

Who are we? What matters to us?

3 April 2002

Introduction

Who are you? Who are we? What matters to you?

Northern Ireland is changing. It's not the same place it was thirty or forty years ago. These changes have affected both Unionists and Nationalists. How have they affected you? In this leaflet we list sometimes opposing statements which people have made in the last year. What do you think of them? Do you recognise yourself in any of them? Which ones do you really disagree with and why? What important statements are missing?

1. Unionists and Loyalists: what really matters?

In the past people felt good about being Ulster and British. Now a lot has changed: many think we're heading for a United Ireland, and so feel their Britishness is threatened and almost wiped out. Others disagree. Some feelings and perceptions are:

A. A COLD HOUSE FOR UNIONISTS?

- `I feel an outsider in my own country. I almost have to apologise for being British. I feel used and abused. We have the ridiculous situation that a Government Minister won't even fly the flag of the country. Taking British symbols out of all public places denies the identity of Northern Ireland'.
- `I never felt like a first-class citizen, but now I feel like a second-class one. Look at the way they discriminate against Protestants in the police'.
- `Republicans are fantastic at telling us what we are. Why can't we choose what we are: isn't that what self-determination is supposed to be about?'
- `Republicans talk about parity of esteem – for themselves. They want an amnesty for the "on the runs", but when it comes to the security forces all they want is enquiries. Where is the parity of esteem in that?'
- `We're not responsible for what happened in the past. But we get a bad press all over the world because of it'.
- `We've made all the concessions. What concessions have Republicans made?'
- `Taking away the RUC and the UDR means Unionists can no longer rely on the security forces'.
- `People talking about Northern Ireland being a cold house for Unionists make it much more likely for it to become just that'.
- `I feel very secure in my British identity: Unionists who say their Britishness has been wiped out are talking nonsense'.
- `It's ridiculous to speak of discrimination against Protestants in policing: look at the proportions from different religions'.
- `Loyalists never relied on the security forces, that's why we had to set up Loyalist organisations in the first place'.
- `Republicans no longer tell us who we are, and they have also given up the old "Brits out" rhetoric'.
- `We'd be better off admitting our past wrongs'.

B. THE AGREEMENT: FOR AND AGAINST

- `The Assembly has really strengthened us as Unionists. In the past if we were working class we never had a voice. Now we do'.
- `The Agreement cannot survive without Unionist consent: that's written into it'.

- `The Agreement is heading towards a United Ireland. How can I be a Unionist in a United Ireland?'
- `The Agreement was supposed to need cross-community support. But it obviously doesn't need our support'.
- `Sinn Fein have two Ministers in government which means the IRA are in government. This could never happen in Britain or the South, so why here?.'
- `Republicans say the armed struggle is over. But the unarmed struggle goes on, including the greening of N. Belfast as Unionists are driven out'.

C. HOW WE SEE OURSELVES

- `Unionists and Protestants are individualists. We're much more fragmented than Nationalists and Republicans. We need to get greater unity among ourselves'.
- `Working-class Protestants have fallen behind in education'.
- `I want to feel equal, safe and respected'.
- `The one time we went into a dialogue Republicans we did so with honesty and openness but they turned up with taped speeches all prepared. That's not dialogue'.
- `As Loyalists we have had dialogue with Republicans and we were surprised how good it was'.

Questions for Unionists and Loyalists

- What does it mean to you to be British?
- Is Northern Ireland a cold house for Unionists or not?
- How does your identity make room for Irish Nationalists?

2. Nationalists and Republicans: what really matters?

A lot has changed in the past 30 years for Nationalists. They hold five of the ten seats on the Executive. Housing is controlled by the NIHE, not by local councils, nationalist flags fly in many areas in Northern Ireland, there are new North-South and East-West structures in place, the British and Irish Governments work formally together. Yet the views of Nationalists and Republicans today are mixed:

A. THE AGREEMENT FOR AND AGAINST

- `People say we got all the concessions. What about the Assembly, the Executive, very limited North-South structures, the principle of consent and Articles Two and Three? All these were very difficult for our people'.
- `Unionists keep moaning about how much they lost. How is gaining human rights and equality for everyone a loss for them?'
- `Most Unionists just want to bring down the Assembly: the Agreement left decommissioning to de Chastelain, but Unionists wanted to see it themselves'.
- `We're proud of the way our Ministers have performed in the Executive'.
- `The Agreement is the only show in town because the alternative is would be like the Middle East'.
- `The Republican leadership has sold us out. They've ended up administering British rule. We've given up so much for so little'.
- `During the struggle we were all involved. Not now. What was the war all about?'
- `During the war Republicans had to operate a very tight structure, so open dialogue with outsiders was not possible. It is now. But some people are still stuck in a war mentality and haven't seen the point of it yet'.

b. IDENTITY

- `We don't see identity as a problem: we're Irish and we're proud of it. Our identity was defined in the community and in opposition to the State. So it doesn't depend on political structures'.

- `We were victims. Now we're survivors – and against all the odds. We're proud of that also'.
- `Irish language, culture, art and literature are really important, but Unionists are always trying to put them down'.

c. POLICING

- `Policing is vital to us: it's almost part of our identity because of the struggle with the RUC'.
- `We have to get policing right. The British Government reneged on Patten. And the SDLP and the Catholic Church weakened the Nationalist community by joining the police board'.
- `Republicans are wrong not to join the Police Board. We need a new police force and we won't get it without Nationalists and Republicans being involved'.

d. UNITED IRELAND

- `The British keep changing the goal posts. Just when the majority in the North are becoming Nationalist they insist on having a majority of both Nationalists and Unionists before moving to a United Ireland. That's not democracy'.
- `There's no point in moving to a United Ireland with a 51% majority. That would simply continue the same problems in a new context. We have to get Unionist consent to a United Ireland first'.

Questions for Nationalists and Republicans

- In what way has your identity changed over the past thirty years?
- What does the term `Irish' mean to you?
 - That someone was born on this island?
 - That they belong to a people separate from and different from the English?
 - That they belong to the Irish state?
 - Other ideas?
- How does your identity make room for British Unionists?
- How is your identity changing?

3. Questions for all

- What should the political identity of Northern Ireland be?
 - British?
 - Irish?
 - British/Irish?
 - Other?
- How was your political identity affected by the Civil Rights struggle, the fall of Stormont, or the Anglo-Irish Agreement?
- Could Unionists and Nationalists agree on a common identity for `this place', If so, what would we have in common? What would the flag look like?
- Will we be able to go on working together in government while still disagreeing about the past, present and future?
- Does it affect your political identity that the UK and the Republic gave up some sovereignty when they joined the European Community in 1973?
- Could you have a British cultural identity with an Irish political identity or an Irish cultural identity with a British political identity?
- Is your political identity more important than your cultural, religious or family identity?

WHAT IS COMMUNITY DIALOGUE?

Community Dialogue is made up of community workers from across the divide. As a group we do not take positions on party-political issues. We believe that if we want to make peace we have to talk. Not just any old talk, but talk that involves questioning ourselves, listening to others, and trying genuinely to see new angles on things.

Remember: it is up to us to make the future!

Community Dialogue:

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