

Heritage, History & Memory Project
(Workshop 1)

**The Social, Economic & Political
background to the ‘Long 60s’**

A presentation by

Kevin Meagher

followed by a general discussion

compiled by

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Introduction

The Fellowship of Messines Association was formed in May 2002 by a diverse group of individuals from Loyalist, Republican and Trade Union backgrounds, united in their realisation of the need to confront sectarianism in our society as a necessary means to realistic peace-building. The project also engages young people and new citizens on themes of citizenship and cultural and political identity.

In 2018 the Association initiated its **‘Heritage, History & Memory Project’**. For the inaugural launch of this project it was decided to focus on the period of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, and the early stages of ‘Troubles’. To accomplish this, it was agreed to host a series of six workshops, looking at different aspects of that period, with each workshop developing on from the previous one.

The format for each workshop would comprise a presentation by a respected commentator/historian, which would then be followed by a general discussion involving people from diverse political backgrounds, who would be encouraged to share not only their thoughts on the presentation, but their own experiences and memories of the period under discussion.

This pamphlet details the *first* of those workshops. The guest speaker was historian **Kevin Meagher**, who was a Special Advisor to former Labour Northern Ireland Secretary Saun Woodward. He is associate editor of the Labour *Uncut* blog and frequently writes about Irish politics for the *New Statesman*, among others. He is the author of *A United Ireland: why unification is inevitable and how it will come about*.

The event was co-chaired by **Joe Bowers** and **Dr. Margaret O’Callaghan**.

The event was hosted in the **First Presbyterian Church**, Rosemary Street, Belfast, on 6 October 2018.

Some 30 people were present for the general discussion. These individuals represented a wide diversity of political backgrounds and allegiances, and most of them had been participants in the period under discussion.

Harry Donaghy, *Co-ordinator*, The Fellowship of Messines Association

The Social, Economic & Political background to the 'Long 60s'

Kevin Meagher

Introduction: *Calm, Conflict and Chaos*

'If you remember the 60s, you weren't really there' goes the famous quote. The fact that *Google* can't tell me who actually said it makes the point! A lot happened in the 1960s. Geopolitically, socially and culturally. It was a decade of hope and optimism, but also of conflict and despair.

Here in Northern Ireland, it was a seminal period. A decade that began quietly and ended dramatically. A status quo was challenged, peacefully at first, before descending into chaos and bloodshed.

Signs that should have been heeded in time were not, precipitating violence and pain that scars society into the present day. Northern Ireland set the pace for political drama, sure enough, but this was influenced by trends evident by other world events. The 1960s were a decade of drama and massive social and political upheaval around the world.

In explaining my argument, I divide the decade into three rough periods:

- **Calm:** Period until 1963 or so;
- **Conflict:** 1963-1968; and
- **Chaos:** From 1968 onwards.

Throughout, I will try and explore the broader international context to the events taking place in Northern Ireland. I will look at a series of obvious, but critical questions, including:

- What were the forces in play that drove Northern Ireland to the abyss and gave us the Troubles?
- What were the trigger points and why were they missed?
- Who was to blame?
- Could things have been different?

But let's start at the beginning.

1960

It's 1960. Fifteen years after the end of the Second World War. Five years since the end of rationing. Just four years on since the Suez incident. 38 years since Partition.

John F Kennedy is elected President of the United States in November 1960. Elvis

Presley had two of the top ten hits of the year. *Ben-Hur* swept the Oscars. The actor Kenneth Branagh was born here. The IRA border campaign is underway but has little effect on political life.

Harold MacMillan is British Prime Minister. In February, he makes a landmark speech on a trip to South Africa (it was delivered twice – it wasn't picked up first time he made it in Ghana), warning that 'winds of change' were blowing across the continent.

'Whether we like it or not,' he says, 'this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.' His meaning was twofold: In part, a warning that Black majority government is on the way – and that his government will do nothing to stop it.

1960 is often referred to as 'the year of Africa' for this very reason. Decolonisation would become a defining political theme of the decade, as would the quest for civil and political rights.

On January 1, the former French colony of Cameroon gained its independence. Later that year, the Congo receives its independence from Belgium. In July, the Somali Republic is formed from the remnants of Italian and British territories.

Between 1-13 August, the former French territories of Dahomey (now known as Benin), together with Niger, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Ivory Coast, Chad, Middle Congo, the Central African Republic and Gabon become self-governing states.

In March, the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa results in more than 69 dead, 300 injured on a protest over Apartheid's racist 'pass laws'.

June saw public demonstrations by democratic and left forces against Italian government support of the post-fascist Italian Social Movement which were heavily suppressed by police.

In North Carolina, four black students begin a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter. The event triggers similar non-violent protests throughout the Southern United States. Six months later the original four protesters are served lunch at the same counter.

In December, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Francis Fisher, meets Pope John XXIII for talks in Vatican City. This is the first time the head of the Anglican Church has ever visited the Pope.

Also that month, the US Supreme Court makes two landmark judgments, declaring that segregation in public transportation is illegal and that the State of Louisiana's racial segregation laws are unconstitutional, overturning them.

More prosaically, working-class British life makes it to the small screen as a new 13-part television drama begins: 'Coronation Street.'

1961

On a cold January morning in Washington DC in 1961, a youthful John F Kennedy tells Americans ‘ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.’

In stark contrast, outgoing US President, Dwight Eisenhower, warns against the ‘military-industrial complex’ – a salutary warning that securocrats and hardware manufacturers conspire to keep conflicts going.

1961 is also Census year. In Northern Ireland, it’s the highest birth rate for 40 years.

The number of Catholics increases by 26,087 on the previous decade – accounting for nearly half of the total population increase.

The proportion of Catholics in Northern Ireland is now 34.9%, up from 34.3% – the highest since the Census of 1891 – and now the most youthful demographic, with 24% under 10, compared to 17% for every other group.

The number of Presbyterians falls from 29.95% to 29.0% in continuance of the generally downward trend during the past hundred years.

While the Anglican population decreases from 25.8% to 24.2% (compared with a peak of 27.0% at the 1926 and 1937 Censuses).

Interestingly, the number of people with no stated religion jumped from 5,865 in 1951 to 28,418.

The main occupations for men in Northern Ireland were working in agriculture, engineering or general labouring.

Women workers were clustered in services, sales and textiles (although the share of women working in professional and scientific occupations outstripped men – 27,000 to 18,000).

In May, the last passenger liner completed by Harland and Wolff in Belfast, *SS Canberra*, is delivered to her owners, P&O.

That same month, Northern Ireland international, Danny Blanchflower, captains Tottenham Hotspur to the English double – winning the Football League First Division title and FA Cup – the first team in 64 years to achieve this feat.

April sees US *realpolitik* reassert itself, with a botched operation by US troops and Cuban emigres to overthrow Castro at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba.

The same month, Sierra Leone becomes independent from the United Kingdom, while the British protectorate ends in Kuwait and it becomes an emirate.

Meanwhile, White minority-controlled South Africa announces it will withdraw from the Commonwealth, having made itself a republic the year before.

In July, Ireland submits the first application from a non-founding country to join

the European Economic Community. (The United Kingdom applies in August.)

In the American Deep South, the Freedom Riders – groups of mixed race activists who travelled on interstate buses to challenge the Jim Crow segregation laws that enforced racial segregation in seating – meet with brutality at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama and Mississippi as they seek to uphold the Supreme Court ruling of the previous year.

On October 17, French police attack about 30,000 protesting Algerian nationalists in Paris. The official death toll is put at three, but human rights groups claim up to 300 were killed. Many drowned after being thrown in the River Seine.

In November, Kennedy sends 18,000 military advisors to South Vietnam as US involvement begins in earnest.

On the last day of the year, Ireland's first national television station, *Telefís Éireann* (later RTÉ), begins broadcasting.

1962

Two months into 1962 and the IRA calls off its six-year 'border campaign' citing a lack of support from the public 'whose minds have been deliberately distracted' from the goal of Irish freedom.

May's general election in Northern Ireland sees the Ulster Unionists win 34 out of 51 seats. The Nationalist Party gains two to pick up nine seats.

By the end of June, the last French legionnaires pull out of Algeria.

In July, former Belgian colonies Rwanda and Burundi gain independence.

July sees Gay Byrne present the first edition of *The Late Late Show* on RTÉ. He goes on to present the show for 37 years – the longest period any individual hosts a television talk show anywhere in the world.

Meanwhile, British politics is convulsed by the 'Night of the Long Knives' as Harold Macmillan dismisses a third of his Cabinet.

In August, Nelson Mandela is arrested by the South African government and charged with incitement to rebellion. Later that month, Trinidad and Tobago becomes independent.

In October, the first black student, James Meredith, registers at the University of Mississippi, escorted by Federal Marshals.

The pace of social and cultural reform quickens too.

The Beatles' first single: 'Love Me Do'/'P.S. I Love You' is released.

The first James Bond film, 'Dr No,' hits the big screen.

In October, Pope John XXIII convenes the Second Vatican Council paving the way

for major reforms in the Catholic Church.

In the same month, the world holds its breath as the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolds, after a US spy plane uncovers a plot by the Soviet Union to position nuclear weapons in Cuba, bringing the world to the point of nuclear war.

November sees the first episode of the ground-breaking satirical comedy programme, *That Was the Week That Was*, hosted by David Frost.

And one of the defining symbols of modernity takes shape as an agreement is signed between Britain and France to develop *Concorde*.

In November, the UN General Assembly passes a resolution condemning South Africa's racist apartheid policies and calls for all UN member states to cease military and economic relations with the nation.

Last but not least, The Dubliners are formed at O'Donoghue's Pub in Dublin.

1963

As if to prove the point that history does not move in predictable straight lines, the hardliner George Wallace becomes governor of Alabama in January 1963. In his inaugural speech, he defiantly proclaims: 'Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!'

Nevertheless, the same month sees Black student Harvey Gantt enter Clemson University in South Carolina, the last US state to hold out against racial integration.

French President Charles de Gaulle vetoes the United Kingdom's entry into the European Common Market.

In March, Unionist moderate, Terence O'Neill, becomes the fourth prime minister of Northern Ireland. An old Etonian blue-blood who had served in a tank regiment in the Second World War, Captain O'Neill was keen to transcend Unionist and Nationalist identities which had become a 'ludicrous anachronism' that he wants to replace with 'normal twentieth-century politics based on a division between left and right.'

In April, 70,000 marchers arrive in London from Aldermaston, to demonstrate against nuclear weapons.

In May, thousands of black people, many of them children, are arrested while protesting segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Fire hoses and police dogs are used on the demonstrators.

That same month, *'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan'* is released opening with the song 'Blowin' in the Wind.'

Later that summer, Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his 'I Have a Dream' speech on

the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to an audience of at least 250,000, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

In October, Sam Cooke and his band are arrested after trying to register at a ‘whites only’ motel in Louisiana. In the months following, he records the song ‘A Change Is Gonna Come.’

That same month, Alec Douglas-Home succeeds Harold Macmillan as Prime Minister.

In November, Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas. Belfast-born writer, CS Lewis, dies the same day.

Early 60’s summary

What we can see from this pen portrait of the early 1960s is that massive political and social change is taking place around the world.

The rise of democratic nationalist movements in Africa.

The demand for civil rights in the US.

New attitudes and social norms breaking through.

Optimism – perhaps even *naiveté* – on behalf of student radicals across the West. A new broom in Ulster Unionism in the shape of O’Neill, who at least appreciates the desirability of reforming Northern Ireland – even if he’s not sure how best to do that.

Also, a changing of approaches on the other side of the political divide with the end of the border campaign and the emergence of a Catholic middle-class beginning to emulate the constitutional protest politics of the US. But the election of Wallace reminds us that political change often leads to an equal and opposite reaction.

The mid-1960s see the trends already apparent accelerate.

1964

In January, families from Springtown Camp make a silent march to Derry Guildhall to demand rehousing.

In April, Black radical, Malcolm X, delivers a speech entitled: ‘The Ballot or the Bullet.’ He says: ‘If we don’t do something real soon, I think you’ll have to agree that we’re going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It’s one or the other in 1964. It isn’t that time is running out – time has run out!’

In May, thousands of students march through Times Square in New York and San Francisco, in the first major student demonstration against the Vietnam War. Smaller marches also occur in Boston and Seattle. Twelve young men in New York City publicly burn their draft cards to protest the War; the first such act of war resistance.

June sees the murders of three civil rights workers – Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney – who are abducted and murdered in Mississippi by local members of the Ku Klux Klan, with local law enforcement officials involved in the conspiracy. Their bodies are not found until August 4.

President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act into law in July, officially abolishing racial segregation in the United States.

Tensions rise in Northern Ireland during September following threats of direct action by Ian Paisley, who is incensed after an Irish tricolour is displayed in the office window of Independent Republican election candidate, Billy McMillen, in West Belfast. Several days of rioting ensue.

In October, American civil rights movement leader Martin Luther King becomes the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, which was awarded to him for leading non-violent resistance to end racial prejudice in the United States.

Meanwhile in Britain, Labour wins the British General Election and Harold Wilson become British Prime Minister.

The British Empire continues to disintegrate, with Northern Rhodesia, a former British protectorate, becoming the independent Republic of Zambia, ending 73 years of British rule.

1965

In January, Taoiseach Seán Lemass travels to Belfast for an historic meeting with the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland Terence O'Neill. This is the first meeting of Prime Ministers in 43 years: A symbolically important thawing of North/South relations.

O'Neill sought to inject greater pace into the Northern Irish economy, which was already showing signs of structural weakening, with the decline of traditional industries.

Something similar was happening in Dublin, with Lemass, liberalising and modernising the southern economy. This dovetailed with the approach of new Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who famously wanted to release the 'white heat of technological revolution.'

O'Neill faced opposition from his colleagues, few of whom were aware of the meeting and from Ian Paisley – whose followers pelted Lemass' car with snowballs during the visit.

Nevertheless, O'Neill ploughed on, promoting cross-community co-operation and industrial modernisation, visiting Lemass in Dublin the following month.

His attempts at reforming the political firmament involved visiting Catholic schools, meeting with priests and displayed less tolerance of Protestant extremism.

Were these largely cosmetic gestures designed as public relations, or setting the ground for meaningful reform? Possibly both; however, as the academic Ronald Weitzer suggests:

Like the efforts of Whitehead in Rhodesia and Botha in South Africa, O'Neill's reform efforts mobilized and radicalized the subordinate population and precipitated bitter opposition within the ranks of the dominant caste to the prime minister's 'deviations'.

March sees another 'Bloody Sunday' as 200 Alabama State Troopers attack 525 civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, as they attempt to march to the state capital, Montgomery.

That same month, 3,500 United States Marines arrive in Da Nang, South Vietnam, becoming the first American ground combat troops in Vietnam.

Back in the Deep South, there's a second attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, under the leadership of Martin Luther King. It stops at the bridge where, days earlier, marchers had been attacked, to hold a prayer service and return to Selma, in obedience to a court restraining order.

Days later, Dr King leads 25,000 civil rights activists successfully end the 4-day march from Selma to Montgomery.

May sees protests involving hundreds of anti-war protestors, as they burn draft cards at the University of California and a coffin is marched to the Berkeley Draft Board, while an effigy of Lyndon Johnson is hung.

In August, the Watts Riots begin in Los Angeles, resulting in 34 deaths and more than 3,000 arrests. October sees anti-war protests draw 100,000 people across 80 US cities and around the world.

In November, 22-year-old Catholic Worker Movement member, Roger Allen LaPorte, sets himself on fire in front of the United Nations building in protest against the war.

1966

The U.S. announces it will substantially increase the number of its troops in Vietnam.

Nelson's Pillar in O'Connell Street in Dublin is blown up by Irish Republican Army volunteers marking this year's 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising.

In March, Harold Wilson's Labour Party wins the British General Election, gaining

a 96-seat majority.

In April, UVF members petrol-bomb Holy Cross Girls' School, in Belfast. The attack happened two days before Terence O'Neill was to address a Catholic-Protestant reconciliation meeting there.

The following month, John Scullion, a Catholic, is killed by the UVF and is often referred to as the first victim of the Troubles.

In June, Éamon de Valera is re-elected President of Ireland.

Throughout July, there are protests and arrests outside the US Embassy in London's Grosvenor Square.

In November, Seán Lemass retires as Irish Taoiseach and is replaced in the role by Fianna Fail colleague, Jack Lynch.

Divis Tower in Belfast is built.

And Seamus Heaney's first poetry collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, is published.

1967

In January, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association is founded in Belfast.

April sees large demonstrations held against the Vietnam War in New York and San Francisco. Hundreds of thousands are now involved at these events, led by Martin Luther King, the singer Harry Belafonte and others.

Further drama spills onto the streets of Newark in New Jersey, following the arrest of an African-American cab driver for an alleged driving offence. Race riots break out in Newark, lasting 5 days and leaving 26 dead.

In June, 22 British soldiers are killed in the Aden police mutiny.

In the autumn, abortion is legalised in Britain, following the passing of the Abortion Act.

In November, the British Government is forced to devalue sterling following a currency crisis.

In Northern Ireland, opposition to O'Neill's reforms is so strong that one of his supportive MPs, George Forrest, is pulled off the platform at the Twelfth of July celebrations in Coagh, County Tyrone, and kicked unconscious by fellow members of the Orange Order.

In December, Lemass' successor, Jack Lynch, travels to Stormont for his first meeting with O'Neill. The following month they meet again in Dublin.

1968

In January 1968, O'Neill makes a speech marking five years in office calling for 'a new

endeavour by organisations in Northern Ireland to cross denominational barriers and advance the cause of better community relations.’

In May, he is pelted with eggs, flour and stones by members of the Woodvale Unionist Association who disapprove of his policies.

In October, a NICRA march across Derry on October 5 1968 – (half a century ago) – is banned by Home Affairs Minister, William Craig, meets with violence from the RUC who use batons on protesters, among whom were prominent politicians. An RTÉ crew captures the events and the footage is broadcast globally.

O'Neill's government is unable to deal with the disturbances that follow, so Harold Wilson summons him to Downing Street. The Stormont cabinet minutes show Wilson had threatened to take over if O'Neill could not manage to regain control.

In response, O'Neill introduced a Five-Point Reform Programme, granting a number of concessions that NICRA had demanded. Crucially, however, it does not include one-man-one-vote in local government elections.

Despite this, NICRA feels it has made some ground and agrees to postpone its marches, despite many Catholics feeling let down by the limited reforms.

September sees the launch of *Myrina* from the Musgrave Yard slipway at Harland and Wolff; the first super-tanker and the largest ship built in the UK to date.

In December, Taoiseach Jack Lynch and Prime Minister of Northern Ireland Terence O'Neill meet for talks at Stormont.

1969

People's Democracy, founded on 9 October '68 by student activists including Bernadette Devlin and Michael Farrell, begin a four-day march from Belfast to Derry. On the fourth day, marchers are brutally attacked at Burntollet Bridge outside Derry.

Although many RUC officers were present, none intervenes. It later emerges that some of the assailants were in fact off-duty policemen. Many marchers were injured – with 13 requiring hospital treatment. The Burntollet attack sparked several days of rioting between the RUC and nationalist protesters in the Bogside area of Derry.

January also sees Ian Paisley jailed for three months for illegal assembly.

In February, O'Neill calls a snap election, reacting to the turmoil inside the UUP. About ten to twelve dissident MPs opposed his leadership, and Brian Faulkner resigns from the Government.

The Ulster Unionists retain a majority of seats but fail to give O'Neill a clear majority for his proposed reforms. Many describe him as 'the right messenger but at the wrong time.'

He is humiliated by his near-defeat in his own constituency of Bannside by Ian Paisley.

In April, Bernadette Devlin, the 21-year-old student and civil rights campaigner, wins the Mid-Ulster by-election. She is the youngest-ever female Member of Parliament.

Later that month, British troops arrive in Northern Ireland to reinforce the ‘civil power.’

Eight days later, on April 28, Terence O’Neill resigns, following a series of bomb explosions on Belfast’s water supply by the UVF, and is succeeded by Major James Chichester-Clark.

Review

This, then, is a quick canter through some of the key events – here and around the world – taking place during the 1960s. Some of the parallels are immediately apparent.

It’s clear that the 1960s was a period of massive social and political change here, but also globally. Two big trends are apparent. The decolonialisation movement was literally and figuratively ripping up the map of Africa, while protests against the Vietnam War and the calls for Black civil rights were convulsing American society.

The sense that anything was possible and that an old order could give way to a bright new dawn animated 1960s protest politics. Yes, there were setbacks and martyrs along the way, but the sense that progress was inevitable and that the arc of history, as Martin Luther King put it, ‘bends towards justice’, was all too apparent.

Northern Ireland was not immune from these forces. The civil rights movement here was a carbon copy of US and UK movements, even down to the same protest songs. Those same forces of change that MacMillan had warned the South Africans about were ‘blowing in the wind’.

There is no getting away from the fact that the nature of inequality and discrimination in Northern Ireland was pervasive and took many forms. Imbalances in the power relationship between Catholic and Protestant communities were visible and measurable. This is not to automatically assume cause and effect: ‘Inequality is merely a cause of discrimination.’

But the majoritarian political system, the fact that one side of the community made up the police force; the fact that local government boundaries were deliberately skewed to monopolise control for one community; the fact that there was no universal suffrage in local elections; and that sectarianism was all too apparent when it came to the allocation of jobs; leads to the inescapable conclusion that discrimination was

responsible for that inequality.

Let's just look at its various facets:

Democratic inequalities

Under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, local elections were supposed to be conducted under proportional representation. The Unionist Government changed this in 1923 to the Westminster 'first-past-the-post' system and by 1929 had introduced FPTP for Stormont elections as well, ensuring Unionist dominance.

The voting franchise in local elections was determined by property ownership, not universal suffrage; penalising poor Catholics and Protestants alike (although there were plainly more of the former). The impact was severe. For Westminster and Stormont elections, the electorate was about 900,000. For local elections, this fell to around 600,000.

The poor were also at a disadvantage because of the business vote. Companies had up to six votes, exercised by nominees. Greater Protestant ownership levels of businesses favoured Unionist candidates, while Queen's University was granted four seats in the Stormont assembly.

Even more scandalous was the gerrymandering of constituency boundaries. The deliberate manipulation of the electoral process. Most notoriously, this took place in that 'city-up-the-road-with-two-names'. Catholic voters were corralled into larger wards returning fewer councillors than a greater number of smaller wards containing fewer Protestants which nevertheless yielded more councillors. So blatant was the practice that Unionists controlled 85% of Northern Ireland's councils despite accounting for just 66% of the population.

Housing inequalities

Equally pernicious was the situation with housing. Only 50,000 houses were built in Northern Ireland between the Wars. House-building did not keep pace with population growth – aided by the plethora of local authorities across Northern Ireland, keen to avoid urban sprawl.

This nimby-ism merely stored up a massive political problem. Unlike mainland Britain, where public housing allocations were and are based on need, Northern Ireland had a patchwork of *ad hoc* local arrangements. As an illustration of the point, 82% of the council houses built in Fermanagh between 1945 and 1967 were allocated to Protestants, despite Catholics making up a majority of the local population.

A particular grievance was the preference shown to individual Protestants over

larger Catholic families. On the basis of need – the British system – they would have been dealt with first. Given Unionist political hegemony meant the ‘right’ people living in the right place, it is hard not to sense political malfeasance as well as communal reward playing a part here.

A southern Irish political figure described this as ‘an institutionalised caste system’. The fact that this came from the defiantly anti-republican Conor Cruise O’Brien is revealing.

When it came to employment, matters were little different. In 1928, only 5% of the workforce of Belfast Corporation was Catholic – despite comprising a quarter of the city’s population. Few Catholics were found in the higher echelons of the Civil Service – with just a single Catholic Permanent Secretary by the late 1950s.

By 1972, a third of Catholic men were classed as ‘unskilled’ – twice the rate of their Protestant counterparts. Catholic rates of unemployment consistently remained double until fairly recent times.

Meanwhile, a study showed areas with Catholic majorities only received 60% of the allocation of public jobs accorded to Protestant-majority areas across Northern Ireland. The inequality of outcome in Northern Irish society was palpable – but did this amount to discrimination?

Unionists might say, ‘Well, Catholics didn’t want to be part of the RUC, or to play a full part in society, disputing the very nature of the state.’ But what was the expected outcome from hoarding power and opportunity? Perhaps in those quiet decades after 1922 it was expected that Catholics would know their place. But by the 1960s – with so much tumult and change taking place – it was a forlorn hope that things would not boil over.

Stormont’s mistake was in not managing this change. O’Neill clearly tried. One of the fundamental problems of Unionist political leadership seems to be the lack of cultural cache middle-class Unionist leaders had among working-class loyalists. By definition, many here had little to give – sharing similarly poor conditions to Catholics – and resented re-cutting the cake.

Security and policing

Another area of discord centred on policing. The security apparatus was overwhelmingly Protestant – with Catholics only ever making up 17% of recruits to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Then there were the B-Specials – recruited almost exclusively from the Protestant community (initially from the ranks of the UVF). While the Special Powers Act – primarily used against the Catholic Nationalist

community – was introduced in 1922 as a temporary measure but lasted for fifty years until Direct Rule was introduced.

Even if we accept the argument that extraordinary times called for extraordinary measures, it was plainly undesirable to have one community in an ethno-national conflict effectively left to police the other. Whatever way you stack it up, it was a recipe for disaster.

Conclusions

Let's just go back to those initial questions:

- What were the forces in play that drove Northern Ireland to the abyss and created the Troubles?
- What were the trigger points and why were they missed?
- Who was to blame?
- Could things have been different?

Key opportunities to manage this change were missed by the authorities here. As is so often the case, Westminster is looking the other way when it comes to Northern Ireland. The onus was on Stormont to de-escalate tensions and avoid the violence and pain that was to come. It had its chances. NICRA did not even come into being until 1967, when similar movements in America were already well-advanced. If Terence O'Neill could see the need to break down community divisions in the early 1960s, then there was little excuse for inertia.

Who was to blame? Ultimately, the buck stops at the doors of those in public office – such is the price of political power. Any political system needs to find a way of incorporating the demands of new social movements and the next generation's demands. Northern Ireland's system of politics was hardly equal to the task.

O'Neill's legacy, such as it is, is confined to a series of 'what if?' moments. What if he had been able to bring Unionism along with him? What if he had been equal to the task of healing Northern Ireland's divides? Could the Troubles have been averted?

O'Neill was in many respects a tragic figure. His father, Captain Arthur O'Neill, became the first Member of Parliament to be killed serving in the First World War, while his two brothers were killed serving in the Second World War. An honorable man, in his way, who lacked the timing and luck to convince his fellow Unionists to come along with him (a product, perhaps, of being a one-time tank commander?).

But he also had a hapless quality. In an interview with the *Belfast Telegraph* published on May 10, 1969 he stated:

‘It is frightfully hard to explain to Protestants that if you give Roman Catholics a good job and a good house they will live like Protestants because they will see neighbours with cars and television sets; they will refuse to have eighteen children. But if a Roman Catholic is jobless, and lives in the most ghastly hovel he will rear eighteen children on National Assistance. If you treat Roman Catholics with due consideration and kindness they will live like Protestants in spite of the authoritative nature of their Church.’

As ‘backhanded compliments’ go, it’s a classic of the genre.

But what happens when hope and optimism and reason are met with indifference or even worse, violence? Where do they turn then? Could things have been different? Yes, of course. Although I do not underestimate the difficulties involved. The civil rights movement challenged the very edifice upon which Northern Ireland had been created. Ultimately, however, peaceful, law-abiding democratic agitation must be accommodated. It is always a symptom that the body politic is failing.

Was the civil rights movement an ‘IRA front’? All protest movements are amorphous, combining moderates and radicals. But the nature of the discrimination here was blatant and pervasive. There is no getting away from that. It deserved to be challenged. Indeed, it was inevitable in the vortex of 1960s politics that it would be so. Crucially, however, it was also *institutionalised*. The levers and agencies of the state perpetuated it – validated it. Central and local government. The RUC and B-Specials.

No-one ‘whipped up’ the civil rights movement. It was amazing it took so long to get going. A backlash of some form was inevitable. Too much grievance had backed up in the political system. The nature of that backlash, however, was not. When protest comes wearing its best Sunday suit, linking arms and singing ‘We Shall Overcome’, be thankful it is expressed so moderately.

This was legitimate protest. It could be reasoned with. A mirror image of movements against Apartheid in South Africa, or against the Vietnam War, taking place at the same time in London. Or Chicago. Or Paris. 1968 was the great year of protest and Northern Ireland’s civil rights movement was simply another manifestation where political authority was being challenged by a new generation. Change seemed possible because change was taking place everywhere.

The smart response, in hindsight, but also at the time, was to engage with the gist of the demands being made. They essentially amounted to a call to stop abusing processes that benefitted one community over the other. Looking back at them, I’m minded to ask: ‘Is that all they wanted?’

- ‘One man, one vote’ in elections
- No more gerrymandering
- A points-based system for allocating housing
- Scrapping the Special Powers Act
- Disbanding the B-Specials
- A new complaints mechanism for local councils.

It wasn’t a demand for radical change, merely to create a system of equality of opportunity. The political response should have been to engage with the civil rights movement’s demands and adapt. O’Neill was the canary in the mine – or the John the Baptist figure – telling Unionism change was coming and it was far better to make an ally of it. The shortage of housing was straightforward to fix by relaxing planning laws. There were still more Protestants than Catholics, so free and fair elections on proper constituency boundaries and under universal suffrage should not have been a hardship for Unionism. It would still have convincingly won.

Was conflict avoidable? Yes, it was. Were all Unionists to blame? No they were not. Many lacked opportunity, just like Catholics. The de-industrialisation that has crippled the economy here and shortage of decent housing were already biting. Just as it is inevitable that those without will rise up to demand a fairer share, so too it is inevitable that those who may have little more will resist changes that see them forfeit their advantage, as they see it.

In other aspects of life, loyalty usually counts for something. Whether it’s a worker dedicated to their company, or priority over tickets for cherished cup games offered first to season ticket holders. But a society cannot work on that basis. Human and civil rights must be universal. All must have equal opportunities. Northern Ireland’s Catholics did not. That was the essential problem.

The tragedy is that this call for democratic reform, an end to discrimination in jobs and housing did not graduate into more familiar left/right class-based politics. The sectarian fault line did not break. That is the political tragedy of 1960s Northern Ireland. If that had changed – and peaceful protest had led to entirely justifiable reforms – then the future could have been so different.

Britain swung to the left after the Second World War, creating a new consensus around social and economic progress, but Northern Ireland – without ‘normal’ politics, did not. Politics here failed. Perhaps it is still failing, although the basic inequalities generated by the Northern Irish state in the 1960s are, in the main, thankfully consigned to history.



Kevin Meagher's presentation was followed by an animated and wide-ranging audience discussion. Unfortunately, this discussion was not recorded. Nevertheless, a small number of those who had attended were later brought together, and their discussion is detailed below.

[**Martin Connolly**] There have been some fascinating photos reproduced recently in the *Belfast Telegraph* dating as far back as the 1950s. And they show you just how much things have changed. Did you know that the first thing to be put up in the Belfast City Hall grounds, before the City Hall itself was built, was the statue of Queen Victoria? That shows you where local politics was at.

[**Michael Hall**] I was completely turned off by local politics. I was brought up in a secular household, and even though my grandfather had been a B-Special and other relatives were in the Orange Order, my immediate family members were all Labour people. My uncle was a trade unionist in the shipyard and a member of the Communist Party. I was in the People's Democracy from its founding and was at Burntollet: and on the way into Derry, along Irish Street, we were attacked; somebody punched me in the face so I punched him right back, and at that moment I realised I had never really been exposed to the sectarian divisions existing in my own country. I thought: what is going on here? where is all this going to lead? who are these people with hate-filled eyes charging down at me, and who are these people who have come out from Derry to join us? In the sixties my political consciousness had nothing to do with Northern Ireland, or Irish history, it was focused *outside* Northern Ireland: the shooting of Rudi Dutschke in Germany, the 'May events' in France, the 'Prague Spring' ... local politics was not on my radar.

[**Sean O'Hare**] I had been in the IRA before I went to England in '65, but over there it was all left-wing politics that I was into. I remember coming home on holiday and someone asking me if I was still in the branch and I said, "No, it's all socialism now." He said, "Sure, we're going that way too." I said to myself: I don't effing think so! But that was about '66. When I came back from England, me, Joe McCann and others were part of that scene, and we thought that we were the vanguard here, that we were going to overthrow the two capitalist governments in Ireland and create a socialist Ireland. It makes you laugh now when you say that, but back then

We thought that we were the vanguard here, that we were going to overthrow the two capitalist governments in Ireland and create a socialist Ireland.

people really believed it, we really thought that we were the vanguard of international socialism. But then as things wore on you realised it was a sectarian squabble going on here, it wasn't a revolution. It's no use you thinking you are being a revolutionary if the whole Protestant population regard all republicans as a group of nationalists trying to overthrow them.

But then as things wore on you realised it was a sectarian squabble going on here, it wasn't a revolution.

Regarding my own story I was born in Amcomri Street in Belfast, which stands for 'American Committee for Relief in Ireland': they had built the houses in the street for refugees of 1920. And they put all the names in a hat and my grandfather's name was picked out, so we got a house there. I then moved to Ballymurphy when I was five. My father had been interned during the War, as had about three or four people in our street, who were ex-IRA prisoners. But they kept very quiet, they had a sort of – in my view – a defeated attitude, that their day had been and gone. The most active people in the street would have been three or four ex-servicemen. One had been in the RAF during the war, and was a member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party. And they were the people who complained to Belfast Corporation about housing and things like that. They sort of spoke for the local people. They weren't elected or anything, I think they represented that militant labour attitude that brought about the Health Service and the Labour government in Britain.

When we first moved into Ballymurphy the City Hall – these were Corporation houses at the time – had a woman, called Dunlop, who used to go round all the houses and inspect them, to see that they were clean, that the garden was tidy, the railings were painted, and so on. She probably, like so many others in the City Hall, couldn't believe that Catholics would know how to look after new modern houses. And when we were playing in the street we would have heard somebody shout: "Dunlop's in the street!" And our mothers trailed us in to clean up our gardens and brush the floors and all that. She had the people absolutely terrorised! But one time when she came to this ex-serviceman's house he said: "Hello, what do you want?" She said, "I'm here to inspect your house." And he told her that she would have to make an appointment to come into his house, and he would have to invite her in. More or less told her to get lost. And that one incident broke her power in the area.

When I was growing up, very few of the people of my age in the area would have been republican; I would have been because of family background. The

majority of kids, when the 1956 IRA border campaign started, just laughed and joked about it, saying it was daft, and they must have heard that from their parents. And I remember when the ceasefire came all my mates in the street said: “Ah, youse are all beat now!” And I said, “No, we’re just dumping weapons, we’ll be back.” And at school myself and Kevin Hannaway would have been the only two republicans in the class. And people’s attitude to republicans then was: what about the health service, what about family allowance, the dole; and some people had got new houses, so what’s the use of republicanism, it’s dead and gone. Catholics should just accept their place in a Protestant-dominated society. That was the general attitude.

I think that Unionism and the Unionist government missed a golden opportunity during those years; they could have tried to involve the nationalist population through the Nationalist Party. Had they given nationalists a ‘warm house’ – for want of a better term – I think they could have won them over to the state. I remember I wrote ‘Up the IRA!’ on a gable wall, and there was a whole uproar about it. The other mothers were down at my Ma’s door saying, “He wrote ‘Up the IRA’ on that wall!” The attitude then was: put your head down and get on with things, we’re doing okay, never mind this old republican business.

I think that the Unionist government missed a golden opportunity during those years. Had they given nationalists a ‘warm house’ I think they could have won them over to the state.

In ’64 I joined the republican movement. It was like a family tradition, it was your family duty, but you never thought anything would ever come from the IRA. We were a kind of a sub-culture, we weren’t generally accepted within the nationalist population, they thought we were crackpots. And we may have been at the time! The branch for the whole of Whiterock, Ballymurphy, and part of Andersonstown had only five members: myself, Joe McCann and three others. They were from old republican families.

When Terence O’Neill came to power he visited St Dominic’s School on the Falls Road, and got his photo taken with nuns, etc. And people said at the time, jokingly, that Unionists used to walk over us with hobnail boots, but O’Neill is going to walk over us with bedroom slippers, but at least that’s better than the boots! People were saying: let’s see what happens. But then among the younger generation, the left-wing thing started coming into it in the early sixties.

1964 was the big turning point. As I said, the nationalist population more or

less accepted things as they were, and there was an awful fear of trouble among the older generation. People accepted that O'Neill was half decent, but when Paisley said he was going to take the flag down in Divis Street, and more or less forced O'Neill to send the cops in to take it down,† young nationalists decided that it wasn't O'Neill who was ruling the country, it was Paisley and his philosophy. The flag was replaced and when the police came again to take this second flag away there was a couple of thousand people, all young, on the streets. I remember a funny thing. You could have been arrested in them days if you had a Tricolour in the house, so nobody had a flag. But there was a local girl who had a jumper with green and yellow stripes on it, so the crowd carried her on their shoulders down Divis Street! The cops charged them and so the crowd pulled up the gratings, smashed them into pieces and then pelted the police with them. This went on for two nights, and older people were saying to us: "Don't do that, you'll bring it all down on top of us; they'll be shooting us in our beds, we don't want to start all that again!" And we said, "No, this is a different thing, it's not going to happen again."

The turning point was the moment the police turned and ran and were chased back down to Hastings Street barracks. That was the turning point for the younger nationalist population. People think of '69 and the Civil Rights turmoil. Of course that played a big part, but this was the real turning point: everything led on from that. There was a meeting called in Castle Street on the Sunday following, and some republicans from Dublin spoke, but they reckon there was between

three and four thousand people there, which was unbelievable. There hadn't been a nationalist crowd like that since the ODR riots in the Thirties. People's attitudes were starting to change.

The Blues supporters used to walk down Leeson Street and there was always shouting between both sides. But this time the people came out and physically

That was the turning point for the younger nationalist population. People think of '69 and the Civil Rights turmoil. But 1964 was the real turning point: everything led on from that.

† When, in September 1964, during the run-up to a British General Election, an Irish Tricolour was displayed in the Divis Street headquarters of the Republican Party in West Belfast, Rev. Ian Paisley, leader of the Free Presbyterian Church, threatened to remove it if the authorities did not. On the 28th, when the RUC, armed with sten-guns, revolvers, riot-batons and shields, went to seize the flag they were confronted by a crowd of more than 2,000 people. After the police had smashed down the doors of the headquarters with pickaxes and taken possession of the flag, violence erupted. Severe rioting continued for another three nights.

stopped them from marching down. Also, there was somebody being arrested in Ballymurphy and people came out and stoned the cops, which had never happened before. I remember another occasion down the Falls some cops were trying to arrest people and people pulled the bins out and blocked the streets. And this too hadn't happened from the thirties. So '64 changed people's attitudes entirely.

[**Martin Connolly**] You're talking about '64. If you look back that whole sixties decade seems like an eternity, there was so much happening. You have the whole decolonising of large swathes of the African continent. You have South Africa and its apartheid regime and the Sharpeville shootings when 70 people were killed and hundreds injured. You have JFK in America, all of that. You have the Beatles. And all of that played into a youthful energy, that young people were not going to accept things anymore; the whole 'swinging sixties' as it was called, kind of gave a vent to young people's attitudes. You had the Paris events, and behind the Iron Curtain you had the Prague Spring. Before that in '56 you had the Hungarian Revolution, and events in Poland as well. *Students were rising up. So it was kind of gathering pace, this youthful involvement in politics, and it was no surprise that it caught on here as well.* Students were rising up. So it was kind of gathering pace, this youthful involvement in politics, and it was no surprise that it caught on here as well.

[**Sean O'Hare**] In the sixties you also had some decent journalism, unlike now. The likes of the 'Insight team' in the *Sunday Times*, Robert Fisk....

[**Martin Connolly**] Paul Foot, I remember him. And John Pilger.

[**Martin Snodden**] Yes, I think an important thing too, in terms of that particular period, was the growth of television, and the journalism that was taking place, and the images. Events weren't just happening somewhere across the world, they were brought into your own living room. So there was all this information coming in on what was taking place in other countries. I might have been 16 whenever JFK was assassinated. I remember candles being lit in Catholic houses in Donegal Pass, so there was this local Catholic connection to that global event.

[**Sean O'Hare**] You could buy all sorts of pictures, there was one of JFK and the Pope, but then when Robert Kennedy was also killed you could get a long picture of the two Kennedys with the Pope in the middle. There were two groups among young people in those days. There was the radical groups, which I thought I

belonged to, and the ones who just loved the music. They would have been Beatles fans, the more radical were Rolling Stones fans.

[**Michael Hall**] In the sixties I read dozens of radical books – by authors like Frantz Fanon, Herbert Marcuse, Raoul Vaneigem, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, R D Laing, A S Neill... And yet the irony is that – until the personal shock of the Burntollet ambush – I had little or no interest in reading about Ireland or Irish history – for up to then Irish history, to me at least, was just boring and divisive.

[**Martin Connolly**] That international dimension is very important because you also nearly had World War Three – the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

[**Michael Hall**] People often say they can remember what they were doing when Kennedy was assassinated. Well, I can't... but I *can* remember the fear and excitement there was as the Russian ships slowly approached the US blockade.

[**Sean O'Hare**] When we were kids the most frightening thing, from a religious aspect, was in the late 50s: it was a thing called 'The Three Dark Days'. It was all to do with the 'Third Letter of Fatima'... and we were terrorised about this. There was going to be three black, dark days, and candles were going to be burned in the homes of the Holy people. Now, I thought the 'holy people' were the wee men who collected the money in the chapel, who would be saved while the rest of us would be f__ked. And the Pope was ready to read this letter, and all the adults were talking about the Three Dark Days. I remember working on my grandfather's farm in Donegal and my task was to drive cattle up to higher ground after milking... and I was terrified that the three dark days would happen when I was up the hill and never get down again! People had all these ludicrous superstitions back then.

[**Martin Snodden**] Whenever I was a child growing up in Donegal Pass, and even as five or six-year-olds we were almost 'street urchins', we grew up out on the street. There were no worries about going up to Ormeau Park, or Botanic Gardens or anything. You were just out on the street and everybody seemed to look after everybody else's kids as best they could, while we were getting up to all the devilment of the day that we could think of. But I can remember as a six-year old, and this was maybe '62, going up to Ormeau Park and being caught by a couple of people from Cromac Street in the Markets and beaten up. I have a

We were almost 'street urchins'. You were just out on the street and everybody seemed to look after everybody else's kids as best they could.

vivid memory of running down the Ormeau Road, back down to the safety of the Pass, and that was my first experience of sectarianism. And I can also remember getting pulled in off the street by my mother at the interface with Cromac Street when there was a riot. This was probably to do with the '64 trouble over the flag. And I was told: "Stay away from those bad people!" And as a child those things register in your mind: oh, there's bad people down there. Even though my favourite aunt came from down there, but you just didn't marry it up in your head.

It would have been shortly after that when we moved up to Suffolk [estate], and Suffolk at that time was an amazing place to grow up in as a child. Green-field playground, where you had the rivers, the trees, all of that, and you had lots of things to be doing. In 1969 I was fourteen whenever things were happening, and I can remember my school mates, who lived at the top of Lenadoon, were getting bullied by ones who were coming up from Andersonstown. I remember two of them saying to me: come up and give us a hand. And I went up – and this is fourteen years old – and going up there to have fights with these people who were coming across. And that was my introduction to inter-community conflict.

I left school at fifteen years old and things were getting really bad up there, because it was a small Protestant neighbourhood right beside what was to us a huge Catholic population. There was always 'them' coming in at 'us' and very little of 'us' going in to 'them' – it was more of a defensive type of thing. And at that particular time things were really, really bad, especially '70, '71 up there. And I can remember there were alarm systems set up, and whenever there was an attack on the community these alarms were set off and people came running out; every male in the area of any age was coming out to try and defend their community. I can remember one time going to get my brother, I was walking the dog along Horn Drive, and for some reason I had gone up by Doon Road, and there was a crowd there. And they seen me and were calling me all the Orange bastards of the day, and I took a charge at them, letting on there was ones coming the other way, and this boy stepped out of the crowd and 'Bang! Bang!' I dived over a hedge to get away. And they were regular occurrences then.

Whenever there was an attack on the community people came running out; every male in the area of any age was coming out to try and defend their community.

And Lenadoon Avenue at that stage we were evacuating people, and as we were evacuating people other people were moving new families in, Catholic families

in. And it was in Lenadoon, when I was sixteen, that I had my first gun in my hand, and asked to defend the community. The reality was that I had been defending the community for two years prior to that, but this was a new way of defending the community. And at that particular stage there were people in the area who were joining the security forces, like the UDR – my father joined it – and I joined other things. And that’s the way it seemed to be in the community. For our age group never seen the UDR, or the RUC or the British Army on the scene whenever things were happening in the area. It was only *after* things had happened that they appeared and tried to create some kind of barrier. But it was us who were always on the streets, standing on the corners, up at the shops, and were left and felt responsible for the defence of the area. So you had all of that going on.

I was arrested, taken down to Andersonstown for hijacking a lorry and put against the wall for a period, and then brought in and put in front of a table with a big spotlight on me and questioned. Those were the type of experiences. And whenever I was arrested everybody in the neighbourhood came out onto the streets to protest. And eventually, after a lot of hours, they released me. But at that time what I was witnessing in the community was this drift, this slide into chaos. And whenever you were getting different news reports it was feeding into that chaos. And one of the things for us was Jack Lynch moving troops to the border, and everybody then automatically believed there was going to be a war

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on. So there was no shortage of those putting their hands up and taking one side or another at that time. I remember up in the British Legion Club, after it had been bombed about three times, there must have been 25-30 people lined up with old Steyr rifles that probably would have blew up in your face! But the word we got was that the IRA were are not going to try and blow it up any more, they were going to take it over themselves – and they eventually did.

But that’s what was feeding into the mentality of that community, and it was a community which felt itself under siege. There were a few occasions when there was a mass of people that would have come up from other districts, up into Suffolk, to launch an attack into Lenadoon Avenue. I remember on one of those nights, everyone had a couple of houses to target, and I had a crowd up from Seymour Hill, and I was supposed to say to them: right, you hit number 16, and

you hit number 12... And whenever I said that they never f__king done anything, because people from other areas were never used to that type of engagement. And I remember having to run up to each door myself and kick it in, to get these others to actually do something! The difficulty was that after that they got on their buses and went back home! We were left in the area and that particular night it was a bit like 'Zulu': there were reports that hundreds were coming up from Lenadoon to attack Suffolk, and we're sitting in the middle of this. But for the British Army God knows what would have happened.

But that was those teenage years, and a drift into physical force violence that eventually led me into Long Kesh. And there wasn't, if truth be told, there wasn't a political thought in my head at that time, it was purely about defence and attack, and that was it. There was no politicisation within either the UDA or the UVF up in Suffolk, it wasn't happening. And there was very little training. Basically you were handed a gun and you knew which way to point it and you knew if you pulled that trigger something was going to come out the other end. There was very little firearms practice or anything else. And there was us going out with these guns and bombs, and some bombs blowing up in our faces and everything else. And it is not until you get into Long Kesh prison camp that you actually start to get a political education. And there's conversations taking place. On the outside we would have targeted people simply because they were a Catholic or were living in a certain area. ... Compound 21 was the Official IRA, Compound 20 was the Remands, 19 and 18 were UVF, 16 and 17 were UDA, and here's these conversations taking place across the wire with the Official IRA, who two months earlier you might have been shooting or targeting on the street.

[In Long Kesh] here's these conversations taking place across the wire with the Official IRA, who two months earlier you might have been shooting or targeting on the street.

And this is the beginning then of that education, and for me it was definitely a university of a kind, sitting down with people like Paul McDonnell from the Lower Falls, a young Official IRA man, he and I studied together. But initially we were talking about our own upbringing and his was no different from mine, and mine was no different from his, and that was the reality. We became friends as we studied through that. To such a degree that he actually came up to visit me after he was released. And the screws and other people in my own cage were saying: 'What the f__k's going on here!' And that's just the way it was at that time. We

can't forget how bad things were then in that period of the seventies. I never had the luxury of leaving it and going back, this was 24 hours a day, every day of the week, every week of the year. Constant, constant, tension, pressure, activity.

And then there were the Tartan gangs, and Suffolk Tartan were fighting with Finaghy Tartan and Taughmonagh Tartan, two other loyalist neighbourhoods, at discos and different things. Yet withall, then everybody was together as one fighting these people from the other side. It was bad, bad old times. Where I am now I can reflect back on things, but for me as a teenage lad it was a nightmare.

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lad it was a nightmare.***

[**Martin Connolly**] I live just above Suffolk, but the transformation that has taken place... I remember going to Suffolk playing on the football pitches in the 1980s and it was obviously tense then, but nowadays the community relations are brilliant there.

[**Michael Hall**] Marty, you talked there about prison being like a university... With regard to our competing interpretations of history – after all, that's what people were ultimately killing one another over – in my opinion the 'chattering classes' and the academics felt little responsibility to help change things; they left any re-education to be undertaken by grassroots activists. I remember when some progressive elements close to the UDA began to promote Ulster's *shared* history – this was around the time of the UDA's *Beyond the Religious Divide* document – one academic sarcastically commented that this was all emanating from 'the University of Gawn Street' – a reference to the UDA's headquarters in East Belfast – as if to say: 'Who do these plebs think they are; what would *they* know?'

[**Sean O'Hare**] I came back from London with very radical left-wing views, but when it all started in '69 the emotions took over, and even the most zealous socialists would have had the attitude that the Northern State will have to go – and that's it! The Irish Army will come in and support us. And when the fighting was going on – you mentioned Lynch's speech – people were saying, "The Irish Army is crossing the border!" And then some members of the Knights of Malta come down one night, and there was smoke and you couldn't see them clearly, but you could see that these people had uniforms, and somebody shouts, "There's the Irish Army coming now!" And everybody started cheering. That was the attitude, and it took us a few months to come to our senses and realise that this wasn't the way.

[**Martin Snodden**] When I was growing up there was a deference to people with any form of authority. We lived in a ‘two-up, two-down’ in Donegall Pass, and the front room was kept for those people. We weren’t allowed to play in the front room because that was for the GP coming in, or when a clergyman called: that was always the best-kept room, but was never lived in.

[**Michael Hall**] Religion had a real hold on many people then. When I was at primary school, my teacher said one day: “Right, I want you all to bring in your Bibles tomorrow.” Then she paused and looked at me. “Michael, you look a bit confused? You *do* have a Bible in the house, don’t you?” “No, miss.” “But what do you use for church?” “We don’t go to church, miss.” And she went bananas! “Get into the corner and face the wall!” I was in that corner for over an hour. And when I told my parents my mother was ready to dash round to the school and confront the teacher, but my father stopped her, and said it would all only rebound on me. So he had to go out there and then and buy our first family Bible!

[**Martin Connolly**] It was pure indoctrination. And in Catholic schools as well. When I went to school there was deference to the teachers and the teacher was deferring to the priests. It was madness.

[**Harry Donaghy**] The priest, the schoolteacher, the lawyer, were venerated basically. But that was starting to dissipate as the sixties progressed.

[**Sean O’Hare**] A mate of mine at school became a teacher, and he got a job in one of the schools until they discovered that he hadn’t gone to a Catholic training college, so he was out, even though he was from the area. You have to remember that Catholic Mass attendance was about 97% at one time; now it’s down to 20% or something. In my school whenever the priest came into the classroom everybody had to stand up and remain standing until he left, and if we met him on the street we had to salute him.

[**Michael Hall**] My first experience of sectarianism was of Catholic sectarianism. My sister and I went to Irish dancing – and not that many children from a ‘Protestant’ background went to Irish dancing – but at one particular fêis my sister was doing so well it looked as if she would be junior champion. And although she came second my mother was delighted. But then she saw the other parents arguing with one of the adjudicators, and finally one parent came over to her and said. “Mrs Hall, your daughter should have come first, and, to our shame, we suspect that the reason she didn’t is because the organisers don’t want a Protestant name listed as

winner in the *Irish News* tomorrow. And this was *before* the Troubles, so there was a latent sectarianism in *all* communities, bubbling away under the surface.

[**Martin Snodden**] I think there is also a whole story there in the growth of the civil rights and the social justice movement, even going back to '63 with Con and Patricia McClosky. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was an umbrella grouping, there were many different groups within it, and the history does get very confused and complex. And that is why this type of thing we are involved in is so critical with regard to getting some kind of decent narrative of what things were actually like then.

[**Harry Donaghy**] There were a lot of people in 1964 who could remember 1919, 1920, 1921, they could remember that this place was God-awful with what was going on. But things were beginning to change, until – as Sean said – '64 happened.

[**Martin Connolly**] The people coming through on the nationalist side, were beneficiaries of the Butler Education Act, so that was also a massive thing. Along with the Welfare State.

[**Sean O'Hare**] The Civil Rights movement kicked a sleeping dog, and when the dog started barking many of those who had seemingly supported Civil Rights got offside, saying this is nothing to do with us.

[**Martin Snodden**] Do you not think, Sean, that within the Civil Rights there were those who just wanted to bring about reform of the state, and then there were the revolutionaries who wanted to *change* the whole state. There were real differences there, and it just gets presented simply as a civil rights organisation when underneath it was so much more.

And yet even in the darkest hours of the conflict there was still relationships across the 'divide'. Not a huge number of them, but there would have been people who were trying to keep in touch with workmates on the other side. And there was even bandsmen from both sides who leant each other their instruments.

[**Michael Hall**] Jackie Hewitt, manager of Farset, once said that the peace process started the day the first stone was thrown. What he

Even in the darkest hours of the conflict there was still relationships across the 'divide'. Not a huge number of them, but there would have been people who were trying to keep in touch with workmates on the other side.

meant was that whenever the two communities found themselves in conflict there were always individuals who said: hold on, let's go across [the 'divide'] and see what we can *both* do here. Right from the beginning there were individuals in both communities trying to put a lid on things; or taking children on holiday schemes, just to get them away from interface violence. So, long before you had any politicians, or church or business leaders, coming onto the media talking about the need for a 'peace process', it was ordinary people, people who wanted to build bridges with the 'other' side, who, in the true sense, started the real 'peace process'.

[Martin Snodden] That is an interesting observation there, absolutely. Another thing we haven't looked at is where did all those people who were supporting Civil Rights go to whenever the torch was f__king lit! I never seen them up in my communities, saying: don't be doing this...or anything else. So when *human* rights were being denied – particularly the right to life – I often asked myself: where did the leaders of that mass movement go to? They just disappeared.

[Michael Hall] Whenever the PD sought to align itself with the Provisionals I left it and brought out a pamphlet lambasting both reactionary Unionism and armed force Republicanism, and a message was relayed to me from the Provos that if I wrote anything like that again I would get my “knees ventilated”. Two weeks later I was confronted by two UVF men who said: “We're watching you, you bastard!” And whenever I went to Kelly's Cellars – where the PD leaders used to meet every Saturday – and complained about all this, they just said: “It's your own f__king fault, this whole place is sewn up between the two extremes and there's nothing we can do.” And I said, “But we brought people out onto the streets with talk of working-class unity!” And they said, “Oh, you can forget about *that*.”

[Martin Snodden] I think that's a critical story too, you know. You were there, you were doing that, and that's what happened to you.

[Harry Donaghy] This is why it is important to speak to people who were about at the time, and can relate events from their own perspective. Some of these people hadn't been spoken to for fifty years.

[Sean O'Hare] My generation would have been the last generation that mixed with Protestants, worked with them, met them at dances, cinemas, etc. Because of the Troubles today's generation don't know what it was like. That is why we should try to explain to them how it *can* be done.