

Reflections on 1969
Lived Experiences & Living history

(Discussion 4)

The First Peace Dividends?

compiled by

Michael Hall

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mikehall.island@yahoo.co.uk
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The Fellowship of Messines Association

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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 other backgrounds, united in their realisation of the need to confront sectarianism in our society as a necessary means of realistic peace-building. The project also engages young people and new citizens on themes of citizenship and cultural and political identity.

Among the different programmes initiated by the Messines Project was a series of discussions entitled *Reflections on 1969: Lived Experiences & Living History*. These discussions were viewed as an opportunity for people to engage positively and constructively with each other in assisting the long overdue and necessary process of separating actual history from some of the myths that have proliferated in communities over the years. It was felt important that current and future generations should hear, and have access to, the testimonies and the reflections of former protagonists while these opportunities still exist. Access to such evidence would hopefully enable younger generations to evaluate for themselves the factuality of events, as opposed to some of the folklore that passes for history in contemporary society.

This *fourth* discussion was held in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, on 22 October 2019. The discussion was chaired by **Padraig Yeates**, and **Jim McDermott** gave an historical overview before the discussion was opened up to all those present. These individuals represented a wide diversity of political backgrounds and allegiances, and most of them had either been participants in the events under discussion, or witnesses to them.

The theme of this fourth discussion was *The First Peace Dividends?*

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

The First Peace Dividends?

[**Padraig Yeates**] Just a few words before Jimmy McDermott gives his presentation. I was reading over the Hunt Report, which is quite short. I had forgotten how brilliantly written it is – whatever you think of its conclusions. It is very clear, it is very concise, it just cuts through the waffle. But one thing which struck me was the preoccupation at the time with the IRA, and its association with revolutionary socialist groups, and the potential this had to cause serious disruption in the North of Ireland and in a wider context. So, that’s something we tend to forget now. That was seen as the *real* problem, rather than anything inbuilt into the sectarian infrastructure of Northern Ireland. It was also a distraction for the British government, but it underlines the total lack of connection between the British political establishment, Labour or Conservative, and the local politics of Northern Ireland. It is an angle I had forgotten about, how important it was at the time. Jimmy will expand on that far more adequately than I can, so I will ask Jimmy to speak now.

[There was a] total lack of connection between the British political establishment, Labour or Conservative, and the local politics of Northern Ireland.

[**Jim McDermott**] What I am going to say will be very individualistic, I suppose. I was eighteen when those events were happening in August, September and October through to December 1969, and I was completely, and I mean completely, at sea. It was only later on when I was able to read up on it a wee bit that I found out more about it. And I think there is a tendency within all of us to varnish the past, to think we knew more than we actually did. As someone once said: ‘Life is lived forward, but is only understood backward.’

I don’t want to talk about the events we have already covered in this series of discussions – the unexpected violence of 1969, the sudden deaths, the enforced movement of families, the distrust, the context of the Civil Rights organisation – but in the period just after August I want to try and revisit what *attitudes* were like, what life was like, what *uncertainty* there was. I want to trace out two parallel sets of events. I want to look at the nationalist community’s reaction to the unfolding events which had culminated in 1969,

and what so-called ‘peace dividend’ they were hoping for when the Troubles subsided in 1969, or at least when the house-burning stopped and so on. I also want to look at unionist perspectives, whether from moderate unionists or hardline unionists, for there was a spread of different opinions within the unionist community, just as there was within the nationalist community. What expectations did both communities have? I also want to look at the Northern Ireland state as it was on the verge, on the cusp, of the Civil Rights movement.

Sir James Craig was the longest-serving member of the Northern Ireland parliament; he had been there from 1921 to 1938, and he represented – even if you look at his face on portraits – a solidity, a continuation, a comfort, if you like, for unionism. He was able to keep all the various factions within unionism within the one fold. He had been there during the violent days of the period 1920-22, when the state was getting set up. He had been a Member of Parliament, but he had also witnessed at first

hand the tremendous violence that had accompanied the setting up of the Northern Ireland state. 455 people had died in Belfast between July 1920 and August 1922. He saw his task as consolidating the state but above all keeping a Unionist Party majority, doing away with Proportional Representation in 1929, doing what he considered he had to do. There are therefore two different views of him. For most nationalists – who very reluctantly accepted that there would be Unionist Party rule, although there wasn’t much heart given to it – Sir James Craig represented repression, things they didn’t like. On the other hand to the unionist community generally he represented reassurance.

[T]remendous violence had accompanied the setting up of the Northern Ireland state. 455 people had died in Belfast between July 1920 and August 1922.

His successor, Andrews, carried on essentially in his footsteps. He didn’t create waves. The Ulster Unionist Party sat in Stormont with very little Nationalist opposition. When they sat on the benches at Westminster they sat on the Conservative benches. They were a safe pair of hands. The 1960s were to come as a shock therefore to the unionist community, and bring a sense of optimism to the nationalist community. Then the fourth premier came in, Captain Terence O’Neill. He was a member of the Orange Order, an ex-military man; he came from an established unionist family, and had been educated at a public school. In many ways he represented a continuity, with one serious

break: he wanted to try and reform Unionism. Arguably this was partly in response to the inroads being made by the Northern Ireland Labour Party, rather than any threat, real or imagined, from republicans. The failure of the IRA's border campaign of 1956-62 had effectively demonstrated that armed republicanism had little support, had little financial backing, was not a success even in motivating their American supporters, and had eventually petered out. The six years the campaign lasted wouldn't have anything of an historical resonance to the period 1918-21 in Ireland, or 1920-22 in Northern Ireland.

This failure led to a rethink among republicans in the South, and with the threat of armed insurrection seemingly lifted there was a comfort-zone established for unionism in the North. The new danger to the Unionist Party was that in the sixties the Northern Ireland Labour Party was starting to make inroads into the old certainties. The long-established all-class alliance within political unionism felt increasingly under threat. Realising that reform was necessary Terence O'Neill, who was a very plausible performer, and a decent man on a one-to-one basis, felt it was safe to make small gestures towards the Catholic/nationalist community. In actual fact what O'Neill was offering, with his visits to Catholic convents and all, wasn't very much, but it did spook the right wing of unionism. Talk of reform frightened people imbued with old attitudes and shibboleths: 'Not an Inch!' 'What we have, we hold!' To this section of loyalism there were only two sets of people in the North: there were loyalists and there were 'disloyalists'. To give ground to disloyalists was, to them, the thin edge of the wedge.

And there were always undercurrents of concern, especially in the 1960s with two significant anniversaries coming up, both seminal to the mindsets of unionism and nationalism, though both separate. In 1966 the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising meant that there would be massive parades all over Ireland, with Belfast, Derry and Newry being no exception. The fear of an insurrection, the bogey-man, was always part of unionist mental furniture. The other big anniversary was of the Battle of the Somme. The huge sacrifice made by the 36th (Ulster) Division was almost part of the social religion of Protestant Ulster. Very few houses didn't have family

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members who had fought – and often died – at the Somme, or wouldn't have cherished photographs or other mementos of their loved ones. Old ideas, old fears were being brought up, more often imagined than real.

The IRA, despite the fracas in Divis Street in 1964, by 1966 had not reestablished itself as a potent physical force. On the contrary there had been a drift to social agitation under Cathal Goulding in the South, and that had permeated what little 'physical force' republican organisation there was in Belfast. The UVF, on the other hand, long since a folk memory since 1913-22, had been reformed. There were new forces stirring.

As Terence O'Neill started to talk of reform some people got very afraid. Evangelical preachers like Rev. Ian Paisley came onto the scene, and Paisley is interesting in that he not only reflects, but he heightens, the fears of often working-class unionism: 'You can't trust these others, they are disloyalists.' And that mindset is very hard to shift, it has been there from the inception of the state, in parallel with the nationalist community which does not trust the state. To the unionist community there is a fear that the state will be destabilised. Maybe there will even be another Easter Rising? There had been events before 1969, such as the UVF murders of Matilda Gould, John Scullion and Peter Ward.

And now there was this emerging Civil Rights movement demanding equal British rights for British citizens. And under the umbrella of the new Civil Rights agitation there were a range of different ideologies: from the Northern Ireland Labour Party, to moderate unionism, to some republican elements, to the old Nationalist Party, the Liberal Party, trade unionists, Communist Party... all under the umbrella of the Civil Rights movement, demanding reform. It was like a red rag to a bull to those who were content with the status quo, and in consequence the Civil Rights movement found itself in many serious engagements with the authorities. Civil Rights marches also found themselves opposed by loyalist counter-marches.

Tensions had correspondingly increased, and there were two responses to the escalating disorder. First of all there was a paranoia, and this paranoia was to increase as the sixties went on, from militant unionists: 'This is it! the genie is out of the bottle, they [the nationalist community] will want everything, and they will want it right away. You can't please them.' There might be different

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groups within the umbrella of the Civil Rights Association [NICRA], but under it all this is really a republican plot: ‘Take my word,’ loyalist hardliners said, ‘those left-wingers and republicans have so much in common that we really can’t trust any of them. The best thing is to put them back in the box, and go back to what worked, back to what we know.’

The Minister of Home Affairs, Bill Craig, told Terence O’Neill: you can’t go nicely-nicely here, this is the thin edge of the wedge and it must be avoided. Craig banned Civil Rights marches and so on. (And later he became associated with the Vanguard movement.) But he is significant, because he represents, within O’Neill’s cabinet at Stormont, a hardline entrenched position, similar to Harry West and others who we would term ‘traditional’ Unionists. Even moderate unionists like Chichester-Clark, O’Neill’s cousin, feared what would happen if traditional unionism was not, in some way, appeased. For him, and he was generally a reasonable man, the Civil Rights demands could upset the apple cart, even if they were on face value perfectly reasonable.

Could you, for example, disagree with ‘One Man, One Vote’? How could a person with a property evaluation have multiple votes when people who lived in the same area had no votes at all; and it clearly worked in favour of unionism. And in Derry there was gerrymandering to the extent that small wards like the Waterside could throw up twelve local councillors against eight from a huge majority Catholic community as in the Bogside. In

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Derry there were 6,000 perceived Protestants and 20,000 perceived Catholics, so the situation was a clear example of rigged gerrymandering. The ‘B-Specials’ were also seen by nationalists as a partisan force, a force that was used to bolster the Orange Order. Housing was allocated on a local basis, often unfairly. There was a long list of things which nationalists found outrageous, but which unionists, because they had lived with them so long, not only refused to find ‘bad’ but actually found comforting: this is the way it works, don’t rock the boat, it’s better than going back to the violence of the past. Others thought they needed to nip in the bud anything that looked like massive reform.

The big problem to the Unionist Party was how would the British government, especially the Labour Party, respond to these Civil Rights demands. After all,

there was cross-party support in the Labour Party for reforms. To them the slogan of 'British standards for British citizens' sounded perfectly reasonable.

On 22 November 1968 O'Neill announced a 5-point 'reform package', consisting of a points system for housing allocation, the appointment of an ombudsman, the reform of local government elections, a review of the Special Powers Act, and the replacement of Londonderry Corporation by the Londonderry Development Commission. It was met with a lukewarm response by nationalists and anger by hardline unionists. A week later inter-communal stoning broke out after a legal Civil Rights march in Armagh was blocked by 1000 supporters of Rev. Ian Paisley and Major Ronald Bunting, some of whom carried sticks and pipes with sharpened ends. On 9 December O'Neill made his 'Ulster stands at the crossroads' speech on television, in which he appealed to the Civil Rights movement: "Your voice has been heard, and clearly heard. Your duty now is to take the heat out of the situation."

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NICRA responded by calling for a period of 'truce' without marches or demonstrations. However, the more radical People's Democracy grouping announced a march from Belfast to Derry commencing 1st January 1969, and when it was viciously attacked by loyalists at Burntollet Bridge outside Derry, polarisation intensified, and the situation on the ground deteriorated even further. Finally, on 29 April 1969 Terence O'Neill resigned as leader of the Unionist Party. In the Shankill Road celebration bonfires were lit. O'Neill was replaced as Northern Ireland Prime Minister by Major James Chichester-Clark.

What followed is now history: the 'Battle of the Bogside' in Derry, quickly accompanied by the terrible events in Belfast of 14th to 16th August, with killings and burnings. Nationalists felt they had been attacked by an angry and growing groundswell of unionism and loyalism, while loyalists felt that the only way they could respond was to attack what they perceived to be an angry and growing nationalist insurrection. Both sides had moved into binary positions. They each saw the 'other' as simply a tribal block. For nationalists, it would have been extremely difficult in September, for example, behind the barricades, listening to pirate Radio Free Belfast, to have convinced your friends and your neighbours that loyalists were your friends, that they were just misguided, or

anything like that. That would have been impossible. But on the Shankill, just as on the Falls, there was the belief: ‘That’s it, it’s out of the bottle now!’ And the fear, in both communities, was: what is going to happen next?

The unfolding events took Westminster by surprise. The parties there, by an unwritten convention, had not discussed Northern

Ireland for generations. It was regarded as devolved business, to be resolved locally. Most MPs were ignorant of the history of Northern Ireland, they were ignorant of the nuances of Northern Ireland. It was Gerry Fitt, MP for the Dock Ward, who had begun to open things up. When he had been elected in the sixties he, along with MPs like Paul Rose, began to investigate various problems of what was described as ‘Britain’s hidden political slum’. Many MPs did now begin to take an interest, and the ongoing Civil Rights campaign had amplified that interest. But there was no in-depth knowledge of the way that local people here thought.

And it’s in that context that Chichester-Clark was summoned to meet Prime Minister Harold Wilson, James Callaghan and Denis Healey at Westminster. Chichester-Clark took with him Brian Faulkner, Robert Porter and Ken Bloomfield. They really expected the worse; never mind that troops had already been sent in, they thought that: oh, they’ll try and reform Northern Ireland completely. Chichester-Clark volunteered to let the commander-in-chief of the British Army, General Freeland, take over all security forces.

The RUC was to be disarmed. For the nationalist community this was a real peace dividend. Here were the people who had been patrolling the streets – and to the Catholic community were agents of repression – being disarmed for the first time since 1921. The B-Specials, who had been regarded as a Protestant partisan force, were to be stood down. The Unionist leaders hoped that they were being stood down temporarily. But when Harold Wilson confirmed that they were to be phased out, Chichester-Clark was aghast. How could he sell this to the unionist community? Because while Catholics saw the B-Specials as agents of repression, to members of the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community these were people who lived beside you, people who delivered your milk, people who worked their farms next door to you, ordinary decent people, just with the task that they must guard

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Ulster. This identification within the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community was not sufficiently taken on board by the Westminster government, which is why there is a question mark on the term 'peace dividend?', for certainly in one community it was not regarded in any way as a 'peace dividend'.

Then the Scarman Report came out in August-September, in which had been examined the foundation issues which divided the two communities. And it found, by and large, that the demands of the Civil Rights campaign were legitimate. Once again, Scarman was viewed quite differently in both communities.

To the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, and to most people in England, especially in the Labour Party, it was perfectly right to stop the gerrymandering, to have a fair allocation of housing by a points system (which led to the establishment of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and had actually been part of the programme of the Northern Ireland Labour Party in 1964). It was perfectly right to disarm the police, perfectly right to do away with the B-Specials, to get a proper complaints procedure against discrimination in housing, a proper complaints procedure against members of the security forces who exceeded their brief... and so on. Indeed, there were 600 complaints within the first week it was set up.

But within the unionist community there was only dismay. To unionists it now seemed that the only people being listened to were nationalists, and, as far as many unionists were concerned, these nationalists had been, and were still being, manipulated by republicans. Indeed, Chichester-Clark himself believed that in 1969

the 15th August police action had been a response to a republican uprising. Unionist/loyalist feeling was: what was all their loyalty to England worth now? What were all their sacrifices in the First World War all about?

So the two communities were branching off, with increasingly divergent opinions and attitudes. Yesterday I watched a YouTube video giving responses to the Scarman Report. Four people were featured on it. Ivan Cooper, a Protestant Civil Rights leader, and John Hume, both criticised it but broadly welcomed it. They noted that by and large the Scarman report said that the Civil

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Rights demands were perfectly justified. Ian Paisley said he hadn't fully read it, but claimed that the report confirmed that republicans had been behind events. Eamonn McCann from Derry said it didn't do its work right and didn't do enough. The PD was also moving away from the wider NICRA movement; it wanted more, it wanted a reconstruction of the state and they had a spokesperson in the House of Commons in the form of Bernadette Devlin.

Some people took a broader view. Paddy Devlin, for example, an old republican himself, and a member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party which had cross-community support, in his book *Straight Left* showed that he was quick to appreciate the dilemma of unionist leaders who had been forced to move too far from their base. He understood the realities of life on the ground.

So, there was a wide range of ideas, but bubbling underneath the surface were the hard men, on both sides, who thought: this isn't going to be. The old republican organisation in September under McMillan's leadership thought they had adequately defended Catholic areas but sixteen armed men burst into a meeting he was holding on the Falls, and demanded a break with the Dublin leadership and a new Northern Command.

There was fear also permeating Loyalist communities. The various defence organisations around the Shankill area eventually formed into the Ulster Defence Association. The Ulster Volunteer Force never lost momentum. There was a 'zero-sum game' attitude prevalent: if one community was gaining something, the other community must be losing. Emotions were running high.

And then the Hunt Report finally came out in October and recommended the disbanding of the B-Specials. Faulkner had previously tried to insist: oh, they're not doing away with the Specials, they have only stood them down for the moment, they will still be there. But the Hunt Report changed that: it said they're not going to be phased out, they're out! They were going to be replaced with the Ulster Defence Regiment [UDR].

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To nationalists the disbanding of the B-Specials was another ‘peace dividend’. But, as I have already said, to the loyalist community these people were next-door neighbours, they were cousins, they were fathers, they were people you could have trusted. To have them summarily ousted was yet another insult, and emotions, and an increasing uncertainty about the future, ran very high.

But, incongruously enough, just after the Hunt Report, and up to the end of December, Chichester-Clark, Brian Faulkner and other unionists – as well as many others – thought: that’s the worst over. There was, of course, continual violence, but not on anything like the scale there had been in August and September. All on the face of it seemed quiet enough... the local news was taken up with Dana and the Eurovision Song Contest, Terence O’Neil was made a Lord... so maybe it’s over? But the dynamics were already there for the Troubles. Loyalists hadn’t been appeased by the Downing Street Declaration. Nationalists thought they hadn’t got enough, whereas unionists said you can never give them enough anyway. Mistrust was palpable. In reality it would only get worse.

And in 1970 you have the rise of the Provisionals, following the split in the IRA, and a new situation rapidly accelerates.

So what you had were false dawns. If the Downing Street Declaration had hoped to have settled things... it didn’t. When the Ulster Defence Regiment was formed some nationalists might have thought: maybe I could join that... but that too was another false dawn. The UDR soon became regarded by nationalists as just another aspect of unionist control. And how things were read at Westminster was quite different to how they were read on the streets in nationalist communities, and different yet again in unionist communities.

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General Discussion

The discussion took place during a time of perceived crisis for Northern Ireland's Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community. When the people of Great Britain and Northern Ireland voted by referendum to exit the European Union, negotiations between the UK and the EU immediately ran up against a seemingly intractable problem: how to ensure that there would be no 'hard border' between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (the latter being part of the EU). EU negotiators, especially the Irish government, insisted that any 'hard' border – with customs posts, etc. – would threaten the delicate peace brought about by the Good Friday Agreement. Negotiations dragged on and on, especially when the EU and the Irish government insisted on a 'backstop insurance' being written into any final withdrawal Agreement, which would see Northern Ireland aligned to EU customs rules rather than those of the UK. This was anathema to Unionists and Loyalists, and the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] frustrated all Prime Minister Theresa May's attempts at reaching such a solution.

When Boris Johnson took over as British Prime Minister in July 2019 he promised the DUP that in no way would he contemplate any agreement which treated Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK. When his eventual proposals were announced, however, in the view of many Unionists and Loyalists he had done just that. As an indication of growing Loyalist concern a special meeting was convened in the Con [Constitutional] Club in East Belfast, attended by some two hundred loyalists and others. That meeting is repeatedly referred to in the discussion below.

[**Padraig Yeates**] Thank you, Jimmy, for that very good overview of the events which erupted after October 1968. I was in England at the time and we had a couple of civil rights campaigns going on, and we were very much pushing against an open door with the British people, there was no opposition there, no sense of solidarity with Unionism, they didn't even know who these strange people [the Unionists] were, and people were more readily identifying with the Catholic community. So, in a sense the fear within Unionism was justified, because they were very much an isolated community, almost a heritage community from a past which no longer existed. So, I can agree very much with what Jimmy was saying there.

[**Tim Plum**] I was at the Con Club last night, at the loyalist event, and when I heard them speak, and going by what you were saying there, Jimmy – nothing has changed in fifty years. A lot of what you were describing... a lot of what was said last night reflected the very same attitudes. Whether it is towards the British government, or towards republicanism, or whatever, it's very much the same... the same fears are still there. The same distrust, of the same communities, is still there. Fifty years on – I don't really think we have moved forward.

[**Jim McDermott**] On the walls you will sometimes see Santayana's statement: 'He who forgets history is condemned to relive it.' And I think the events with regard to Brexit, with this new talk of a border down the Irish Sea, has just reinforced the Unionist/loyalist distrust of British politicians. And they would have felt: we were right all along. I heard that the press were kept outside that meeting? But I would have been very surprised if what was said wasn't recognisable from 1969.

[**Tim Plum**] Just to let you guys know: the way the press is reporting it, the *Irish News*, the *Telegraph*... I was in the room the entire time, I was five feet from the stage, from the speakers. The way it is reported in the press is not exactly the way that it actually was. The threat of violence... and all this... it wasn't there. It really was not there. Despite the way it was portrayed in the *Irish News*, it was not that way. These people are looking for a *political voice*. Fifty years ago they felt they didn't have a political voice *then*, and they *still* don't have one. And I know, coming from the States, that working-class people don't vote. So therefore you don't have a voice. And, indeed, they were talking last night about the percentage of loyalists who just don't vote.

These people are looking for a political voice. Fifty years ago they felt they didn't have a political voice then, and they still don't have one.

[**Jim McDermott**] The old certainties have definitely gone. The slogan in 1921, '24 and '28 was: the Union Jack must sweep the polls. That would have meant that British politics were a safe bet for Unionists. They don't regard it now as so safe.

[**Andy Hart**] Jimmy, I thought your talk was great. I continually pick up nuances here, and they are fantastic. But what strikes me, and judging from what Tim said, fifty years on, if we take ourselves back to '68, '69... we weren't learning the

lessons then from the fifty years *previous* to that period – the troubles of the early twenties, and martial law being declared down in the south-western counties – when the RIC were effectively replaced, in terms of its armed role, by the Auxiliaries and the Tans. That was a big mistake, and the British government didn't learn from it. Because the B-Specials, let's be frank, were simply the UVF reconstituted in the 1920s. Their recruiting was absolutely from Volunteers.

And we made the same mistake again with the formation of a part of my regiment, the Ulster Defence Regiment, by not putting in place those absolutely necessary protections – that were later to be put in place when the Police Service of Northern Ireland was formed – but the Ulster Defence Regiment did not have those protections. I don't think, speaking as somebody who isn't an insider with the Ulster Defence Regiment, I don't think it was necessarily their fault. I think there were pressures from within, yes, but there were equally pressures from without, that prevented the entire community being equally represented in the Ulster Defence Regiment. But it was a political failure not to put in place the necessary protections for that organisation. Now, I would stand in front of any audience and say that the perceptions of the Ulster Defence Regiment were false, and those falsehoods were perpetuated. But in my view it was a political failure. We didn't learn from the 1920s, and we didn't learn from the 1960s, and we're still not learning now.

It was a political failure not to put in place the necessary protections for that organisation.... We didn't learn from the 1920s, and we didn't learn from the 1960s, and we're still not learning now.

[**Padraig Yeates**] Could I just say, on the UDR, that in fairness some people at the time would have supported Catholics joining. Certainly Republicans would have been very opposed to that. I remember being on a picket against Roy Hattersley, who was the junior minister, denouncing his scheme to replace the B-Specials, and it's a sort of wish-fulfilment thing: if you say this is a replacement for the B-Specials, then it will *become* a replacement for the B-Specials. I am not sure what Catholic recruitment was...†

[**Jim McDermott**] I can actually remember people walking about in UDR

† The UDR began with Catholic recruitment accounting for 18% of its soldiers, but by the end of 1972, after the introduction of Internment, this had dropped to 3%.

uniforms on the Falls Road. But it didn't last long. Social opprobrium is what we don't allow for. See if you leave, or talk outside the tribe, depending where the tribe is, then you are regarded with great suspicion. It is wise not to underestimate paranoia.

[**Bernie Browne**] Tim, could I ask you: what did those at the meeting last night fear from the press? Because my thinking is that by excluding the press they just created that doubt and that let the newspapers give an inaccurate account. And if the press aren't allowed in to see the truth, then you get the likes of Jamie Bryson helping to stir the pot. There is this fear, and also among moderate people: what's going on on both sides? Who is stirring the pot? And what have they got to gain from all this?

There is this fear, and also among moderate people: what's going on on both sides? Who is stirring the pot? And what have they got to gain from all this?

[**Jim McDermott**] I was glad to hear Tim say that there was no talk of militancy, although I am not surprised really. I also think those who organised the meeting would know that even if the press was kept outside the door, there would be some reporting on the event. I do think that this situation is different, because whereas Harold Wilson was wrong-headed, and Callaghan was wrong-headed, as was Healey – who I thought would have been very able – I don't think there is as much doubt about Boris Johnson, I don't think they imagine he spends a lot of time agonising about right or wrong decisions. And although he is an able enough historian, I doubt if his night-time reading is Irish history; it is generally biographies of Winston Churchill. He himself actually wrote a biography very recently of Churchill, but it's really a case of: 'what I would have done if I had been Winston.'

[**Harry Donaghy**] It is sometimes a bit scary that whenever there is tension seemingly bubbling away on the island of Ireland, that Unionism has always turned to English Toryism. Now, I didn't say 'British Conservatism', but 'English Toryism', because Unionists seems to have some sort of bond with a certain type of English Tory. You know, the people who have basically taken over the English Conservative Party, who were educated in top schools and universities, and are members of various elite clubs and establishments where the 18th and 19th centuries are still very much alive. The type of people who

when they feel threatened come at those threats playing *Land of Hope and Glory*. But that level of deafness is not going to solve the endemic problems that Britain faces as a modern state, especially in the European context. By relying on this outmoded and delinquent form of Tory nationalism, I think Unionists have found themselves in a very dangerous position as regards the political structures that exist in Britain now. It is going to be tragically ironic that the very people who profess their Britishness time after time after time in such strident and strong terms about their precious Union, that their self-interest and incompetence is going to probably speed up a new realignment of the different nations across these islands.

[**Peter Black**] When you study Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, you might think there are strong differences between moderates and militants, but I think that under it all the basic ideologies remain the same, the different factions just have different strategies. I am thinking of the talk at St Dominic's school and also the 'Crossroads' speech by O'Neill, two speeches by O'Neill about the Union and its ideology, when he used the term 'we'. On the other side of the coin were nationalists, who were also divided. Not all nationalists believed in a united Ireland or Irish independence. They did believe in an Irish culture, an all-Ireland culture. But they too had their differences. I remember a debate between Billy McKee and Billy McMillan, possibly September or October '69, when McKee was referring to the 'Voice of the North' or something like that, while McMillan was more concerned about people's pensions and everyday things.

But despite all these seeming internal differences – different strategies, different tunes – underneath it all Unionism as an ideology hadn't changed, and Irish Nationalism hadn't changed, they were fundamentally both still the same.

But despite all these seeming internal differences, underneath it all Unionism as an ideology hadn't changed, and Irish Nationalism hadn't changed, they were fundamentally both still the same.

[**Jim McDermott**] I agree with Harry. Fintan O'Toole and other commentators have always said that English conservatism never embraced Europe, they always regarded themselves as an island race, and that rarefied group from public schools even more so. A lot of it is more to do with emotion than rationality. The birth of the Welfare State was opposed by them. The People's Budget was opposed by

them in 1910, as if Armageddon was due because we were going to pay ten shillings for old-age pensions. And then the fervour that was lit under them during the whole Brexit campaign... We should have seen the writing on the wall when [Labour Party leader] Jeremy Corbyn was told he should straighten his tie, he was looking too sloppy, he should stand up straight and sing the National Anthem. It's the 'Great Gatsby' syndrome. It's looking towards an invented past that doesn't really exist, but was sold wholesale in children's comics, popular books, Kipling poems. Now, these people have got their role, they have indeed. But they conflate reality with dreams, and that is what's happening at the present time. I think it is also part of the times we're living in: where Trump in America is able to deny reality – two and two is not going to make four any more, it's going to make six!

[**Padraig Yeates**] What bothers me, and I know I have said this before, I am reminded that in the 1640s we had a king who was trying to rule without parliament, we had a parliament which wasn't recognising or accepting the authority of the king, and there was a war which spread across three kingdoms. But I do wonder how much legitimacy there is within Northern Ireland. People have mentioned the meeting in East Belfast last night, looking at: what's the future for us? People right across Northern Ireland are going to be worried about that future. I think there has always been a

subconscious acceptance that no matter how bad things get here they will never get *too* bad because, in the worst-case scenario, the British Army will come in and keep the lid on things – depending on how they do it, of course. But if there isn't a government in London with the political will or capacity to send in the British Army, and if the British Army have gone home permanently, that will send a shiver down the spines of all communities if it's true. So I must

say that's one thing that does worry me, and I know I am fortunate to be living in Dublin and not up here, but it does worry me. How legitimate do people feel the present temporary arrangement is in Northern Ireland, with Direct Rule – or a local parliament that might be on or off, we don't know – do people feel confident there is a stable enough situation here in Northern Ireland?

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[**Jim McDermott**] In '69 the shipyard was a going concern, Mackies was

growing, the Ropeworks was even still going. There was almost full employment, and people took their *social* identity from industry, and they had a pride in their trades. But then the economy went into decline, and they don't do that now: they're pushing trollies around Sainsburys and places like that when they're out of work. And there's little for the fathers or their sons to look forward to. Their fathers before them had been tradesmen in '69. Now, that situation has drastically changed, and the young loyalist... what is he to identify with? That's a new dimension to everything.

Their fathers before them had been tradesmen in '69. Now, that situation has drastically changed, and the young loyalist... what is he to identify with?

[**Tim Plum**] Last night they put up on the board four questions and then they held an open discussion. I'll tell you what those four questions were. (1) How does the community resist the 'Betrayal Act'? (2) How has the threat of republican violence been rewarded with political concessions? (3) What has the 'peace process' delivered for Unionism/Loyalism? (4) Where do we go next? Will other areas organise public meetings to discuss how to resist the Betrayal Act? So, you can see that the opinion right out of the gate was: the danger is Sinn Féin/IRA, not the British government. Once they actually began to talk about it you then started to get an acknowledgement that it was Boris' Agreement, that some of it was Boris' fault.

There is a tacit understanding that they've been sold down the river again, and that they put their political hopes in the DUP, thinking that the DUP were going to be what they were in 1998 around the Agreement (when in fact they were outside the room). Now, the DUP were *inside* the room regarding Brexit, or that's what they believed, and that would deliver something to them, simply because the ten DUP MPs were crucial in sustaining the Conservatives' slim majority, given the tightness of the mathematics in the House of Commons. But then when that Conservative walked across the aisle of the House and joined the Lib-Dems that was the balance undone, the government completely fell apart, and the DUP's influence was gone. And given the Loyalist sense of impending betrayal... as I said before there's a continuity here with the fears you outlined, Jimmy, regarding 1969. You could almost change the faces and have the same rhetoric.

[**Jim McDermott**] You mentioned the 'Betrayal Act', which refers to Boris'

new Withdrawal Agreement which will see a border down the Irish Sea, something which, in Unionist/Loyalist eyes, is tantamount to separating Northern Ireland from the Union. Now, the ‘Surrender Act’ is the terminology Johnson himself used about the Benn Act – which prevents the UK exiting the EU without an agreed deal – and which he said was a surrender to Europe. Did they use that terminology as well?

[**Tim Plum**] No, they never used that terminology. Mostly it was: we are British and we don’t like republicans. It was never: we are British, we don’t like Europeans. It was just we are British and we don’t like Sinn Féin/IRA. The enemy is still the same, even though the ball has moved. One of the things I heard last night... they lump Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance all together – and those are the ‘other’. And what they’re looking for, they believe that unionism is too dispersed as a voice. So, there was a lot of talk of: we need one candidate, we don’t care about the party, we need one candidate, one voice. One of the things I have noticed is being pushed by some of the Unionist

parties, the smaller ones, and a lot of working-class loyalists, like the ones I met last night – for the room was loaded with paramilitaries – is that they are looking for some kind of fora, basically a unionist fora; they want to have that public voice and they want to be heard, for they feel that they are not being heard. Because everybody is against them, the siege mentality, we’re defeated. And that’s what they are looking for now, and I asked them: why didn’t

They want to have that public voice and they want to be heard, for they feel that they are not being heard. Because everybody is against them, the siege mentality, we’re defeated.

you do this a few years ago, why didn’t you do this *before* Brexit? So, why are you doing this at the last possible minute? They had apparently written a letter to the Prime minister, seeking a judicial review. But that’s all.

[**Andy Hart**] Jimmy, you mentioned about there being a ‘zero-sum’ game. And to an extent it is still being portrayed as that. The DUP as an entity, and the people they represent as an entity – and there are huge swathes of opinion within both of those entities – were a busted flush when the last elections delivered at Stormont the first Assembly which had no unionist majority, for the first time ever. And it did away with the power of the Petition of Concern, because no party had sufficient seats to deliver a Petition of Concern. There

were actually discussions in Stormont House as to how to manage the demise of the DUP! But, of course, Theresa May then pulls her great blunder and loses her majority in Parliament. That was hubris run riot.

And the result was that the DUP has this Lazarus-type resurrection and they were, for a brief period, in a position of overwhelming power. They had gone from picking up the scraps of the negotiations to one where they were actually dictating policy, and when yer man walked across the floor, that was the end of it again. So you go from having the Good Friday Agreement, to the flags issue, to the demise of the DUP... albeit postponed for a couple of years... so I can understand why people in East Belfast get that siege mentality, I can see where it comes from. And if you think it's bad in Belfast, go down to Fermanagh, for Fermanagh, whatever shade of the community you come from, they have a siege mentality there. The point is that they have to be given some mechanism for their voice to be heard, because just reading those four questions asked last night it seems to me that there is an undercurrent of violence contained in them.

[**Tim Plum**] We saw that newspaper article a few weeks ago about 'Loyalists were talking about violence'. Now, I don't think you are going to see loyalists on the streets unless you see nationalists on the streets, in terms of actual violence. And if we eventually leave the EU that is only the first step; the real hard stuff is actually coming afterwards, the stuff that actually matters, the pounds and pence as it were. And that's when I think agitation is going to rise: once the realisation as to what it actually means,

in terms of practicalities on the ground. The DUP didn't need Stormont because they could knock on Downing Street's door. But now the DUP *need* Stormont again. But at the end of the day the British parliament doesn't care about the 2.9% of the UK's population here, in relation to the 65 million in the rest of the UK. After Theresa May's blunder when the DUP suddenly became significant, the 'number 1' term looked up on Google the day after was 'DUP'. People just didn't know what it was! The DUP had been sitting there for years but most people in the rest of the UK hadn't a clue who these ten people were!

But at the end of the day the British parliament doesn't care about the 2.9% of the UK's population here, in relation to the 65 million in the rest of the UK.

[**Harry Donaghy**] It is worrying to hear about the new fears being expressed

by Loyalists. We need to be going back to them. Many loyalists went out onto a limb and came under attack from so-called ‘respectable Unionism’ about the necessity of the Good Friday Agreement being signed and implemented. That seems to be being reversed in that regard. We need to engage with them, as we have been doing over these past number of years, honestly, openly – and that needs to be done. We must ensure that dialogue takes place, and hopefully we can have some sort of positive influence on the thing, not to let the Jamie Brysons of this world become somehow the people you go to when you want to speak to loyalism... God, that would really be a tragi-comedy!

We need to engage with [one another], as we have been doing over these past number of years, honestly, openly – and that needs to be done.

[**Tim Plum**] Even inside loyalism he is not the voice they want. I was in the room with all these loyalists and some of them told me that Bryson has just taken the mantras and turned it into a job, but he’s not really the voice they want. And they tell me that all the time.

[**Harry Donaghy**] Going back to this thing about how do you counteract this mentality, of it’s ‘us’ against all of ‘them’? ... That whole idea is being sold again to the loyalist community: ‘There must be no weakening, no bowing down: we need one voice, one position, because our enemies are all around us!’ How quickly people forget things! In my grandfather’s generation Irish nationalism was prepared to settle for an accommodation, but it wasn’t given, and the relationship between North and South just deteriorated. But as the decades moved on both sovereign entities recognised that their relationship in the modern context would have to be based, not on the memories of battles and massacres, but on how they would together face the modern world. And it was no accident that when the Treaty of Accession to the EEC was signed in 1972, it was done so *jointly*, at the same ceremony, by the two sovereign states. And Irish civil servants like T J Whittaker probably had more influence on the changes that were taking place within Ireland – political, social and economic – and its relationship with the larger entity a short distance across the sea, than anything any IRA brigade or company ever did in their history.

[**Bernie Brown**] I was walking down from the train station this morning, with

my headphones on and listening to Nolan... and they were talking about the meeting in East Belfast last night and one of the loyalists came on the radio and he talked... and it was so sad to hear this, because I lived through the Troubles too... he talked about ‘themuns’. It is all ‘themuns’ fault, not anybody else’s. History has a habit of repeating itself. Take the Home Rule Bill: they were prepared to take up arms against their own government to make sure it didn’t pass, and so they were staying loyal to the King but not to his government. They were prepared to take up arms against their own people to stay where they were; they couldn’t move, they had to be ‘Ulster Say NO!’ even then.

[**Tim Plum**] That’s what they feel now. The very first sentence of the Ulster Covenant sets out their opposition to Home Rule, and loyalists still live by that.

[**Harry Donaghy**] Anyway, having my optimist head on, and having spoken to loyalist friends and colleagues who are able to articulate a broader, deeper, understanding of things, I really do believe there is a different mindset out there within loyalism, a different viewpoint on what basically needs to be done. And the people that I know – some of whom served considerable numbers of years in jail for activities they undertook at the behest of leading unionist politicians of the time – in our discussions with them, their manta was: how do we prevent our grandkids from falling into what we did?

So, how can we and others create those spaces, create the opportunities for those conversations to take place? Either in camera or in some sort of semi-public arena. But that such discussion take place is probably required now more than ever before, if we aren’t going to unnecessarily stumble into another cycle of lunatic nonsense.

But that such discussion take place is probably required now more than ever before, if we aren’t going to unnecessarily stumble into another cycle of lunatic nonsense.

[**Padraig Yeates**] Could I thank Jimmy for a very thought-provoking and very concise description of events at the time. I’m sure it got us all thinking about the issues involved, which, as we can see, is unfortunately still haunting us today, And thank you everybody for coming, and hopefully we will see you all at our next discussion.

Appendix: The War of the Words

Throughout his presentation, Jim McDermott emphasised the misperceptions and mistrust which permeated all communities in Northern Ireland prior to, during, and subsequent to, the outbreak of the Troubles. Pádraig Yeates also remarked on the obsession both the Stormont government and the British government had that subversive elements were directing the rapidly-deteriorating situation.

It is certainly true that in articles, speeches, declarations and public utterances, many individuals, from *all* sides of the political spectrum, frequently voiced opinions and made statements which only served to confirm the fears and suspicions held by ‘their’ community about the ‘other’ community, and to deepen the sense of widespread distrust. Indeed, after riots in 1935, in which a dozen people lost their lives, the Belfast city coroner commented: “There would be less bigotry if there was less public speech-making of a kind by so-called leaders of public opinion.”¹

Right from the inception of the Civil Rights agitation Unionist politicians were quick to tell the Protestant community that the ‘civil rights’ demands were inherently seditious. In December 1968 William Craig asserted that the Civil Rights movement was bogus. In January 1969 Roy Bradford claimed that the Civil Rights movement was out to overthrow the government, and Harry West said that the Civil Rights movement was only a “cloak [for] our old traditional enemies”.

And if these Unionists had been cognisant of it, they would perhaps have quoted *Tuairisc*, paper of the Wolfe Tone Society, which in September 1966 had argued for committees to be set up across Northern Ireland “to organise the maximum number of people at a local level to bring pressure on local authorities, on Stormont, but particularly on Westminster, to wrest so many concessions from O’Neill that he begins to sweat blood.” Or even the 1967 Sinn Féin internal policy document, *Educational Manual Vol III*, in which Roy Johnston had talked about

the high priority of the struggle for Civil Rights... It is necessary to realise that non-Republican people in the North are not disposed to agitate to get Civil Liberties for Republicans, they have to be involved in their own interests. Which means that if a Civil Liberties movement is to be built in the North, it will have to involve Catholics on the issue of discrimination in housing and jobs, and the Protestant working class on the issue of the local government electoral register which is weighed

against them by the property qualification.... Force O'Neill to concede more than he wants to do or than he thinks he can dare give without risking overthrow by the more reactionary elements among the Unionists. Demand more than may be demanded by the compromising elements that exist among the Catholic leadership.

With regard to the pivotal Civil Rights march in Derry on 5 October, 1968, one of the chief organisers, Eamonn McCann, was later to admit that

our conscious, if unspoken, strategy was to provoke the police into over-reaction and thus spark off mass reaction against the authorities. We assumed that we would be in control of the reaction, that we were strong enough to channel it. The one certain way to ensure a head-on clash with the authorities was to organize a non-Unionist march through the city centre.²

At the height of what became known as 'The Battle of the Bogside' in August 1968 a statement issued by Bernadette Devlin and Eamonn McCann demanded:

The barricades in the Bogside must not be taken down until the Westminster Government states its clear commitment to the suspension of the constitution of Northern Ireland and calls immediately a constitutional conference representative of Westminster, the Unionist Government, the Government of the Republic of Ireland and all tendencies within the civil rights movement.³

In December 1968 in Strabane, Seamus Rodgers, from Donegal Sinn Féin, told a meeting: "The Civil Rights movement has done more in a few weeks to damage the Unionist structure than decades of IRA activities."

In September 1969, the Republican newspaper *United Irishman*, under the headline 'The Risen People', was fulsome in its praise for the Civil Rights movement:

Who would have thought last October when a few hundred brave men and women took to the streets that their ultimate victory would have been so great? Once again, as it did in the years 1956 to '62, the spirit and force of republicanism has lighted the way to final victory, which cannot now be far off.

The same edition of *United Irishman* stated: "Republicanism is the dynamite that will eventually blow British rule in Ireland sky-high. The British know this.

The Unionists know this.”

On 24 April 1969 William Craig said: “The people of Ulster will not surrender their Parliament without a fight. What we see today on the streets of our province – the disorders – will look like a Sunday school picnic if Westminster tries to take our Parliament away.”

On 27 April, 1969, the *Sunday Times* ‘Insight’ team wrote:

The monster of sectarian violence is well out of its cage. The issue is no longer Civil Rights or even houses and jobs. The issue now is whether the state should exist and who should have the power, and how it should be defended; and this is an issue on which the wild men on both sides have sworn for 40 years, frequently in blood, that they will never back down.

In May 1969, in the *New Left Review*, Eamonn McCann admitted that the Civil Rights campaign, instead of uniting the two communities as originally hoped, was dividing them more than ever:

We keep saying parrot-like that we are fighting on working-class issues for working-class unity... It is a lot of pompous nonsense.... The consciousness of the people who are fighting in the streets at the moment is sectarian and bigoted.... Everyone applauds loudly when one says in a speech that we are not sectarian, we are fighting for the rights of all Irish workers, but really that’s because they see this as the new way of getting at the Protestants.

On 12 October 1969, at a meeting of the People’s Democracy, PD leader Michael Farrell said:

Now that all the Civil Rights demands have been met, we must work further into the future... The People’s Democracy believes that its objectives can only be obtained by the ousting of both Tory governments [North and South] and the establishment of an Irish Socialist Republic.⁴

Even constitutional nationalists proved belligerent. On 2 January 1972 at a rally in Falls Park, Austin Currie, SDLP, told the crowd:

I have no doubt that within the next six or seven months Brian Faulkner and his rotten Unionist system will have been smashed. [T]he writing is on the wall for Unionism... I say to [British Home Secretary] Maudling: why the hell should we talk to you? We are winning and you are not.

On 18 March 1972 Ulster Vanguard leader William Craig, declared: “We must build up a dossier of the men and women who are a menace to this country, because it may be our job to liquidate [them].” On 19 October Craig said: “I am prepared to kill and those behind me have my full support.”

In January 1977 the IRA declared that even if they had to demolish Belfast brick by brick, they would eventually remove ‘the British presence’.

On 16 November 1981 Rev. William McCrea said: “We owe it to our children, even if we have to die, to fight the rebels with a Holy determination and never to sheath the sword until victory is won.”

On 23 November 1981, addressing a ‘Third Force’ rally in Newtownards, Rev. Ian Paisley declared:

One of my commanders said to me that ‘any rat will suck eggs in the presence of a chained dog’ – that is what the IRA vermin have been doing in the presence of the security forces. If that dog is not unchained, *we* will be the unchained dog! The killing of the IRA is over as far as Ulster is concerned!... the IRA have got to be exterminated from Ulster!

Yet years later the relationship Paisley struck up with former IRA commander Martin McGuinness became so close that their detractors labelled the pair ‘the chuckle brothers’.

Finally, when flying back to London after his first fact-finding mission to Northern Ireland in July 1979, Northern Ireland Secretary of State Reginald Maudling reputedly said to the flight attendant: “For God’s sake, bring me a large Scotch! What a bloody awful country!” He was following in the footsteps of Harold Wilson, who, in 1964, had commented: “Any politician who wants to get involved with Ulster ought to have his head examined.”⁵

Notes

- 1 Quoted in *Drums and Guns: Revolution in Ulster* by Martin Wallace, Geoffrey Chapman Ltd, London, 1970, p 85.
- 2 *War and an Irish Town*, Eamonn McCann, New Updated Edition, Pluto Press, 1980, p 35.
- 3 *Drums and Guns* op.cit. p 4.
- 4 *The People’s Democracy, 1968-73*, Paul Arthur, Blackstaff Press, 1974, p73.
- 5 *Ulster, by the Sunday Times Insight Team*, Penguin Special, 1972, p80.