

Democratising the Mindsets: Progressive Loyalists and Conflict Transformation

Aaron Edwards

Over the past few years loyalists have been responsible for multiple deaths in Northern Ireland. Yet, strangely, there are countless other loyalists who have sought to bring an end to the killings by trying to entice paramilitaries 'out of the jungle'. This conflict transformation process is aimed at democratising the mindsets of those who previously resorted to politicicide as a means of tackling the irredentist threat posed by physical force republicanism. Despite the positive outcomes already evident there has been little actual media exposure of these important peace-building initiatives.

According to the Chairman of the Loyalist Commission, Mervyn Gibson, this is due largely to the inability of loyalists to manage their media profile: 'I think [what] the organisations need to be doing is more clearly sending out signals that they want peace. They have been on that path for some time but the message hasn't got through to mainstream unionism or the Government'. It might be said that providing loyalism with a rational political voice - amidst the calamity of inter-community violence and internecine conflict - is a thankless task for those who are prepared to put their heads above the parapet.

Gibson remains undeterred. He has consistently stated that he 'wouldn't be involved in working with paramilitaries and transformation if I took them for gangsters and criminals'. Gibson is not the type of public figure to have the wool pulled over his eyes by those individuals who see militant loyalism as a lucrative business enterprise. As he admits: 'Some individuals are involved in criminality. The vast majority I deal with are in the organisation for ideological reasons'. As someone close to loyalism Gibson is responsible for heading up many high profile initiatives in loyalist communities. The most notable being the 'Loyalist or Racist: You Can't Be Both' campaign spearheaded by the Loyalist Commission.

Fortunately, this is one high profile campaign which has attracted media attention. One could think of others, including the 'Love Ulster' campaign, but there are countless other initiatives which receive no media attention. This article looks at one of these: the East Antrim Conflict Transformation Model – devised and superintended by the PUP in partnership with the UVF.

Under the Radar

The East Antrim Model aims to tackle the conditions which give rise to paramilitary activity, to challenge these and to provide young men, in particular, with an alternative route away from paramilitarism and into more community-orientated enterprises that will have an ultimately desirous affect on their communities. This grass-roots initiative has received little (if any) media exposure. Yet it has been jointly undertaken by the leaderships of the PUP and UVF in conjunction with various community based groups, including: Monkstown Community Resource Centre, New

Mossley Community Group, the Factory Community Group in Larne, LINC Resource Centre and Carrickfergus Mediation Network.

The absence of direct government support for such initiatives inevitably saps away at their legitimacy in the eyes of the general public. An additional problem for local activists is the presence of an obnoxious view that these activists are merely front men/women for terrorists. This is simply not the case. In most cases programme leaders are ordinary people from beleaguered working class communities who have suffered disproportionately from the socio-economic catastrophe caused by 'the troubles'. Moreover they feel let down by populist Unionist politicians who appear to be much more concerned with accumulating power than with offering any kind of visionary leadership.

That the East Antrim initiative has received the support of the UVF is encouraging. For an illegal armed paramilitary organisation like the UVF, which has been responsible for over 400 deaths since 1969, one would have thought that a move in a positive direction would invite intense media scrutiny; but none has yet emerged. Given the local UVF commander's commitment to scaling down his organisation's operations (in terms of recruiting and punishment beatings) in the area - as well as his comments that 'I would buy into the conflict transformation approach 100%' and 'It's time for the organisation to start thinking about jobs, getting back to work, moving away from the violence' - it seems surprising that this should be ignored. Hitherto unpublished research has even verified that the UVF has come full circle in recent months to a position where it supports the community from which it pools its personnel.

The Emergence of Principled Loyalism

The reasons why an open channel between the loyalist community and the British Government has not been in evidence may be due to the traditional bulwark of a media inimical to any kind of grass-roots initiatives from loyalist or republican areas. Similarly, the voice of principled loyalists has been overshadowed by the mafia don image of militarists (such as Johnny Adair and the late John Gray) who would make HBO's fictionalised Capi Tony Soprano weep with envy. Arguably, this 'tail wagging the dog' affliction has been something more acute to the UDA/UFF.

It could be said that whatever way paramilitaries package themselves they will generally fail to curry favour amongst the professional classes in Northern Ireland. That is not to imply that working class Protestants (particularly those from the skilled strata) will be anymore endearable to the highly publicised criminal activities of those who seek to line their own pockets to the detriment of their co-religionists.

One of the reasons why non-combatant activists have been permitted such a free hand is due principally to the support given to the project by the UVF leadership at a local and province-wide level. As one senior UVF Brigade Staff Officer told us: 'I personally don't think the UVF are in any position (anywhere even close) to decommissioning. Paramilitarism going away - that's a different ball game. They believe very much in that and they would see a marked difference between going away and decommissioning: they don't see the two running in parallel'. It is obvious

to us - from what we have seen on the ground - that the UVF leadership is committed to applying the methodology of the East Antrim Model in other areas.

At a time when the IMC has declared the UVF and RHC to be heavily wedded to organised crime it might be a suggestion for this quango to at least give a nod and a wink towards the organisation's endorsement of this Conflict Transformation project. Moreover, it might be worthwhile for those analysts of paramilitary organisations to actually take the odd stroll through loyalist areas. What they would see in some of these most deprived areas in Northern Ireland is 'a lack of a fair educational system, few skilled job prospects and a community with low self-esteem – these problems lie at the very core of loyalist angst' according to Kelly Haggarty the Community Development worker for Monkstown Community Resource Centre. Above all they might also discover that driving a desk can only take one so far.

Towards a Panoramic View

Beneath the shallow veneer of loyalist youths throwing Molotov cocktails at the security forces and the copious layers of bling coating those self-appointed gangsters there is a community crying out for a better life. The trouble is that seven years after the Belfast Agreement peace has not brought the dividends wished for by the Unionist community. Unionists are without a voice and they resent it. Moreover they have recently seen their political culture tarnished by the illogical ranting of a cadre of unrepentant 'priests and presidents' who fail to see the irony of their interminable bleating comparables of all Protestants as 'Nazis'. Unlike Nationalists Unionists do victimhood very badly, especially those working class Protestants who attempted to keep to a semblance of civility with their Catholic neighbours during an unrelenting war of attrition waged by the Provisional IRA.

It is impossible to get a panoramic view of these grassroots projects by navel gazing. But that should not detract from the positive impact they are having at the coalface. The allegations appearing in the Sundays about individuals involved in conflict transformation in East Antrim remain unsubstantiated; the truism is that nobody wants to admit that the UVF has taken a grip of its renegades, disciplined them and installed a new leadership in the area. Our proof comes to us through empirical research, not from a mystery 'loyalist source' plied with beer tokens by unimaginative hacks. As Dawn Purvis writes in her foreword to our latest pamphlet 'loyalists are to the Sundays what celebrities are to the red tops' (i.e. the tabloids). It is doubtful that this heavily moralistic culture will change in the future but as the world's most gifted intellectual, Noam Chomsky, has rightly commented 'If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all'.

The latest pamphlet by Aaron Edwards and Stephen Bloomer - *Democratising the Peace in Northern Ireland: Progressive Loyalists and the Politics of Conflict Transformation* - will be published shortly by LINC Resource Centre, Belfast: <http://www.linc-ncm.org/>. The authors wish to thank all of those who permitted them valuable interview time.