A NEW BEGINNING

SHANKILL THINK TANK

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Introduction

Over a year has now passed since the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires, and yet in some opinion polls half those questioned feel a return to violence remains a definite possibility. Why does such widespread disbelief in the prospects for a permanent peace still prevail? Some claim it is because none of the weapons of war have been 'decommissioned'; others say it is because 'all party talks' have not commenced; some point to the obvious lack of willingness among our politicians to embrace a *purposeful* 'peace process'; while others remind us that it is unrealistic to expect the fears and suspicions, let alone the pain and grief, occasioned by twenty-five years of unremitting violence, to be easily or hurriedly set aside.

But there is another explanation. Throughout the years of conflict concerned people from both our communities have constantly urged our politicians to sit down and 'work out a solution'. Ordinary people are fully aware that finding this solution will not prove an easy task, but if they saw that dialogue was at least beginning, then their hope and optimism might be readily kindled. Much of the present pessimism, therefore, must stem from the fact that over a year into the ceasefires this long-overdue dialogue is almost non-existent. The frustration felt at community level is very real:

> Our politicians might meet one another occasionally to 'make their position clear', but there's no *real* attempt to develop meaningful dialogue. Some even try to convince us that there is no opportunity at all, that it's all a mirage. But why don't they create that opportunity? Unionists tell us that they will never sit down with Sinn Féin until the guns are decommissioned. That's fine, but what's stopping them sitting down with ordinary Catholics in the meantime? Our politicians say conditions are not right for inclusive talks at government level. While they're waiting what's to stop them initiating discussions at *community* level? There's so much work to be done, and yet it seems that we're all just sitting staring at one another. *

Or course, the problem is that even if 'all party talks' do commence there is no guarantee that our politicians will be able, or willing, to transcend their preoccupation with the same old Orange/Green issues which have proven so intractable in the past. If that is the case, and if the prospect of reaching an accommodation is seen to recede in a quagmire of intransigence, then any hope held by the community could quickly change to a dangerous despair.

* Quotes without reference numbers come from three sources: opinions expressed during meetings; comments made to the co-ordinator by people in the community; and various written responses which were submitted.

It is vital, therefore, that our two communities initiate their *own* dialogue. There will be many opposed to such a development. Last year a prominent Unionist politician told a working-class audience that they should leave the business of politics to people like himself. Another complained that "the people on the Shankill are like the people on the Falls – they are just 'takers', they don't know how to 'give'." What the people of the Shankill and the Falls *have taken* is the brunt of the violence of the past twenty-five years; what they *can give* is their energies and abilities to the search for an honourable solution. But to do that they need to engage in dialogue, and they need to commence it *now*.

It was to initiate such a debate within the Protestant working class that the Shankill Think Tank was formed, and the first report[1] of its deliberations was widely distributed among both communities, engendering much welcome feedback. As a further contribution to the much-needed debate, in this latest document the Shankill Think Tank has attempted to address some of the fundamental issues at the heart of our communal divisions. Such issues are too readily put to one side by our politicians in their fixation with 'constitutional' matters, but not only must these issues be addressed, but ultimately in their resolution lies the resolution of all the others. Indeed, one would almost suspect that that is why our political leaders, Sinn Féin included, seem so hesitant to confront them.

The members of the Shankill Think Tank do not pretend that everything that is said within this document necessarily represents widespread grassroots attitudes within the Protestant working class. But the document does represent what *many* within that community are thinking, and we intend it as a challenge to *both* communities to engage in serious debate on all the issues raised, for we firmly believe that without an all-embracing dialogue our society will never find its way to a new beginning.

October 1995

Nationality and Heritage

A new Unionism?

Few working-class Ulster Protestants believe that the old Unionism served them properly and many desire a change, though admittedly for differing reasons. Some, given the perceived threat to their Britishness, argue that Unionism must call a halt to the compromises of the past few years and resist demands that it reach a spurious accommodation with its opponents. Of the two main Unionist parties one seeks to do just that and remains committed to 'No Surrender', while the other is hesitantly trying to grapple with new realities, signified by its frequent use of the term 'the greater number of people in Northern Ireland' in an attempt to broaden Unionist appeal to Ulster's Catholics.

However, in public perception, both the main Unionist parties are still deemed to be firmly wedded to only one section of Ulster's population, epitomised this July by the two party leaders parading their respective sashes at Portadown during the stand-off with the RUC. Hence, a growing number within the Protestant working class feel that a *new* Unionism must be developed, one which is released from the restrictions of the past and offers an *inclusive* option for our whole community:

> There's no way Catholics can identify with present Unionism; even those Catholics who wish to retain the link with Britain must cringe at being labelled 'Unionists'. In its obsession with warding off any threat from Irish nationalism, traditional Unionism failed ordinary Catholics and then wronged them – like other sections of this society it needs to apologise for the part it played in our communal tragedy. We need to *redefine* Unionism. Do we want a Unionism that discriminates against one section of our community, or fosters economic privilege to the detriment of both working-classes? Of course we don't. Unionism should simply *represent our link with the people of Britain* – nothing more, nothing less. Unionism shouldn't be the preserve of a Protestant Ascendancy, but should be flexible enough to incorporate Protestant, Catholic and agnostic; 'British' Unionists and 'Irish' Unionists; middle-class Unionists and working-class Unionists. We must create a new Unionism that says to Ulster Catholics – we want to leave the past behind and move forward in equality and partnership.

A new Ulster?

A small, but growing, number of Ulster Protestants believe, however, that the days of the Union are numbered, as much because the major party to it – Great Britain – has made it quite obvious that it would like to 'wash its hands' of

Northern Ireland. They also feel that Ulster's Catholics are so estranged from *any* notion of the 'Union' that even a new 'modern' version would hold little appeal. Furthermore, they point out that, as many Ulster Catholics are as equally disenchanted with Dublin's ambivalence towards the 'Six Counties', the best way forward would be to cast aside the millstones of both Unionism and Irish Nationalism and create a new, united Ulster.

However, exponents of an Independent Ulster readily acknowledge that they have much cross-community dialogue to engage in if they are to dispel the belief – held by Protestants as much as Catholics – that an Independent Ulster would simply be a Protestant Ascendancy in new guise.

Irreconcilable identities?

It is often claimed that the Northern Irish conflict is unsolvable, because its roots lie in the collision between two irreconcilable national identities. However, this follows as much because of the exclusive manner in which those two identities are invariably expressed: to be Irish one cannot seemingly be British, to be British one cannot be Irish. There also abound gross misunderstandings as to what each identity entails: Gerry Adams wrote that "The Loyalists have a desperate identity crisis. They agonise over whether they are Ulster-Scotch, Picts, English or British." [2] Now, not one of the members of the Shankill Think Tank knew of *any* Ulster Loyalists who had *ever* agonised whether they were 'English'. Such a misconception might be expected from a badly informed journalist, but not from a major player in the politics of the past twenty-five years, and is a reflection of the many misperceptions held by each community about the other.

More reprehensible is the attempt to deny that the other community's identity is valid. To quote again from Adams' book *Free Ireland: Towards a lasting Peace* (mainly because it is hailed as being "an authoritative account of republican politics"): "There are no cultural or national links between the Loyalists and the British, no matter how much the Loyalists scream about their 'British way of life'." Such a statement elicits a fairly predictable response from Loyalists:

> What arrogance to tell us that the heritage we defend is non-existent! At least Loyalists accept that Irish Nationalists have a legitimate identity, even if we resist it being imposed upon us. Such arrogance stems from the inability of Republicans to accept that there are one million 'British' people living on this island. They just can't cope with that reality, and by denying our British heritage it saves them the bother of having to come to terms with us.

More importantly, however, is the *inaccuracy* of Adams' statement, although therein also lies its usefulness. For in countering it, it is possible to reveal not merely the extent of "cultural and national" links existing between "the Loyalists and the British", but the extent of such links between *all* the inhabitants of this island and the 'British' (whether Scots, Welsh or English).

A common inheritance

- Identical Stone Age burial monuments exist in the northern half of Ireland and south-west Scotland, of which Séan O Ríordain commented: "The tombs and the finds from them form a continuous province joined rather than divided by the narrow waters of the North Channel." [3] Archaeologists have labelled these tombs the 'Clyde-Carlingford cairns' to signify the close relationship between the two regions.
- Not only was the North Channel between Scotland and Ulster a constant point of contact between our two islands, but the entire Irish Sea is seen by some scholars as providing for more complex patterns of social interaction than first believed. As archaeologist John Waddell suggested: "Perhaps we have greatly underestimated the extent to which this body of water linked the two islands in prehistoric times.... Maybe we should consider the Irish Sea as a 'great land-locked lake' to use Dillon and Chadwick's phrase." [4]
- The prehistoric link between the two islands also suggests a shared kinship. As historian Liam de Paor commented: "The gene pool of the Irish... is probably very closely related to the gene pools of highland Britain.... So far as the physical make-up of the Irish goes... they share their origins with their fellows in the neighbouring parts of the next-door island of Great Britain." [5]
- It was settlers from Ulster, labelled 'Scotti' by the Romans, who bequeathed the name 'Scotland' to their new homeland.
- From the 5th to the 8th centuries the Ulster-Scottish kingdom of Dalriada encompassed territory on both sides of the North Channel. From Dalriada emerged the kings who united 'Scots' and 'Picts' in what became Scotland.
- The Gaelic language was brought from Ireland by such settlers and it eventually spread throughout Scotland, a prime example of the close interrelationship between the two islands. In more recent times the influence has been in the opposite direction and much of the distinctive vocabulary of the North of Ireland is of Scottish origin, including words such as *skunder* (sicken), *thole* (endure), *byre*, *corn*, *dander* (stroll), *lift* (steal) and *mind* (remember).
- St Patrick was a 'British' emigrant to Ireland whose influence on Irish history and culture has been profound.
- When St Columba sailed from Ulster to Iona, the monastery he founded there proved of vital importance to the religious and cultural history of Scotland. As the Dutch geographer Heslinga wrote, it was settlers from Ulster who "gave Scotland her name, her first kings, her Gaelic language and her faith." [6]
- This cross-fertilisation between east Ulster and northern Britain gave rise to what Proinsias Mac Cana described as "a North Channel culture-province within which obtained a free currency of ideas, literary, intellectual and artistic." [7]

- Some of the ancient annals of early Irish history concern themselves as much with events in Scotland as with those in Ireland.
- Even in the great Irish sagas major characters such as Cúchulainn and Deirdre commute readily between the two islands.
- At the Battle of Moira in 637, reputedly the greatest battle ever fought in Ireland, the over-king of Ulster had in his army – according to Colgan – contingents of Picts (Scottish), Anglo-Saxons (English) and Britons (Welsh).
- In 1316, at the request of Ireland's Gaelic chiefs, Edward Bruce of Scotland was proclaimed King of Ireland.
- Between the 13th and 16th centuries the importation by the Irish chieftains of large numbers of Scots mercenaries (the gallowglass) – many of whom settled in Ireland – was to prove vital to the resurgence of Gaelic Ireland.
- The Plantation is the most famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) period of major population movement between Britain and Ireland, but it was not the first such movement, nor was it the last – those of Irish descent have made a significant contribution to the present population of Great Britain.
- Rather than the modern Irish Republic being the embodiment of traditional Gaelic aspirations, "the concept and the institutions of the modern nation-state were, ironically, imported from England." [8]
- Irish Republicanism owes much to the radical ideals of Scottish Presbyterianism.
- Despite the conflict which has perennially soured Irish and British relationships, Irishmen have long maintained links with the British Army, epitomised at Waterloo where it is estimated half the British Army were Irishmen. Certainly, according to Wellington, himself the most British of Irishmen, "the 27th of Foot (Inniskillings) saved the centre of my line at Waterloo." This close connection was also evidenced in the First World War, during which some 50,000 Irishmen died fighting in the British Army. And in the Second World War 80,000 Southern Irishmen volunteered to join the British forces.
- Irish writers of English descent (the Anglo-Irish), alongside those of native Irish descent who wrote in English, have established one of the most vibrant branches of 'English' literature (with a roll-call of names that includes Spenser, Congreve, Goldsmith, Swift, Sheridan, Wilde, Yeats, Synge, Shaw, O'Casey, Beckett and Heaney). As Robert McCrum pointed out:

  > In a remarkable way the Irish have made English their own, and have preserved qualities of speech and writing that many Standard English speakers feel they have lost.... In the fusion of the two traditions, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic, it is sometimes said that Irish Gaelic was the loser. The language was certainly transmuted into English, but it found, in another language, ways of expressing the cultural nuances of Irish society, of making English in its own image. [9]

- The history of the Labour movement has also linked the working-class peoples of our two islands, as did some of its greatest leaders: such as Larkin, who was born in Liverpool, and Connolly, who was born in Edinburgh. During the 1913 Dublin lock-out, for example, English workers organised food-ships to help ameliorate the suffering of their Irish comrades.

This list could easily be extended, but it should be sufficient to refute Adams' claim that "Protestants need to be encouraged to recognise that the common history they share with their Catholic fellow countrymen and women in the common territory of Ireland is quite foreign to any British experience".[2] *On the contrary*, it is Irish Catholics who need to recognise that *their* history is not 'foreign' to the historical and cultural experience of the British Isles at all, but is an *integral* part of it. Such a recognition need not threaten either 'Britishness' or 'Irishness', but enrich both, and serve to promote a more inclusive identity. Gusty Spence made such a point when a Loyalist delegation visited the USA:

> We were addressing this gathering of people with Irish 'connections' and when I told them I was proud to be British but also proud to be Irish, one man remarked, in an irritated tone: "Why is it you Loyalists can't make up your minds what you are!" I asked him: "I take it you are American, sir?" "How perceptive," was the gruff response. "I take it you are also proud of your Irish roots?" "I am indeed," was the more cautious reply. "Then if *you* can be proud of your 'Irish-American' heritage, are we not entitled to be proud of *our* dual heritage?" The man nodded and sat down.

Ending the pretence

There are many in Northern Ireland today who still cling to the notion that each community has somehow managed to emerge from centuries of history relatively free from any 'contamination' by the other. By playing their 'own' music, their 'own' sport, and sustaining a host of other more subtle 'differences', they imagine our two communities have managed to remain two distinct and separate 'tribes'. And indeed, during our recent communal tragedy, much antagonism was often directed at those who threatened this simplistic division by daring to initiate romantic liaisons with those of 'the other sort'. But such 'purist' hopes were doomed to failure, for the reality of our history tells quite a different story.

Even during the Plantation period, as Estyn Evans pointed out, "There was much more intermarriage, with or without the benefit of the clergy, than the conventional histories make allowance for." [8] And not only have our two communities interrelated but so too have their cultural attributes. As Estyn Evans pointed out with regard to the Protestant community:

> They've inherited a material culture and an idiom that has the stamp of this country on it. And I like to think of a very paradoxical figure: an Orangeman from the Bannside, waving a British flag and pouring scorn on the Englishman because he can't get his tongue round a good Gaelic place-name like Ahoghill. [10]

The same pertains to the Catholic community. No matter how vehemently Republicans may castigate the 'Plantation', the prevalence of 'Planter' surnames among their ranks indicates their own mixed background, as Ulick O'Connor pointed out with regard to hunger striker Bobby Sands:

> It is ironic that he, who more than anyone else by his devotion to the Irish language while in Long Kesh helped to contribute to the present renaissance of the language in West Belfast, should not have a Gaelic name. (I once published a list of eleven names that could well have been those of a Protestant hockey team of boys and girls from a posh Belfast school. It was, in fact, compiled from a list of members of the Provisional IRA who had been killed in action.) You can see the influence of this mixed background in Bobby Sands' writing – Scots dialogue here and there; 'the sleekit old Brit' for instance. [11]

A new opportunity

Some feel that in the opening up of the whole identity/nationality question a unique opportunity now presents itself:

> Both communities, if they have the vision and the courage, can create something positive from all this soul-searching. For too long we have been obsessed with *definitions* of our heritage which ensured it was different from that of our opponents. But such definitions were based on a *fear* of those differences, and often only served to devalue the real strengths within each tradition. We now have an opportunity to take a journey into ourselves, where we can erode stereotypes and develop an *inclusive* identity.

Such a 'journey' will have many pitfalls, but some feel that the opportunity now exists for the baggage of the past to be thoroughly scrutinized to determine its relevance for today. After twenty-five years of terror and grief, not to mention centuries of mistrust, our communities yearn for a new beginning. But before we can begin this journey, old rigidities must be called to account:

> Fundamentalism, whether expressed through extreme Protestantism or unyielding Irish nationalism, must be challenged. Both communities must demand of the fundamentalists where their stances are taking us all, what they hope to create for our children's future. And we don't need to confront this fundamentalism with aggression, but with *logic*. We mustn't isolate the extremes, we must strive to bring them into the real world. Protestantism no longer needs to be obsessively anti-Catholic, any more than Irish Nationalism needs to be obsessively anti-British. Both obsessions have long since passed their sell-by date.

Some feel that the two communities in Ulster hold the key to a new realignment of *all* the peoples of our two islands, not least because Ulster has been a primary conduit for extensive population exchange and cultural interaction over the centuries. Others feel that if this is not feasible, an alternative way forward would be to unite the two communities within a new Ulster. For either scenario

the cultural and historical foundation stones already exist; as Ian Adamson wrote: "We are a very fortunate people – the marvellous diversity of both Irish and British culture has been accorded to us. We should all be proud of what we are." [12]

However, there are also those who believe that any hope of bringing both communities into a new partnership is grossly misplaced:

> We're wasting our time with talk like this. Republicans have no intention of compromising: Adams recently made it perfectly clear that his bottom line was still 'Brits Out'. But *we* all know – as does he – that the real 'British' presence in Ireland is *us*. And for us to be made welcome in Adams' glorious new Ireland, we'd have to awake from our 'delusions' of Britishness and embrace our 'true' Irishness – the Republican movement's version of Irishness, of course. Even constitutional nationalists aren't far behind that analysis – everyone knows that the SDLP doesn't really want a constitutionally-secure Northern Ireland, no matter how reformed it might be. If only the outside world could realise that behind all this nationalist talk about 'dialogue' and 'consent', it is ultimately 'dialogue' to bring about an eventual United Ireland and *our* 'consent' to relinquishing our Britishness that they're really talking about. Nationalists never presume that 'dialogue' might *also* mean the Catholic community giving 'consent' to the Union. No, everything that is going on, with the collusion of the British government, has a United Ireland as its ultimate objective.

The 'zero-sum' game

The fact that a sizeable section of the population in Northern Ireland perceives itself to be Irish and aspires to Irish unity, was always seen as a threat to the very existence of Northern Ireland, and the constant fear of a 'fifth column' in their midst became a motivating factor behind the discrimination perpetuated by Unionist administrations. The outcome was self-fulfilling: by treating the Catholic community in this way Catholics became convinced they were never going to be accepted as equal partners and so the desire for a United Ireland became not just an aspiration but a necessity, as the only means by which they would ever be accorded legitimate expression of their Irishness.

Some might respond that the 'fifth column' threat was very real. As historian Rory Fitzpatrick pointed out: "Cardinal Logue, head of the Catholic Church in Ireland, rejected an invitation to attend the opening of the first Northern Ireland Parliament and elected Nationalist MPs refused to take their seats. Catholic society rolled itself into a ball like a hedgehog, priests actively discouraging social contacts between their flocks and Protestant neighbours." [13] The blatant sectarianism of the Unionist establishment was matched by a more subtle Catholic sectarianism: "Religious teaching in Catholic schools led children to look down on Protestants as spiritually and morally inferior and the Catholic Archbishop, Cardinal MacRory, declared that Protestants were 'not even part of the Church of Christ'." [13]

Both communities began playing the 'zero-sum' game with a vengeance – if 'we' are winning, 'they' must be losing; if 'we' are losing, 'they' must be winning. If this society is ever to break free from the stranglehold of this game both communities must completely rewrite the rules by which they relate to each other. For a start both communities must accept the *reality* of each other's position. The Catholic community must accept that most Protestants perceive themselves to be British and, other than by agreement or persuasion, are not going to be marched *en masse* into a United Ireland. For its part, the Protestant community must accept that not only are Catholics no longer prepared to be treated as second-class citizens, but, until such time as their aspiration for a United Ireland becomes democratically realisable, are fully entitled to have their Irishness acknowledged and facilitated *within* Northern Ireland.

Acknowledging Irishness

How is the latter to be done? The British and Irish governments believe that a North-South institution is one way of achieving this. And, admittedly, formal structures do have a certain attraction:

> Let's be honest, everyone needs to feel there are institutions which give some sense of recognition to their heritage. While the old Stormont parliament didn't do much for ordinary Protestants, there is no denying that it was still a reflection of our *Ulsterness*, more than anything remote Westminster could have provided. Why do we assume the Catholic community is any different in its needs? Now Catholics were denied any sense of recognition from Stormont, and no doubt they'd have little confidence in a new one, but we have to accept that their 'Irishness' *must* be afforded legitimate expression.

But would any such form of 'expression' be willingly facilitated by the Protestant community, or granted reluctantly as a hard-wrought 'concession'? If the latter, it would hardly auger well for a new beginning between our two communities. A few individuals feel we can only initiate that new beginning by a leap of imagination:

> It's not simply a matter of the Catholic community being able to express its Irishness. I would go further and say that it requires the Protestant community to admit to the 'Irish' part of *its* identity. Not only admit to it, but *welcome* it. We must not begrudgingly accept a diverse Northern Irish identity, we must *celebrate* it.

Many Ulster Protestants, however, would baulk at any suggestion that they were 'part Irish', certainly not while 'Irishness' is synonymous with the political nationalism which has relentlessly sought to coerce them.

> That's asking too much, trying to move too fast. Let both communities admit to their shared 'Ulster' heritage first; let them prove whether they are genuinely prepared to work together as neighbours, *irrespective* of whether they call themselves British or Irish.

Whatever route is taken, the task will remain the same: how do we move this society beyond the 'zero-sum' game and into a new era of democracy and pluralism?

Pluralism

Much more than 'two' traditions

In Northern Ireland we tend to define most concepts quite narrowly. Those who talk of creating a pluralist society invariably assume the process entails reaching accommodation between 'the two traditions'. But pluralism is much more than simply accommodating 'two traditions'; it is about the *totality* of ethnic, religious and class groupings, secular and religious structures, and cultural and social institutions which together make up society and reflect its diversity.

In a pluralist society all sections should feel that their interests are represented and safeguarded, with no one group allowed to dominate. Pluralism will not necessarily mean an end to tensions but those tensions will be mediated through mechanisms which have their foundation in a respect for civil rights.

The possibility of establishing such a pluralist society in Northern Ireland has, until recently, been abysmally absent, partly because the 'zero-sum' game militated against any preparedness to seek accommodation, and partly because repression and violence, and not negotiation, were the usual methods of resolving our differences. To the 'zero-sum' game must be added the 'either/or' mentality: you're either for us or against us. When a prominent member of the Orange Order appeared on television alongside others from the Protestant community – for the purpose of confronting Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams – he rounded on a community activist who said that the Orange Order did not represent her, and told her she should be sitting on Adams' side of the table. He clearly could not comprehend that pluralism could exist even within the 'Protestant' community.[14] So pluralism is not just something which will have to be painstakingly developed – for many people it will need to be *defined* for the very first time.

Ironically, if we do begin to develop a truly pluralist society – with safeguards such as a bill of rights and a written constitution – obstacles will probably be put in our path by the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, for *their* citizens might begin to clamour for some of the same.

Accommodating our diversity?

Northern Ireland, if it is to move positively into the future, *must* establish a cultural, religious and social pluralism, one that is not imposed but constructed through dialogue and agreement. 'Tokenist' gestures to either community, if handled badly or undemocratically, will only serve to polarise our communities

rather than bring them closer, as some feel happened when Queen's University announced it would no longer play the National Anthem at graduation ceremonies, out of deference to the cultural diversity of the student body:

> I attended the subsequent protest meeting, and was taken aback by the anger among those present – and I'm not talking about hard-liners, but normally moderate people. 'Parity of esteem' should mean the *encouragement* of other identities, not the *destruction* of existing ones. The playing of the National Anthem was a time-honoured tradition within the university, perhaps somewhat old-fashioned, but nobody ever saw it as a triumphalist expression of Protestantism. If *it* could suddenly become 'politically incorrect', there's no limit to what could be on the hit-list.

The National Anthem issue unfortunately fell into the 'zero-sum' trap, and any constructive debate which could have been initiated was pre-empted by the university's inept handling of the matter. Moreover, it created concern as much because it was not perceived to be an isolated issue, but part of a piecemeal process of distancing the Protestant community from its traditions of Britishness.

A false attempt at pluralism

The basic fear within the Protestant community regarding the cross-body body as outlined by the British and Irish governments in their *Frameworks for the Future* is that the ultimate purpose of this body is not really to provide a structure whereby Ulster's Catholics could give expression to their Irish identity, but to serve as a springboard for a nationalist political agenda. In the document the two governments talk of "age-old mistrusts" which "need to be consigned to history", and state that their aim is to address the "totality of relationships" and to seek "a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands", adding that "any new political institutions should be such as to give expression to the identity and validity of each main tradition."

So far so good. But what do they come up with? To complement an elected Assembly, they propose a 'North/South body', whose purpose is "to promote agreement among the people of the island of Ireland; to acknowledge and reconcile the rights, identities and aspirations of the two major traditions", and to carry out "executive, harmonising and consultative functions" on matters relating to both North and South. Fine, that package might (perhaps) satisfy *one* component within the "totality of relationships". But what about the *other* component? Where is the *East-West* body with which to confront the "age-old mistrusts" which exist "between the peoples of these islands" (in this case, the peoples of Ireland and mainland Britain); which will "give expression to the identity and validity" of the Protestant tradition (that is, their link with Britain), and which could carry out "executive, harmonising and consultative functions" between the two islands (especially as they move politically and economically closer within the European Community)? The section misleadingly entitled

'East-West Structures' is *primarily* concerned with how the two governments would oversee their efforts to "secure agreement and reconciliation" amongst the people *of Ireland*; there is no mention of any 'East-West' body charged with securing agreement and reconciliation between the peoples of Ireland *and Britain*.

The document, rather than help our communities transcend the Orange/Green division, further institutionalises it and even provides our politicians with yet another opportunity to intensify the 'zero-sum' game: what incentive is there for the 'Green' camp to reach accommodation with the 'Orange' camp, when *failure* to do so might prove more advantageous, as is implicit in section 47:

> In the event that devolved institutions in Northern Ireland *ceased to operate*, and direct rule from Westminster was reintroduced, the British Government agree that *other arrangements would be made to implement* the commitment to promote co-operation at all levels between the people, North and South, representing both traditions in Ireland, as agreed by the two Governments in the Joint Declaration, and to ensure that the co-operation that had been developed through the North/South body be maintained. [Italics added]

[Ironically, as this North/South body is supposedly dependent upon agreements reached within the elected Assembly, it is hard to see what 'co-operation' could have been 'developed' if the parent body was in such disarray it had 'ceased to operate'. It simply creates the suspicion that the longevity of the Assembly is not a primary concern of the two governments; what they are seeking is the creation of a cross-border body which could be used to facilitate a quite different agenda.]

If, when the two governments had talked of tackling the *totality* of relationships, they had treated those relationships even-handedly, the reaction of the Protestant community might have been far less antagonistic.

A genuine accommodation

So what is to be done? How do we create bodies or institutions which give concrete expression to the Catholic community's Irish identity, but which are not viewed by Protestants as 'Trojan horses' created to undermine *their* British identity? Ultimately, there can only be one answer: leave it to those who really want to achieve accommodation:

> The two governments are just going to make blunder after blunder. Little that is dreamt up by civil servants can ever reflect reality as experienced at the grassroots. And our politicians, despite all their bluster, are shit-scared to tackle the real issues. It is vital that people at community level sit down together and work out what *we* want. We have to do it *ourselves*. It will be hard, it will be painful, there will be times when people leave the negotiating table in frustration... but if we persevere we will achieve something which will be of far more value – and prove more lasting – than anything imposed on us from outside. It requires dialogue and negotiation between our two communities – and the time for it is *now*.

Some feel that the very notion of asking Britain to 'reassure' the Protestant community, and the Republic of Ireland to 'reassure' the Catholic community only serves to *consolidate* our communal divisions, not confront them.

> Let's be honest, both communities have been repeatedly let down by the two governments. And yet we keep looking to them as our 'guarantors'! Will Catholics feel any more secure in their 'identity' the day after this cross-border body is established? Hardly – it would probably prove to be just another quango, as remote from the people of West Belfast as all the other quangos. Why on earth don't we seek our assurances from *each other*? Why can't the Protestant community help to make 'Irishness' an *integral* part of this society. It has been claimed that Ulster has always been "the most Irish part of Ireland"[15] – what is to prevent it *remaining* the most Irish part, with a vibrant Irishness not merely co-existing alongside our Britishness, but *complementing* it. If the Catholic community accommodated our Britishness with the same generosity, *our* siege mentality could soon crumble away.

Obviously, such sentiments could prove hard to translate into reality. Not only might Catholics view them with disbelief, but many Protestants would view them with deep suspicion, as another wedge in the door that leads to a United Ireland. Yet it is the very antagonism between both aspirations which now poses the greatest threat to each of them, while an acceptance of what is held in common could help lead this society out of its imprisonment by the past.

Marching backwards or forwards?

Before either community can even begin to feel convinced that the other community is genuinely prepared to draw a line on the past and engage in a process which could take us into the future, what is said in *theory* will need to be provable in *practice*. And without a doubt it will be over contentious issues – such as marching – that each community will endeavour to 'test' the other's commitment to change. There are obvious dangers in this, especially as those who have no desire to reach accommodation will do their utmost to push each situation to breaking point, so that, if they achieve their purpose, they can then turn to their own community and proclaim 'I told you so!' Nevertheless, if such issues cannot be resolved then there is little hope of building an accommodation on the host of other matters that must be tackled.

The confrontations which occurred this July (in Portadown and on the Lower Ormeau Road in Belfast) over the traditional Orange marches signified different things to each community. Many Nationalists viewed the confrontations as confirmation that Protestant triumphalism was still rampant, and 'proof' that Loyalists were unwilling to reach an accommodation with the Catholic community. Many Protestants, however, because the confrontations had been sparked off when Catholic residents refused the marchers right of way, felt it was 'proof' of an increasing Catholic belligerence and intransigence:

> I accept that many Catholic residents object to Orangemen marching through their areas, but it's quite obvious that it's not simply a matter of local sensitivities; for some it's a welcome opportunity for a sectarian confrontation, and for Sinn Féin it's a cynical way to keep the pot boiling in the absence of their 'armed struggle'. What it does prove is that when they talk about 'parity of esteem' they don't mean *us* or *our* heritage.

This indicates the dangers inherent in so many issues that divide our two communities – they can become symbolic testing grounds for a host of other matters:

> I was at Portadown and I'll tell you this – if people think that it was simply a battle over religion then they're gravely mistaken. Many Protestants were there to take a stand because they've simply had enough. Over the past few years we've seen our heritage denigrated and vilified. Nationalists complain to all and sundry about their democratic rights, but they don't seem to think that *we* have rights too. I mean, we don't sit down in front of their Hibernian marches, and yet they take great delight in illegally blocking ours. If Republicans and Nationalists continue to manipulate everything simply to promote their own agenda there'll *never* be an accommodation between our communities.

Ultimately there is only one way to resolve controversial issues and that is to open them up to community debate, either through open forum, or – and this might be more advisable with regard to the issue of marching – by having a small group of community representatives meet with all relevant parties to determine what form of accommodation, if any, might achieve the widest possible consensus. Such a process will obviously be fraught with difficulties, but if we at community level are not prepared to confront these issues, no-one else will.

Democratic Structures

'Democracy' hijacked

Because each party to the Northern Ireland conflict often gives the impression it holds some monopoly over 'democratic' legitimacy, the very concept itself has become increasingly devalued. Furthermore, as all parties have proven how readily they can resort to blatantly undemocratic *methods* in pursuit of their aims, little trust exists when they begin to expound democratic *principles*. The parties cannot even agree on the geographical area within which their 'democracy' should be exercised: for the Protestant community it is Northern Ireland (if not the United Kingdom); for Republicans true democracy can only be exercised in

an all-Ireland context; and as for the British government – well, who knows any more?

In effect, much of the debate about democracy has been hijacked and constrained within the parameters of the Nationalist/Unionist division, and this has allowed it to become yet another weapon in the 'zero-sum' game. As has already been noted, even the two governments' *Frameworks for the Future* is preoccupied with the Orange/Green question, and hardly touches upon the basic democratic requirements of a modern society.

A return to first principles

How can we transcend this Orange/Green fixation? One way would be to put aside, even momentarily, our preoccupation with the *political allegiance* of our society and concentrate on its *actual structure*. Such a course of action was suggested to a member of the Shankill Think Tank by a prominent community activist from Ballymurphy:

> I believe in a United Ireland, but a United Ireland doesn't interest me if it has no substance and is merely a sop to nationalistic emotions. Everyone with a plan should put it forward – whether a United Ireland, a new Union, an Independent Ulster, even something radically different. If anyone is able to convince me that *their* type of society could offer more democracy and justice than those proposing a United Ireland, I'll vote for them and tell the Republicans to go back to the drawing board and rethink it all.

Admittedly, there would be few people in Northern Ireland – in either community – who could deliberate on their future so unfettered by 'tribal' obligations. Nevertheless, it would be a useful exercise to request that exponents of each of the main options describe for us just what *their* society could offer both communities. Sinn Féin have asserted that "the Unionist minority in Ireland has nothing to fear from a united Ireland".[16] But such a bland statement of principle is insufficient by itself. On what *basis* do they make their assertion? By what *means* would Unionists and their heritage be safeguarded? Similarly, when Iris Robinson of the DUP said that Catholics must be made to feel that Ulster is "every bit as much their home as ours",[17] exactly *how* would the DUP propose to make this a reality? And when John Taylor of the UUP, acknowledging that 40% of Ulster's citizens consider themselves to be Irish, admitted that "we've got to try and incorporate that fact of life in the institutions that exist in Northern Ireland and within this island",[17] we would need to know just *how* the UUP would propose to change existing institutions or create new ones. 'Clarification' on *all* these matters, by *all* the parties, might do this society the world of good, for it would force our political leaders to put aside, even momentarily, their reliance on rhetoric and begin addressing practicalities. Perhaps the end product would be the beginning of a community-wide exploration of the nuts and bolts of constructing a new society.

Even more important than these somewhat parochial concerns – for they still

stem from the Orange/Green question – would be a thorough exploration of the fundamentals at the core of any democratic society: the relationship between citizen and state, between church and state, and between citizen and citizen.

A new 'community politics'?

In its original meaning 'democracy', coming from the Greek words *demos* and *kratia*, signifies the 'power of the people', or 'government by the people'. The experience of Northern Ireland, particularly at the grassroots, has clearly revealed just how far removed from present reality is that original concept. Many believe that Northern Ireland needs new forms of democracy to take us beyond our present sterile sectarian-based politics. Even a new devolved administration would inevitably be framed around the same old divisions, and could actually consolidate and intensify them. We require a politics that addresses the real needs of everyday living and is not simply obsessed with the legacy of history. In other countries the obvious answer would be to vote along 'class' lines on 'bread & butter' issues, but here we are faced with the 'zero-sum' dilemma: a vote 'lost' to the Union is a vote 'won' by the Union's enemies.

One way to transcend this might be a system of *dual* representation. While the politicians were dealing (supposedly) with 'constitutional' matters, a parallel tier of community representatives could be called upon to address grassroots issues. At first all that might be possible would be for community groups to initiate dialogue on grassroots concerns through a community forum. Later, area committees could be elected to give people a more democratic say on the selection of their 'representatives' to this forum. The forum could discuss whatever matters it felt important – not just socio-economic issues, but more 'political' ones: marches, prisoners, 'decommissioning/demilitarisation'... whatever. This 'participative' form of democracy, by directly involving those at the grassroots, might help to counteract the dangerous frustration which sets in when our politicians seem to be getting nowhere. And, who knows, the community might come up with more practical solutions to our communal problems than the politicians. At the very least, our politicians could use the community debate as a yardstick by which to assess just what was possible in their own deliberations. Likewise, the community could judge how far the politicians were failing to match grassroots preparedness to reach accommodation. We have a unique situation in Northern Ireland, there is nothing to stop us developing unique forms of democratic expression.

Community Empowerment

The working class and 'parity of esteem'

There is much talk at present about 'parity of esteem', but, as with other current terminology, this too has been narrowly defined as referring to the Unionist and Nationalist communities. However, such a restrictive definition ignores a more pertinent inequality – between those *with* power in this society and those *without*.

> Republicans keep demanding 'parity of esteem', as if the entire Protestant community has had *all* its traditions and values put on a pedestal. It's time they accepted that while the values of the Unionist establishment were certainly protected and promoted by successive Stormont regimes, Protestant *working class* needs were treated with disdain. The entire working class needs 'parity of esteem', a parity which could help us escape the powerlessness we experience daily.

Working-class areas have suffered disproportionately throughout the past twenty-five years of violence, and those in prison as a result of the conflict are overwhelmingly working class. This 'political' reality has simply added its own burden to a negative socio-economic reality which has never been fully acknowledged.

Deprivation and disadvantage

Despite claims at the beginning of the present 'Troubles' that the Protestant working class was 'better off' than the Catholic working class, much of this 'betterment' was marginal, and in those sectors where Protestants *did* possess a substantial employment advantage, the collapse during the 60s and 70s of much of their traditional industrial base soon enforced its own brand of 'equality'.[18] Most people along the Falls Road would now acknowledge the similar situation which pertains across the 'peaceline' on the Shankill Road – especially when considering the circumstances facing our young people. Whatever lingering doubts still remain are gradually being dispelled through the regular encounters which now take place between community activists along the 'Interface'.

Where differences do exist they are often 'balanced out': one area might suffer more *deprivation*, the other more *disadvantage*. Some differences have a traditional base: for example, despite equally bad circumstances, in Catholic West Belfast 70% of young people stay on at school, whereas only 20% do so on the Shankill. Catholics, excluded from many industrial opportunities, were more inclined to see education as a 'way out' of deprivation, while Protestants traditionally valued industrial skills. But both communities were motivated by

the same desire – to escape from poverty.

Given the suffering inflicted upon working-class areas as a result of violence, deprivation and disadvantage, it is vital that any future 'settlement' does not remain fixated with 'constitutional' issues, but addresses the *totality* of problems facing the most vulnerable sections of this society.

A multiplicity of problems

In seeking a solution to grassroots reality, there cannot be one single answer, for the simple reason that we are faced with a multiplicity of problems.

> While our most intractable problem is that of the long-term unemployed, we also have a generation of youth leaving school with minimum employment prospects, and, to compound matters even further, a new generation just starting school who, on all the indicators, will gain little from it. We need a multi-layered approach – of short, medium and long-term strategies – with which to confront these problems.

All these 'layers' create further 'spin-off' problems. The long-term unemployed readily fall into the 'benefit-trap' (even if people are willing to seek work, the low wages on offer can actually leave their families worse off, due to loss of benefit entitlement) and so they resign themselves to a future without work, an attitude which often becomes reflected among their children. Likewise, today's school-leavers who find that opportunities for meaningful work are denied them can easily vent their frustrations in anti-social behaviour such as vandalism, joy-riding, and drugs. Similarly, if the generation entering school now end up ill-prepared at the end of it all we will simply compound all these problems.

Unemployment, therefore, when we consider all the different groups affected, presents far-reaching consequences for the whole of our society. This is why the response must be multi-layered. The pre-school and primary school situation must be tackled *now*, to try and get today's education relevant for those children's tomorrow; meaningful training and jobs for today's school-leavers is another necessity; and of course something must be done to help the long-term unemployed, not just for their own sense of wellbeing, but to prevent 'benefit-trap' attitudes permeating even further into the community.

The need for community empowerment

While these adverse circumstances have created a widespread defeatism within working-class areas that will be difficult to counteract, an increasing number of ordinary people want to do something about their circumstances. When the Greater Shankill Partnership organised a series of workshops to discuss socio/economic issues, over 600 people turned up – a indication that people *are* concerned and want to be involved.

What has happened to community strengths over the past twenty-five years? As well as the suffering and horror inflicted upon working-class communities,

they have also had to contend with a more subtle 'invasion'. Throughout those years both communities have played host to a spectacular bourgeoning of middlemen and quangos, all 'catering' to the needs of the working class, whether their social and economic needs or their more spurious 'cross-community' needs. On the one hand this 'invasion' and the way these middlemen have monopolised resources, has compounded the powerlessness felt at the grassroots. On the other hand, because of their resilience and persistence, some community organisations have won the grudging acceptance of those with control over resources. If such groups can avoid the inherently divisive danger of being 'courted' by government to the detriment of less articulate organisations, they might find they possess a leverage that could take them beyond the confines of 'funding-recipients' and into the realms of 'decision-makers'. But how can that be achieved?

First of all, the working class – ideally, a united Protestant and Catholic working class – must develop its own *strategies*. Strategies that, while allowing community groups to work closely with all relevant sectors within the economy, nevertheless derive from, and are sustained by, grassroots needs and values. A valuable exploration of some of the issues involved took place during the recent Belfast Community Economic Conference.[19]

The working class must also develop its *own* co-ordinating structures. The conference mentioned above called for a Belfast-wide 'Forum for Community Development and Regeneration'; other areas around Northern Ireland could do the same. Such forums would force government and funders to take heed of local views; the community must not be cajoled into accepting a subservient role – there is enough evidence of the failure of previous 'top-down' initiatives. Even where area-based partnerships are in existence and working effectively, independent community forums could still play a vital overseeing role.

An Agenda for a New Beginning

Three fundamental principles underpin this 'Agenda':

Firstly, a deeply felt sentiment that could not have been better expressed than in the words of a Falls Road resident who contacted our Think Tank:

> Tell your group that it is my honest belief from talking to people along the Falls that *none* of them ever want to go back to the violence we had before. Even if suspicion between us takes a long time to overcome, and our bitterness a long time to heal, the *only* way to deal with it is through dialogue. We must *never again* allow a situation to develop where we find ourselves at one another's throats.

Secondly, knowing that it has been the ordinary people in both communities who have borne the brunt of the suffering, and that it is they who have most to gain by a permanent state of peace, our emphasis is on giving *them* a voice in a 'peace process' which up to now has been kept beyond their grasp. We call upon the people of the Shankill and Falls in particular to take the lead and begin the dialogue that could set us on the road to a new future.

And thirdly, knowing that our two communities have had enough of documents full of empty rhetoric, we will attempt to outline practical ways by which the hopes expressed here could begin to be translated into reality.

A commitment to a different future

After twenty-five years of bloodletting, it is clear that no party to our conflict can achieve 'victory', therefore we ask that no party continue to seek 'victory' through its actions, or perpetuate a belief among its supporters that it is only 'one more push' away. The Protestant community is *not* going to be coerced into a United Ireland; the Catholic community is *never* again going to accept a subservient role. If both communities acknowledge these 'realities', then reaching an honourable accommodation is surely not beyond our collective capabilities.

We call upon all parties to commit themselves to work towards such an accommodation, and to reaffirm that violence, or the threat of its resumption, must be forever banished from our thinking. Furthermore, we call upon all parties to transcend the 'militarism' and 'confrontational politics' which for too long have characterised our attitudes and tactics, and strive to address each other in ways more likely to build trust.

No party to our conflict has a monopoly of suffering, any more than it has a

monopoly of truth or vindication. We have harmed one another grievously; the debt we now owe to history is to act courageously to build a society in which such suffering can never again threaten to blight the lives of future generations.

We do not pretend that the necessary dialogue will be anything other than difficult, but we are convinced there exists a willingness in both communities to overcome the legacy of the past and build for the future.

Therefore, we call upon all those community groups (and individuals) who have sustained their areas through decades of adversity to make (or renew) contact across the 'divide' for the purpose of initiating dialogue. Our Think Tank is prepared to meet with any group wishing to explore such issues with us.

Identity and Heritage

We challenge Ulster Loyalists to redefine their Unionism. Instead of remaining trapped by exclusivist definitions they should have the confidence to celebrate their link with the peoples of Britain in a way that transcends religious, class or cultural differences within Northern Ireland. We challenge them to develop a Unionism which can be truly inclusive of *all* sections of our people.

We challenge Irish Republicans to redefine their Nationalism. Instead of remaining trapped in exclusivist definitions they should have the confidence to celebrate *all* the facets that make up this island's heritage and not continue to assert that some are 'alien' and hence inferior. Their nationalism must become truly inclusive. No longer must they assert that a sizeable section of the people living in Ireland can only be considered 'Irish' once they relinquish their 'Britishness'.

Furthermore, we challenge Loyalists and Republicans to acknowledge that over the centuries each community has imbued many of the other's attributes, to the extent that the heritage of both traditions has increasingly become a shared one. We challenge Loyalists to acknowledge the 'Irish' component of their heritage, and Nationalists to acknowledge the 'British' component of theirs.

The Shankill Think Tank offers to sit down with any group from either community with a view to exploring this shared heritage and to see how 'Irish' and 'British' aspirations could be 'harmonised' to our mutual benefit.

Pluralism

Before a truly pluralist society can be created here, we must transcend the 'zero-sum' game by which any 'gain' for either tradition was automatically perceived as a 'loss' to the other. Such attitudes have condemned both communities to a state of perpetual antagonism. We are confident that our two communities possess the ability and the willingness to sit down together and negotiate ways in which *all* our traditions and aspirations can be afforded legitimate expression.

We further believe that it will be this *inter-community* dialogue which will provide the most realistic basis from which to develop *genuine and purposeful* links between the two parts of our island.

We call for all these matters to be opened up to community debate. Let our two communities determine what is required for this society to become truly pluralist, and let us negotiate our own 'frameworks for the future'. The Think Tank again offers to meet with any group wishing to explore the issues in more depth.

Democratic Structures

We must redefine the Northern Ireland problem. While it has invariably been focused upon the clash between two conflicting national identities, in many ways it has always been a problem of democratic participation, or lack of it. If Northern Ireland from its inception had been a truly democratic society, it is hard to believe that cultural or religious differences alone could have led us into the self-inflicted communal tragedy we are now emerging from. Hence, although the resolution of those religious and cultural 'differences' might still be a long way off, if we can get the democratic fundamentals right this time, the likelihood of returning to the torment of the recent past will hopefully be banished forever.

Martin McGuinness recently said that when Sinn Féin eventually sat down with Unionists they would be giving nothing, for there was nothing left to give. However, this assumes (and it is an assumption shared by many Unionists) that our political leaders will have little else to discuss but the 'national' or 'constitutional' question. We believe there is much more than that to talk about, and much more that each community can 'give' to the debate. The creation of a truly democratic society – *irrespective* of its allegiance – has hardly begun.

We call upon our two communities, as part of their dialogue, to explore the democratic structures they feel to be vital in our society, irrespective of whether they believe in a new Union, a United Ireland or something quite different. Our Think Tank is willing to sit down with any group wishing to explore this issue.

Community Empowerment

The social and economic needs of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland have been continually sidelined by the political conflict that has beset our society, and yet the failure to adequately address those needs has always been a fundamental factor sustaining that conflict.

We therefore urge all those involved in community development to give consideration to the recent call to establish community-based 'forums for regeneration', so that those at the grassroots can at long last begin to have a genuine say in the decisions which affect their lives.

About the Community Think Tanks . . .

Throughout the past twenty-five years of violence, while our politicians have danced circles in their efforts to avoid having to engage in purposeful dialogue, ordinary people from both our communities have constantly striven to initiate debate on ways of tackling this society's problems. Although these efforts have usually remained confined to each community, not infrequently the debate has been taken across the 'divide', proving that our two communities *can* talk together, even if as yet they have been unable to reach agreement on our future.

In 1992 three people each involved in promoting dialogue – Jim McCorry, Michael Hall and Billy Hutchinson – mooted the idea of a cross-community 'Think Tank'. However, before this could take shape, the 'Life on the Interface' conference,[20] organised by the *Springfield Inter-Community Development Project*, clearly revealed that any debate had to be undertaken on *two* fronts – *between* the two communities and also *within* each community, for it was apparent that only those who could articulate their *own* community's fears and aspirations would have the confidence to engage the other community in meaningful dialogue.

As a first step, in late 1993 a Think Tank was initiated on Belfast's Shankill Road, and a broad spectrum of Protestant working-class opinion was represented by those who participated: ex-prisoners, local councillors, community activists, members of 'fringe' political parties, and concerned individuals. For various reasons, a complementary Think Tank based within the Catholic working class was slower to initiate, but one is currently being assembled.

The object of the Shankill Think Tank was to encourage an open exploration of views, especially as later meetings were concurrent with the Republican and Loyalist ceasefires, and the bitterness engendered by 25 years of violence sat uneasily alongside the new hopes being articulated. If any comment relayed to the Think Tank was felt to be a genuine reflection of attitudes 'out there on the street', no attempt was made to sanitize or amend it. It was felt that only by being totally honest could we create the necessary foundations upon which genuine inter-community dialogue could emerge. The end product of those first meetings, the pamphlet *Ulster's Protestant Working Class*,[1] elicited an immediate response from both communities, indicating the constructive potential of such an open debate. Of the pamphlet, one reviewer wrote:

> This 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. [21]

Our hope is that as our Think Tank continues to promote dialogue, that this 'authentic voice' will increasingly become a cross-community one.

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18 The workforce at Belfast Shipyard, for example, has plummeted from its peak of 42,000 to just 1,700; Mackies Engineering Foundry has dropped from 7,500 to 450. Many major outside companies with local plants have since departed Northern Ireland: ICI, Courtaulds, British Enkalon, GEC, Goodyear, Michelen. The collapse of the linen industry saw the closure of numerous mills. Decline or demise has hit other major employing sectors – Gallaghers, the Ropeworks, the stevedores at the docks. Small businesses in the Greater Shankill area, once numbering over 600 before redevelopment, now total around 130.

19 *Belfast Community Economic Conference*, edited by Michael Hall, Island Pamphlets: 12.

20 *Life on the Interface*, edited by Michael Hall, Island Pamphlets: 1.

21 *Books Ireland*, December 1994.

Over a year into the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires the fears and uncertainties of the recent past show little sign of abating. The Shankill Think Tank – created in 1993 for the purpose of stimulating debate within the Protestant working class – believes that much of this uncertainty is due to the inability of our politicians to initiate purposeful dialogue, and the fact that the ordinary people of Northern Ireland – the ones who have most to gain by a genuine peace – have been given no real say in the 'peace process'.

This document is a call to both working-class communities to assert their right to be heard. It seeks to explore the issues that lie at the heart of our communal divisions, and challenges people of both 'traditions' to redefine their aspirations more inclusively. Finally, the Shankill Think Tank reiterates its belief that only through debate and dialogue within and between our two communities can we ever hope to set this society on the path to a new beginning.

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