

A history of Island Pamphlets

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1: Creating a vehicle for debate

Introduction

Since 1968, apart from a two-year period in the mid-1970s when my wife and I backpacked across Asia, I have been continuously involved in community action of one sort or another: grassroots politics, children's holiday schemes, community drama,¹ and the facilitation of cross-community dialogue. During seven years with the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) I endeavoured to establish a community-orientated approach to social work.² I spent a similar period as co-ordinator of Kinder Community House, a cross-community residential facility in Killough, Co. Down, funded by the Dutch charity Pax Christi Kinderhulp.³

Throughout this time, working in communities on both sides of Northern Ireland's so-called 'sectarian divide',⁴ I was always struck by the diversity of views I was hearing, views which often did not fall neatly into the stereotypes presented by the media. Furthermore, the media tended to be preoccupied with the pronouncements of politicians, clergymen and other 'leaders' of society, and the voices of ordinary people rarely received an airing. Even when 'phone-in' programmes began to make their appearance on radio and TV the format seemed to encourage confrontational exchanges rather than constructive debate. I felt that the rich diversity of grassroots opinion needed to be heard as a matter of some urgency if Northern Irish society was to move into a more pluralist future. However, there seemed to exist no useful mechanisms through which this unheard voice could be purposefully articulated.

A hidden history

I have always had a deep interest in the largely untold story of what 'ordinary' people accomplished during periods of radical social change: such as in France 1789, Mexico 1905, Russia 1917, Spain 1936, Hungary 1956. In most history books – dominated by an academic fixation with political parties and 'leaders' – not only were the creative achievements of 'the masses' either ignored or sidelined, but so too were their voices. However, if you searched the historical material deeply enough, those voices slowly began to emerge. One recurrent thread which linked different historical episodes was that they had often been preceded by, or had given rise to, an intense and often radical grassroots debate. This debate had taken different forms: the radical pamphleteering which emerged during the French Revolution; the energetic discussions in the Spanish working-class community centres (*Casas del Pueblo*) during the 1930s; or the café debates which flowered during Czechoslovakia's 'Prague Spring' in 1968. In the early 1970s in Belfast and Derry radical discussion papers and small pamphlets had surfaced sporadically, but had been limited in their impact.

Thwarted first efforts

In 1968, with incidents of student power and workers' control manifesting themselves around the world, many radicalised youth in Northern Ireland, myself included, had their eyes so firmly focused on international events that developments at home almost crept upon us by stealth. But the birth of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement, and the blunt reaction of the Unionist administration at Stormont, revealed that there was a struggle to be waged right under our feet.

However, my upbringing had been a completely secular one and I was totally unprepared for the subsequent explosion of sectarian hatred. I was among the People's Democracy marchers ambushed by hardline Protestants at Burntollet Bridge in January 1969, and that event revealed to me what little real understanding I had of the historical and cultural realities of my own society, and that this homegrown struggle was not quite the same as those which fired my imagination elsewhere. As the violence spiralled into new intensities, the internationalist hopes and ideals of radicalised young people like myself were quickly rendered redundant by the narrow nationalism of the IRA's newly-resurrected 'armed struggle' and the equally brutal Loyalist reaction.

In response, in 1973 a few friends and I founded the Belfast Libertarian Group. We produced and circulated what we hoped would be the first in a series of documents which would attempt to analyse the events unfolding around us. In a pamphlet, *Ireland, Dead or Alive?*, we not only castigated Unionism and its discriminatory practices, but the Provisional IRA and its rapidly escalating bombing campaign. To my surprise, reaction was almost immediate.

A friend with links to the Republican movement was given ‘a message from the Provos’ to pass on to me: ‘Tell your mate that if he writes anything like that again he’ll get his knees ventilated.’⁵ Around that same time I was confronted by a group of Loyalists whose warning was no less blunt: ‘We’re watching you, you bastard – we’re going to get you soon!’ While such exchanges certainly taught our small group something about the anti-libertarian nature of both Irish Republicanism and Ulster Loyalism I had also learned how *not* to try to engender a debate.

Alongside the doomed pamphlet venture, we had also produced a series of silk-screened posters, incorporating a numbered ‘Know Your Enemy’ theme in the hope that this might sustain more public interest. Our targets included sectarianism and the exploitation of the working class. We began to paste up these posters around North and West Belfast, but found it exhausting work for such a small group. When a member of the ‘Official’ wing of the Republican movement approached us, saying how much he

liked the posters and suggesting that his associates put them up in Catholic/nationalist areas, we reluctantly let him become involved. And so they began to put up our posters by the hundreds.

When our contact first began to take posters we hadn’t at that stage produced poster No. 5, criticizing the churches, and when he saw it he looked alarmed and asked us not to do anything with it until he got back to us. He returned the next day to inform us: ‘I’ve been told to tell you that we can’t put that poster up. We’ve been seen putting all the others up, so people will assume they originated with us. And we can’t be associated with any attack on the churches.’ More ominously, he added that he had also been told to tell us that *we* were ‘not going to be allowed’ to put up any either.

We put up two dozen of the offending posters in a gesture of defiance, then destroyed our remaining stock. With hindsight, it was probably ill-conceived on our part to focus on the churches, but we felt so angry at *every* sector in society – government, the churches, the business community, the Republican movement, the Unionist establishment, the Loyalist paramilitaries – for the terrible situation now confronting ordinary people that we fervently desired to lambast them all.

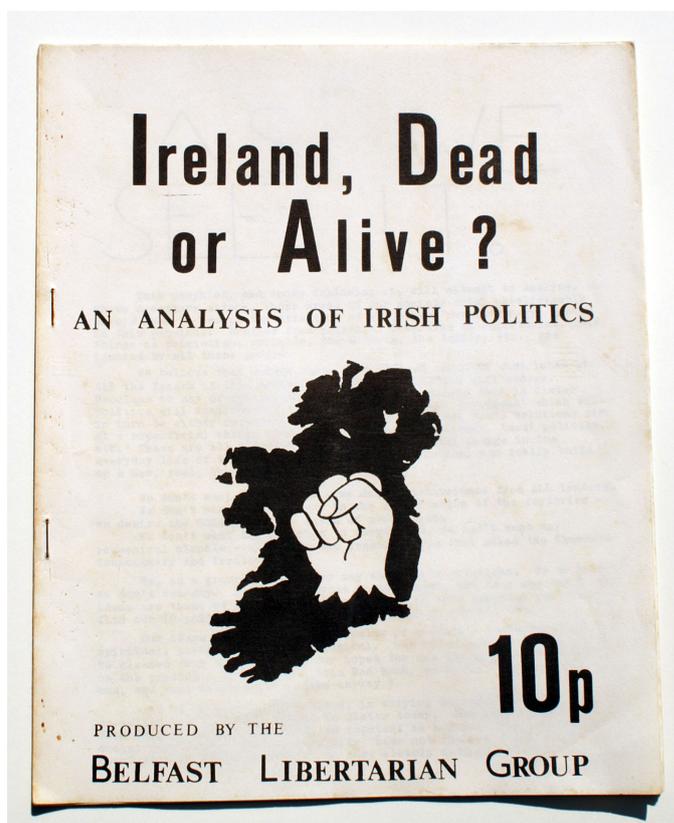
Such episodes convinced me that attempting to engender a radical debate – certainly at that time – was not going to be welcomed by the main players to the conflict, and shortly afterwards my wife and I decided that it might be an appropriate moment to undertake the backpacking trip across Asia we had long been contemplating.⁶

The continuing need for debate

A few years later we were back in Belfast and I had joined the NSPCC, where I endeavoured to harness social work skills to community needs.⁷ The numerous community contacts I established provided me with yet more evidence of the rich diversity of views and opinions which existed at a grassroots level.

It was also evident, however, that an exploration of this diversity of views was still being thwarted. Most Loyalist paramilitaries viewed any attempt at dialogue with suspicion – and, if it embraced a cross-community element, often deemed it to be traitorous – and even Protestant community workers with progressive views had to tread cautiously. The Republican movement too, for all its talk of ‘freedom’, was also avoiding any real engagement. When I asked a prominent member of Sinn Féin what form of economic structure the Republican movement envisaged for its new Ireland – and specifically whether it embraced any form of workers’ control – his blunt response was: ‘We can’t discuss issues like that until the Brits are kicked out!’ When I then asked how Republicans hoped to create their new society *without* such a debate, I was told in no uncertain terms that the ‘armed struggle’ had to be given priority.

Nevertheless, at a grassroots level many people *were* attempting to initiate genuine dialogue – even if only within



their own areas. And over the coming years community groups on both sides of the so-called ‘religious divide’ – from the Rathcoole Self-Help Group on the ‘Protestant’ side to Springhill Community House and Conway Mill on the ‘Catholic’ side – would endeavour to provide citizens with opportunities to talk their way through to a new future. Indeed, I believe that the *real* untold story of the ‘Troubles’ – aside from the largely unheard suffering of the victims – concerns the constant efforts made by ordinary people to initiate dialogue, efforts repeatedly thwarted not only by forces within their own communities but by a political establishment which resented any intrusion upon its well-entrenched interests.

Exploring our shared history

In 1986 I received a request which reawakened my earlier desire to utilise the printed word as a means of engendering debate. Jackie Hewitt, manager of Farset Youth and Community Development Project, handed me a copy of *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* by Cyril Falls and asked if I would write an abridged booklet version, primarily for use by the young people involved in Farset’s Somme Project. I agreed, on the understanding that the booklet’s content would not be restricted to the material contained in Falls’ history.

The resultant publication, *Sacrifice on the Somme*⁸, recounted the story not only of the 36th (Ulster) Division but of the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions; and while acknowledging the sacrifice made by Irish citizens of all religious persuasions it also highlighted the futility and horror of the Great War and set the Irish contribution against the backdrop of political events at home.

The interest shown in the booklet – and the debate it engendered – suggested that an exploration of other aspects of Ulster’s shared heritage might be an ideal way to kick-start the pamphlet series I was now determined to produce. That same year I also wrote a book on the theme of our shared heritage, *Ulster—the Hidden History*. However, such work, particularly when done in collaboration with local paediatrician, historian and publisher Dr. Ian Adamson, stirred up a veritable hornets’ nest among certain quarters.

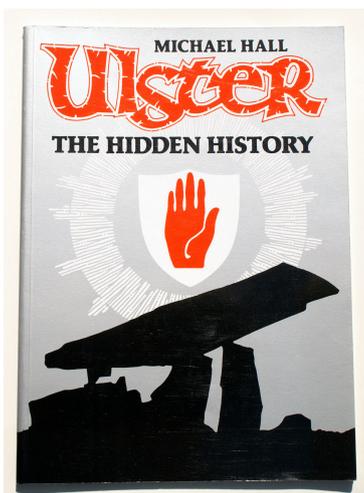
I have made a detailed response to this matter elsewhere⁹, but at times the so-called ‘critique’ contained wild assertions. One academic¹⁰ even attempted to place himself in the role of all-seeing oracle when he wrote: ‘Hall’s work for reconciliation is admirable, but the myth that drives it is false.’ And this despite the fact that my involvement in grassroots reconciliation work *predated* my first awareness of a shared history – the so-called ‘driving myth’ – by a full seventeen years.

I adhere to neither a British nor an Irish (nor even an Ulster) identity. I believe that the fundamental tasks of the 21st Century will not only be to eradicate poverty, environmental damage, disease and inequality, but humankind’s fixation with nationalism and religion. If anything can be said to have ‘driven’ my desire to promote an awareness of our shared history, it is the fervent hope that such an awareness can assist in putting the question of history behind us, for I consider it a distraction from the real tasks facing society: radical social and economic change, and the establishment of genuine forms of participatory democracy.

New focus

In May 1988 I endeavoured to bring together a number of individuals, including former UDA leader Andy Tyrie and radical priest Fr. Des Wilson, in what I described as a ‘cross-community think tank’. However, the initiative never got off the ground. In 1990, I began to prepare much of the historical material in *Ulster—the Hidden History* for re-publication in pamphlet format, with the intention that the first title in what I would call my *Island Pamphlets* series would be a (re-sized) reprint of *Sacrifice on the Somme*. However, a chance discussion was to amend that.

In December 1991 I happened to be engaged in conversation with Billy Hutchinson, Loyalist ex-prisoner and Director of Springfield Inter-Community Development Project (SICDP). Our discussion once again turned to the idea of convening a ‘community think tank’, something Billy had also been contemplating. We kept the idea alive throughout 1992, intending to move on it subsequent to a major interface conference being organised by SICDP in October of that year. That conference proved to be a landmark community event, and it was felt important that an



account of it should be widely circulated at grassroots level. Furthermore, because many of the exchanges during the conference itself had been emotive and energy-charged it was also realised that before a *joint* Think Tank could be convened, a necessary preliminary would be to establish separate, but complementary, Think Tanks in each community.

On both accounts it was felt that my proposed pamphlet series could play a significant role. The conference report would become the first title in the series, and when the different Think Tanks eventually got going those discussions would also provide ideal pamphlet material, for this would permit the debate to reach a much wider audience.

Island Pamphlet No. 1, *Life on the Interface*, published in 1993, received an enthusiastic reception across the community network and had to be reprinted. It was quickly followed by seven ‘shared history’ titles already in preparation, and the first actual ‘Think Tank’ pamphlet was published as Pamphlet No. 9, *Ulster’s Protestant Working Class* (1994). These first Think Tank pamphlets were published in collaboration with SICDP, but were eventually to be produced independently under the auspices of Farset Community Think Tanks Project.

Even at this early stage interest in the pamphlets at a grassroots level far exceeded my expectations, and, much to my satisfaction, discussion as to the topics which would be covered by the series increasingly originated not with me but with individuals and groups within the community who realised the potential of such a format. In effect, the pamphlet series had quickly become the vehicle for debate and dialogue I had hoped it would.

Frustrations over funding

Some of the early pamphlet titles were written and published at my own expense, when I failed to obtain funding or sponsorship.

(Prior to the launch of the pamphlet series I had also made numerous unsuccessful applications for a variety of publications with a cross-community focus, including a graphic novel on the Cúchulainn saga. The funding bodies I applied to included The International Fund for Ireland, The Ireland Funds, The Community Relations Council, The Arts Council, Belfast City Council, The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, The Irish American Cultural Institute, The Cultural Traditions Group, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, and The Foundation for Sports and the Arts. However, they all either sent me an outright rejection or poured cold water on my application because I was applying as an individual and they could only really consider requests from organisations.)



However, as the pamphlets slowly began to appear a few people within the funding bodies realised that they offered a unique vehicle for cross-community dialogue which should be assisted. The first to provide funding were The Ireland Funds, and then, in October 1998 – commencing with Pamphlet No. 19 – the Farset Community Think Tanks Project formally came into being, funded by the European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (administered through the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council and the International Fund for Ireland). I was now in a position to devote myself full-time to the task of realising the potential of the pamphlet series.

The problem of distribution

When I commenced the pamphlet series I had assumed – especially given that the titles had an important ‘local interest’ content – that there would be no difficulty in getting them accepted for sale in Belfast bookshops. Some outlets were indeed very supportive: John Clancy’s second-hand bookshop, The Bookshop at Queen’s, and the Linen Hall Library. The Green Cross Art and Bookshop on the Falls Road and two Loyalist shops also readily accepted the pamphlets on their shelves. But what linked such outlets was that they were all Belfast-based. Those bookshops whose parent companies originated elsewhere proved to be unsupportive. First Dillons and then Waterstones declined to stock the series, and when Gardners bookshop on Botanic Avenue (through which over 1000 pamphlets had been sold) was taken over by Easons reordering abruptly ceased.

Prior to the birth of the pamphlet series I had written to the manager of Dillons Bookshop, asking her to comment

on the bookshop's refusal to stock some of my (earlier) material. She had replied: 'We live in a commercial world and money tied up in very slow saleable stock can be extremely expensive.' (The actual amount involved was £10.72.) But now, with the launch of the pamphlet series, I determined to try again. However, the new manager also refused to stock any of the pamphlets, claiming that they were hard to display. I wrote to the London headquarters of Dillons (or Waterstones, as it had by then become), pointing out that it was ironic that publications funded by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the International Fund for Ireland were being refused space in Belfast's largest bookshop. As for the excuse cited, I mentioned that I could provide a display case which held 120 pamphlets. I even pointed out that there was a suitable blank wall in the middle of the bookshop's Irish section where this could easily be mounted.

However, the exchange of letters achieved nothing. Well, almost nothing. Within a few days of London forwarding my correspondence to the Belfast branch, the free wall space – which had lain completely bare for many months – was suddenly filled with posters!

I am convinced that the reasons behind such refusals were largely commercial, for inexpensive pamphlets provide scant profits. Even though these businesses were operating during a period of great political and communal change in Northern Ireland, it seemed to me that they did not believe they had any role to play in promoting or assisting that change. Indeed, in one of my letters of complaint I expressed the opinion that 'The only "change" our business sector seems interested in is the change that rattles through the tills.' The manager of a well-known chain of newsagents confirmed this perception when, during a period of increased inter-communal tensions, he declined to take half a dozen cross-community pamphlets for the following reason: 'I'm afraid my shelves are basically Mars Bars-orientated.'

Despite this lack of support from the large bookshops I nevertheless managed to establish an extensive distribution network, and soon had over 120 community organisations on my distribution list. Furthermore, the EU funding allowed for 2000 copies of each title to be widely disseminated, free of charge. To date, 115 titles have been produced, containing within them over 1.4 million words of oral testimony, and 196,000 pamphlets have been distributed around the community network in Northern Ireland, and beyond.

(There have been honourable exceptions in the business community. I only belatedly discovered that Regency Press, the family firm who have printed the pamphlets over the years, had done so largely at cost price, simply because they supported the cross-community purpose behind the series.)

A personal journey

The Island Pamphlets series is a world away from my first venture into pamphleteering: my 1973 document was naive, rhetoric-filled and imbued with the self-certainties of youth. In the Think Tank series, however, I strive to allow the participants to speak for themselves, and I refrain from passing judgement. Assisting victims and the disempowered to have their voices heard came naturally to me, but back in 1973 I could never have imagined that I would eventually be sitting down with Loyalists, Republicans, Orangemen – and many others with whom I have fundamental disagreements – and assisting them to articulate and clarify their views for the benefit of the wider community.

I had come to realise that before this society can truly move forward, we must all begin to listen to one another properly – and even *hear ourselves* properly – even if what is being said is unpalatable. Only when everyone has an equal input will we begin to find ways of reaching a lasting accommodation which will permit us to move into a genuinely pluralist future.



A cartoon by Gary Hamilton which appeared in the *Belfast Telegraph*, 25.02.91, alongside an article noting my failure to obtain funding assistance for the Cúchulainn graphic novel.

2: The Think Tank process

Small-group dialogue

Following the advent of core funding, the pamphlet series focused primarily on edited accounts of small-group discussions – the ‘Community Think Tanks’ – although a few described important community conferences.

Some Think Tanks were area-based, reflecting the experiences of people living on either side of different conflict interfaces. Some focused on specific sectors within the community – young people, senior citizens, victims, community activists, ex-prisoners, people with disabilities, women’s groups, etc. – while others focused on pertinent issues such as cross-community work, marching and parades, cross-border relationships, or the ‘peace process’.

I believe that fundamental grassroots issues are more effectively and creatively addressed in small-group settings than in large public forums. Many who attend public debates often come away feeling that little real dialogue has taken place and that participants – both from the platform and the floor – have directed their comments ‘to the gallery’, or to their own constituency. Community activist Jackie Hewitt remarked,

I have attended many conferences where speaker after speaker got up and said just what I, and everybody else, expected them to say, or what we all already knew. And there was a sense of disappointment that something more productive hadn’t been gained from bringing together such a large group of people. To be honest, I find far more innovative thoughts and challenging ideas being expressed in the Think Tank pamphlets – and yet there are perhaps only a dozen people involved in each. Maybe when people sit in a small group they find it easier to voice different opinions, explore new ideas.

In a small-group setting people feel more confident that their personal input will be listened to and valued, and, if the group gels, an honesty and openness will increasingly enter into the discussions. Furthermore, unlike in public meetings, the small-group setting encourages people to bring some of their life experiences into the discussion, which allows for a deeper understanding, something one funder noted:

Some of the opinions expressed in your latest pamphlet I have heard voiced on television, but usually in the form of brief one-liners – which means that they invariably come across as hardline, reactionary or bigoted. However, when I would come upon identical comments in the pamphlet they were always part of a larger paragraph which provided a context through which you gained some insight into why the speaker had arrived at such an opinion.

As each participant is given space to recount their life experiences, the broad range of those experiences is invariably reflected in the rich diversity of opinions held by the group – often to their surprise. One member of the Shankill Think Tank commented,

When I attended the first meeting I remember expressing a very hardline Unionist viewpoint – because that was what I was expecting from everyone else. But as I listened to the different views which were voiced, not only was I amazed – I had never realised that such diversity existed in my own community – but I began to accept that this diversity – whether in my own community or right across this whole society – wasn’t the threatening thing I had always believed it to be.

If genuine trust is established between participants a confidence often develops which allows them to tackle controversial subjects in a creative way, and certainly in a way rarely possible in a more public setting. Community activist Baroness May Blood made a telling comment to me which confirmed that the parameters of debate *could* be shifted:

When you brought out the second Shankill Think Tank pamphlet [in which the participants had looked to the future] I can tell you there were a few raised eyebrows about some of the things said in it... it seemed a bit radical for the Shankill area. And yet, a couple of months later I was at a meeting and was surprised that people were openly discussing issues which up until then had seemed taboo. When I pointed this out, the response was: ‘Well, if the Shankill Think Tank can tackle these subjects, so can we.’

Encouragement and safeguards

Aspects of the Think Tank process itself undoubtedly encouraged the openness and honesty which became the most remarked-upon attribute of the pamphlets. For a start, it was accepted that my role was to *edit* the discussions, not to *censor* them. That the Think Tank pamphlets allowed people to express themselves openly, and in their own words, was readily acknowledged across all communities in Northern Ireland.

For example, towards the end of 2001, I worked on two pamphlets simultaneously: No. 39, *The forgotten victims*, and No. 40, *The unequal victims*. The first involved a victims' group whose loved ones had been murdered by Republicans, the second involved the relatives of the IRA unit shot dead in the SAS ambush at Loughgall. Each group knew that I was working with the other, but to neither of them did this pose a problem. As one participant said,

The integrity of your project is so well established that we are totally confident that our pamphlet will reflect our views accurately – just as we know that their pamphlet will do the same for them. We also know that any of your own comments inserted into the document are only there to help it flow, not to pass judgement on what we say.

Jim McCorry, a tireless promoter of the pamphlets, noted:

I feel that the exercise has two important components: content and process. In terms of content, the pamphlets allow many individuals and groups to gain access to the opinions and experiences of different communities – including the 'other' community – often for the very first time. But people's preparedness to read the pamphlets is enhanced as much by the other component – the process. People have accepted that the pamphlet series isn't emanating from only one community, and isn't biased towards one community or the other. They know that you are going round meeting people from different backgrounds and political positions, and letting them freely articulate their thoughts and needs. So they are always prepared to give your material a chance, even when it sets out to reflect views they would normally feel antagonistic towards. And, of course, a lot relies on the integrity and trust you have personally built up over the years, right across all communities.

Such a preparedness to 'give the material a chance' – irrespective of its source – was displayed by the small independent political bookshops established in working-class areas. Some very anti-Republican sentiments were voiced in pamphlets emanating from Loyalist areas, yet these documents were readily given shelf space in the Green Cross Art and Bookshop on the Falls Road, adjoining the Sinn Féin Press Centre. Similarly, some very anti-Loyalist sentiments, contained in Think Tank pamphlets emanating from Nationalist groups, were on display alongside Union Jacks and paramilitary badges in Loyalist shops on the Shankill and Newtownards Roads. Such material, which in any other form would not have been tolerated, was accepted because it was seen as part of a series of publications whose overall purpose was to promote understanding and encourage dialogue. And numerous individuals, from Tom Hartley (former chairman of Sinn Féin) to Andy Tyrrie (former chairman of the Loyalist paramilitary Ulster Defence Association) willingly distributed copies to their associates.

Such trust was also engendered through the Think Tank process itself. Although each series of discussions resulted in a pamphlet which would reach a wide readership, it was, primarily, a process involving a small group of individuals. For some of the participants it was perhaps the first time they had been encouraged to articulate their hopes and fears, or describe their personal experiences. It was inevitable that over the period of the meetings views might mellow, or harden – and such a development was accommodated. When it came to discussing the drafts, participants were permitted to clarify what they had said so that their views were accurately represented.

Another encouragement to openness was that no quotes were attributed (apart from a small number of cross-border discussions where names were inserted mainly to avoid geographical confusion), and the final document was only published when there was consensus agreement on its content. As a final safeguard, once the pamphlet was published all recordings were erased and all written drafts destroyed, so that only that which had been collectively agreed remained in the public domain.

I would also be conscious of 'invisible' participants. For example, during one series of discussions a major funding body was frequently referred to, often in a negative manner. I pointed out to the discussants that this organisation had become, unknowingly, a 'party' to the discussions, and I suggested that they be given an opportunity to respond. This was readily agreed and the resultant pamphlet (No. 32, *A question of community relations*) contained two

sections: the first in which the community activists voiced their frustrations, and a second where representatives of the funding body engaged them in debate. Both sides agreed that it had been an extremely useful exercise.

An individual process

A participant in one of the Think Tanks was a woman whose father had been murdered by Republicans. It had left her devastated; the trauma she had experienced had severely blighted her teenage years. She also felt that her personal story wasn't accorded any value. (For example, the day after the 1994 IRA ceasefire the world's media descended on community groups throughout Northern Ireland, including hers, and a TV reporter asked her, 'What are your hopes for the future?' She replied, 'Look, this ceasefire is only a day old; I have a lot of pain to come to terms with yet.' Upon which the interviewer pointedly turned away from her and addressed his question to the others in the room. Like so many in the media, he had no real interest in her story, he was solely concerned with his own agenda.) During the Think Tank discussions, because of the bitterness she felt towards the IRA, she was frequently at odds with some of the more accommodating views expressed by other participants, and when I presented the draft of the proposed pamphlet I expected her to object strongly to my inclusion of many of these views. But because her views were included as well, on an equal footing, she accepted that *all* views had a right to be heard – and, more importantly, on both sides of the community. On another occasion she described the Think Tank experience as 'therapeutic'.

Many participants felt that a definite process was at work, whether while participating in the Think Tank discussions, or reading either the draft or the pamphlet itself:

When you first read the draft you get a bit of a shock. You go: did I really say that! Somehow seeing it down in black and white makes you realise how embittered you must seem to others. Sometimes we all say things automatically without really thinking about their impact.

The pamphlets help you to move forward. In the first few pages you read all these hardline statements which you naturally agree with, then you begin to see other opinions being expressed which initially you might have rejected, but, in the context in which they are said, make you pause and think. And then at the end of the document you can see how you [as editor] have sort of summarised the different views and highlighted possible ways of moving forward, and you say to yourself: Yes, I think I could live with that.

People trust the project not to have a hidden agenda, or to be self-seeking. They appreciate that you [as facilitator] are always careful to ensure that people are happy with the final document. They see it as a *process*, in which their own development is just as important as the printed product. More importantly, it is a process over which the participants have full ownership at all times.

A community response

I was once walking along the Shankill Road when I was stopped by community activist Jackie Redpath, who said, 'We need more copies of the recent pamphlet.' Thinking that he was referring to the last Shankill Think Tank pamphlet I told him that I had few copies left. 'No,' he said, 'not the Shankill one – the Falls one. There's been an amazing amount of interest in it from people who come into our offices.' Two weeks later, while visiting a community group across the interface in Turf Lodge, I received a similar request for 'more pamphlets'. This time I was more cautious in my reply, 'Which one?' 'The Shankill one; everyone wants to know what's being said over there.'

Such a cross-community resonance has been a recurrent theme. One pamphlet (No. 31, *Left in Limbo*) which described the experiences of the children of Republican prisoners, was much in demand from Loyalists – because they could identify with its content; as one Loyalist said to me, 'Our kids must have gone through the same things.' Another positive aspect of this particular pamphlet was that although a couple of the young people had been very critical of the IRA – on the basis that their fathers had cared more for the 'armed struggle' than for their own families – a leading republican commented, 'It's a bit hard [on us] in parts, but if that's what we put our young people through then we must allow them to express their feelings openly.'

Initially the pamphlets were seen as a means of learning about and understanding not only one's own community but the 'other' community. There came a stage, however, when community activists began to see the pamphlets as

a vehicle for reaching out across the 'divide'. For example, Nationalist community activists in Ardoyne, faced with the total breakdown in community relations which resulted from the Holy Cross primary school blockade of 2001, requested that a Think Tank be assembled for the purpose of exploring attitudes to cross-community contact within the local Catholic community, and then have the resulting pamphlet distributed widely across the sectarian interface. This was done (Pamphlet No.56, *Beginning a debate*), and the response from the Protestant side was very positive, for they were heartened to learn that many people in the Catholic community still desired an accommodation, just as many of them did.

The pamphlets have also reached an audience outside Northern Ireland, one not confined to journalists and researchers. Over many years I have worked alongside community activist Joe Camplisson, whose expertise in community development and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland was eventually put to productive use in the former Soviet Republic of Moldova.¹¹ That initiative in turn caught the attention of young Israelis and Palestinians seeking assistance with their own conflict. Two pamphlets were specifically devoted to their needs (No. 57, *Reflections on Violence*, and No. 58, *Making road maps for peace*) and, responding positively to this use of small-group discussion – with its emphasis on the 'personal' rather than dry academic analysis – they arranged for 600 copies to be widely distributed across their own conflict interface.

Michael Hall

References

- 1 See Island Pamphlet No. 5, *Expecting the Future*.
(See also *This is It!*, a play co-written with Andy Tyrie and Sammy Duddy of the UDA in 1984; not published but available from myself.)
- 2 See Island Pamphlet No. 14, *Reinforcing Powerlessness*
- 3 See Island Pamphlet No. 59, *Home and Away*
- 4 See Island Pamphlet No. 78, *Grassroots leadership (7): recollections by Michael Hall*
- 5 A reference to the common paramilitary form of punishment known as 'knee-capping', in which the victim is shot through the back of the knee(s).
- 6 *Remembering the Hippie Trail: travelling across Asia 1976-78*, Island Publications, 2008
- 7 See Island Pamphlet No. 14, *Reinforcing Powerlessness*
- 8 Reprinted as Island Pamphlet No. 2, *Sacrifice on the Somme*. Part of the material was later incorporated into Island Pamphlet No. 85, *A shared sacrifice for peace*, published in 2007, which explored how attitudes to the commemoration of the Great War had changed in the intervening twenty years, largely as a result of grassroots endeavours.
- 9 Island Pamphlet No. 7, *The Cruthin Controversy*
- 10 Patrick Maume, Queen's University, Belfast (in a review on the web-site: www.history.ac.uk)
- 11 An outline of this work is given in Island Pamphlet No. 19, *Conflict Resolution: the missing element in the Northern Ireland peace process*, and Island Pamphlet No. 61, *The search for resolution*. A fuller description and analysis is the subject of the book *From Conflict Containment to Resolution*, Island Publications, 2002.

3: Feedback

This slim volume [*Life on the Interface*] is refreshing in the totally open and honest style of its writing. There is no attempt to disguise the disturbing aspects of the conference or the eruption of emotive issues, which reminds the reader this was not just an academic debate but was concerned with real issues which affected and divided two communities of real people. [But rather than being] tempted to despair... this pamphlet has the opposite effect. It shows that the process of dialogue is essential. (Pauline Murphy, *Books Ireland*, May 1994)

There are absolutely no holds barred here. This [*Ulster's Protestant Working Class*] is the authentic voice of ordinary people, not filtered or interpreted by intellectuals or academics. In so far as we do not hear enough of that authentic voice, or have it presented with scorn or ridicule, this little document is invaluable and should be read by everyone concerned. And if you are not concerned, why not? (*Books Ireland*, December 1994)

The Falls document [*Ourselves Alone?*] should be compulsory reading for everyone interested in a way forward for this community. (Roy Garland, *Irish News*, 3 June 1996)

Island Pamphlets have patiently contributed a lot to reconciliation in the North. (*Books Ireland*, Sept 1996)

Your pamphlet *Death of the Peace Process?* is the only work I've come across so far that gives voice to the people on the ground in Northern Ireland. (Letter from Ann-Sofi Jakobsson, Uppsala University, Sweden, July 1997)

I am currently working on a textbook for GCSE History on Northern Ireland. I particularly like the way your pamphlets get below the stereotypes to reveal more than the simplistic Orange and Green picture portrayed here in England and in the rest of the world. (Letter from Ben Walsh, England, May 1998)

This booklet [*Are we not part of this City too?*] should be required reading for any nationalist who sincerely wants to address the apprehensions of our Protestant minority [in Derry]. The general themes expressed contain proof that there are many in the unionist community who want to search for a way forward, who desire to co-operate with their nationalist fellow citizens in the task of building a more inclusive and settled city. ('Onlooker', *Derry Journal*, 27th July 1999)

[Michael Hall's] numerous pamphlets have played a vital role in making contact between [Northern Ireland's Unionist and Nationalist communities] – a grassroots engagement which has opened ways of communication and understanding which, otherwise, would not have existed. (Wesley Hutchinson, *Espaces de l'imaginaire unioniste nord-irlandais*, Presses Universitaires de Caen, France, 1999)

You're much more likely to find a sharper, more contemporary political analysis and a few home truths in small publications than in books which rely on the whims and potential profit-seeking sales of big publishing companies. . . . In a mere thirty pages this pamphlet [*Reinforcing Powerlessness*] reveals more about our society than the hundreds of academic publications churned out every year. (Dave Hyndman, Northern Visions, 2000)

A group of Americans visited our group and we gave them some of the booklets. They wrote to us a few weeks later saying how much they helped them gain a better picture of what was happening here at community level. That's what those booklets do, they give you time to sit and digest what communities are really saying about their problems. But, even more importantly, being involved in a Think Tank also helped us get a better grasp of what our own community was all about. And reading the booklets produced by the Nationalist community gave us a better understanding of that community too. I like the small-group approach. I have been to public meetings which turned into slanging matches, and people maybe got in a few words all night, but never a real opportunity to express themselves. The small-group context gives you a better opportunity to really debate issues. In the booklets you can see points being thoroughly explored. Being involved in that debate also gives people confidence, and helps change attitudes. (George Newell, community activist, East Belfast, 2003)

I think these booklets are an excellent way of getting views and ideas out. I also believe that the entire series will be very important in the historical sense, in that they will be seen as an accurate reflection of our working-class communities, Protestant and Catholic. (Paul Little, Irish Republican Socialist Party and community activist, 2004)

I think one of the difficulties for all of us is that there is a lack of understanding about the ‘other’ community. And there is work being done to bring about understanding; such as the pamphlets Michael Hall has been producing – these have been very helpful in that regard. (Nelson McCausland MLA, Democratic Unionist Party, 2004)

It is good to get people’s interpretations of what happened to them. Often their recollections are so different – and all the more reason for everybody hearing them. We need to have people talking, and we need then to have some way of making those who have control of resources listen. These Think Tank discussions and publications have done nearly everything that can be done to provide a unique framework within which that talking can be encouraged and publicised. (Fr. Desmond Wilson, community activist, Ballymurphy, West Belfast, 2004)

[The Think Tank/pamphlet series] seems to me to be an epic and unique initiative. I can’t think of a similar attempt to facilitate reflection, dialogue and new political thinking in a post-conflict situation. (*Letter* from Dr Bill McDonnell, University of Sheffield, 2007)

Michael Hall’s Think Tanks have given many people, in both communities, the opportunity to articulate their hopes and fears, and confront issues in an honest but always challenging manner. (Baroness May Blood, *Watch My Lips, I’m Speaking!*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2007)

Another prodigious achievement has been the series of Island Pamphlets, edited by Michael Hall. Numbering some one hundred titles to date, Hall’s project has been a critical contribution to the post-war dialogue between the communities. (Bill McDonnell, *Theatres of the Troubles: theatre, resistance and liberation in Ireland*, University of Exeter Press, 2008)

Your pamphlets [*A process of analysis* mini-series] are very impressive. As a former publisher I admired the quality and presentation of these works. You lay out the problems well and examine clearly the responses. Above all, I was impressed by their content. You raise key issues and were able to assemble significant local players to look at these matters. For some time there has been a serious dearth of discussion on the matters dividing us. The politicians, especially now, have not been tackling these issues. So congratulations on all your efforts in promoting debate on these issues. (*e-mail* from Professor Emeritus Brian M. Walker, June 2018)