured by surface harmony, but by an increasing confidence with which those in public life can fruitfully and practically address real differences and conflicts. In the medium term, improving community relations means a growing capacity to address conflicts not avoid them.
- Good community relations is the search for the foundations of trust between all people in Northern Ireland who have been divided on the basis of perceived political, cultural, religious, or other ethnic background. They are measured by the presence or absence of certain qualities: freedom, safety, trust. Because this is

a statement of values rather than of political aspiration, good relations work automatically extends beyond any exclusive Catholic-Protestant framework. Good relations do not demand homogeneity, or a uniformity of approach to every issue, but they do demand that differences be negotiated within a wider recognition of our interdependence. Because diversity is not a passing phase but the reality of modern life, the skills of dialogue, inquiry and partnership are critical to the preparation of young people for the modern world.

- Post holocaust values are critical to any thinkable political deal. The issue of a shared future is linked to but is not the same as that of the constitutional destiny of Northern Ireland. While political agreement is vital, and the development of a political leadership which works together and models civic equality, justice and inclusion is essential, the establishment of new habits of respect and dialogue to promote a future together apply in whatever jurisdiction or form it should happen. Good community relations is not about ignoring differences of view, but of finding ways to resolve our differences in a way that does not demand the humiliation or injury of the other.
- The recognition of interdependence which lies at the heart of the consultation is not an alternative to human rights and equality but a central element of the process and the goal. Neither is it a simple case that one will lead to the other. Civic equality in the face of the state and of each other is an essential part of any democracy. But if we are to build a sustainable community, whether in Britain,

Ireland or anything else, then working in partnership, building down antagonism and removing all intimidation and restriction on people's right to free association, expression, residence and work belongs alongside human rights. Furthermore, no equality worth its salt can contradict these purposes. Social Capital theory has highlighted that the health of any society is influenced not only by the measurement of objects but by the quality of relationships which allows free transactions in economic and social life. Without working on relationships in Northern Ireland, or recognising the challenges of new partnerships and difficult dialogue, numerical equality will fail to contribute to its wider purpose.

- There is a role for legislation. The question of hate crime legislation, or of new powers to remove graffiti or challenge Council's is important, provided that both can be made meaningful. Certainly, there is a need to ensure that those who are intimidated do not pay the price for their own intimidation. But while legislation can limit the worst excesses, it cannot deliver change on its own. In 1929, the League of Nations agreed to outlaw war: the purpose was noble, but the law could not deliver. The quality of our Shared Future depends on change experienced in lives not just in legislation. This requires us to do more than rely on the state to deliver the hard work: it must be built in a community level, in the workplace, in public institutions and in the decisions we take about who can live where and with whom.

- There is a strong temptation to resign ourselves to the management of segregated enmity, so called benign apartheid. While this may be the only available possibility in some places, it cannot become the norm defining good relations. The forced exclusion of Northern Ireland ghettos must not be confused with free choice. It may be the choice of people faced with sectarian intimidation and threat, it is certainly not the result of non-violent freedom. We may be forced to accept it as current reality, but we cannot pretend that it is benign, democratic or non-violent. No democratic political system can be built on the forced exclusion of one part of the population from certain districts, on the systematic intimidation of supporters of specific football clubs on certain streets or on the notion that only children of one tradition can safely ride the school bus. If we accept it, the logic of apartheid leads to further conclusions – no shared toilets, no shared streets, segregated housing markets – none of which could be described as benign. Furthermore, strategies for management of conflict continue to involve enormous costs:
- The erection of permanent physical barriers to prevent uncontrolled contact (‘peace walls’) holds out no prospect of generating reconciliation. Even these are temporary, however. Inevitably events will move at different paces on the two sides of a peaceline. As a result, any surface stability is likely to be temporary if relationships remain fundamentally hostile.

- The necessity of patrolling numerous interfaces imposes huge additional costs on the exchequer, requiring endless duplication of services and a high security presence.
- Access to core services- educational, youth, libraries, leisure, even shops and social security - by residents is likely to be restricted by fear.
- Maintaining employment which requires a journey to work through ‘hostile’ areas will be difficult. For as long as territory is a consideration, mobility will suffer.
- The defensive imperative will continue to promote aggressive behaviour by young men as ‘patriotic’. Leadership will be equated with defensive military capacity not with trust building or innovation. Paramilitaries will continue to operate in a more or less open fashion.
- Investment will be extremely difficult to attract. Interface communities will either be areas of persistent mass unemployment or characterised by out-migration. These in their turn are the roots of the next round of instability. The only thinkable solution becomes the eradication of one side of the interface (always the others) by the numerical victory of our own side, and the gradual creation of larger *apartheid* blocks of population from which ‘the others’ are excluded.

Apartheid may be better than massacre, but it is no cost-free solution for a sustainable society. Nor does it eliminate antagonism, but institutionalises it. The difficult task will be to accommodate different speeds at once, dealing with the legacy of the past and reaching for a shared future.

- For too long we in Community Relations have shied away from measurement, because we have equated trust with a feeling. A recent article in the Financial Times, drew attention to the fact that the most important goals are not necessarily reached by dealing with them directly. Happiness is not necessarily achieved by striving to be happy. Instead, by approaching them obliquely, through other, lesser goals, the most important things occur. Likewise with Trust. Trust cannot be directly manufactured, but it can be given space if we work together to eliminate its impediments. And its measurable impediments are many:

1. Deaths, injuries, bereavements, sectarian incidents.

2. Economic measures: Mobility – does location influence access to work, willingness to take a job, retention rates, markets

Investment – to what degree is sectarian violence influencing investment decisions in Northern Ireland

Innovation and new ideas – to what extent are they constrained by deep patterns of sectarian division

Taxation and spending – to what degree are they higher than necessary in Northern Ireland because of endemic segregation and violence.

Security Budget – level of spending on security as a proportion of GDP

Size of police service

Workplace integration and level of comfort

3. Social measures: restricted residential options, exclusion from resources, duplication of public services, lack of bridging and linking relationships across

- society, presence or absence of obstacles to partnership, level of diversity of membership, degree to which we move the intimidated rather than the intimidator.
4. Quality of life indicators: Sectarian graffiti, low level intimidation, toleration of paramilitaries, access to shared public resources (leisure, parks, libraries, youth facilities), ease of transport services, obstacles to friendship across boundaries.

While trust may remain elusive, all of these things can be measured. The lesson of the fixing broken windows experiment in the United States, is that in targeting small things, larger things begin to be possible. Furthermore if we wait to solve the large things before we move on the small things, we might be waiting for ever. If a shared future is to become more plausible, it is essential that we identify key areas for progress rather than simply expect to solve all the issues in one step.

- The building of trust involves all of society, including political and civic leaders, core institutions and policymakers. Change should not be expected to emanate from violent interfaces alone. Interface areas are the tragic symptoms of a systemic lack of trust rather than the sole cause or the only evidence for it. While those living in the hardest places deserve our support, they cannot be expected to deliver change for a whole society on their own. We already know that peace will require change in how we do politics, policing, paramilitary activity and community safety. What this process has outlined is that change will also be demanded in housing and planning, culture and education, in local government and the workplace, in city centre management and neighbourhood renewal, in community development and youth

work. In every area, real change will demand leadership which steps into the unknown and a willingness to learn from mistakes and even failures.

What is clear from this consultation is that ‘no change’ is not an option. This exercise has confirmed that the issues of justice (equity), our right to be different (diversity) and our common predicament (interdependence) are the crucial issues which will define the progress of the peace process. Moving forward will require sustained courage and commitment over many years from many people. In all of this, we will need a culture which learns from failure rather than condemns experiment.

Political leadership is essential to the development of a society with stable institutions, agreed law and order and the ending of a culture of paramilitarism. The adjustment to all of this will require wide consensus and support. At policy level, there is a need for a coherent approach to promote this work. At government level, there is no doubt that this will require joining up, but it will also require real responsibility to be taken by individual departments to look at a huge range of issues: access to non-segregated housing, education for real relationships beyond institutional separation, planning for safe town centres, no-tolerance zones for sectarian graffiti, an embrace of cultural diversity, community safety which seeks safety in relationship not in excluding others, workplace policies to encourage learning and exchange beyond neutrality, social inclusion strategies which recognise the centrality of addressing the obstacles which community division puts in the way of inclusion, policies to ensure freedom of movement for all and an economic

strategy which recognises and engages with the obstacles to sustainable development, legislation to deal with hate crime and a statistical service to back it up.

Nobody expects miracles but at community level, there is a need to change the culture of lazy acceptance of intimidation and violence. This applies to everyone of all backgrounds in Northern Ireland. Community relations work was only ever soft for people who didn't bother with it. Questions of partnership, of building bridging, bonding and linking relationships and of dialogue around the most difficult conversations must now become central to how we do business in Northern Ireland. Future funding strategies must facilitate change. The question of how safe minorities are in our communities is an urgent question for community and religious leaders across Northern Ireland, but especially for Protestants in Border areas, Catholics in East Antrim and members of minority ethnic groups across Northern Ireland.

Instead of expecting all change to come from the most difficult interfaces, we should perhaps invest in those areas where sharing and interface have happened without massive violence. In the workplace, the development of good relations approaches to staff and service provision are vital. All of this will require places to the organisations to develop new capacities to deal with emotive and difficult issues. The development of this capacity will be a key task in coming years. This too will throw us back on our reliance on learning and growth.

The sheer scale of the agenda can become intimidating. But we should also take stock of how far we have come. With our history, it is a kind of miracle that we are meeting in this setting today. Furthermore, and perhaps for the first time, the discussion of a shared future is now led by people who live here. When the Community Relations Council was established, there were not even talks about talks let alone conferences on sharing the future. It is the strong hope of the Council that this event marks a step change in the public emphasis on peacebuilding and we look forward to playing our part in future developments.