

The role of civil society

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When the Troubles began in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1960s, one response from the British government was the establishment of a Community Relations Commission to develop strategies to improve relationships between the two communities. The Commission thought that society suffered from a lack of community infrastructure and local leadership and that it was important to create a pool of community activists who would eventually connect across the divide and create a new non-sectarian stratum of society which could develop a new politics.

The wider public was in part already involved in political action. The Orange Order, for example, permeated all sections of the Protestant community and acted as an important link between political and civil society. The leaders of the civil rights movement, although mainly middle class and professional, were successful in mobilizing a wide section of the community in their campaign. Their opponents were led by uncompromising Protestants, mainly from the Free Presbyterian Church of Ian Paisley, though participants in their protest rallies also included other disaffected loyalists. Both communities had only limited opportunities for developing a broader political understanding of the situation and street politics remained largely a reflection of traditional sectarian loyalties and identities.

The rise of organized community activity

With the support of the Community Relations Commission, the early period of the Troubles saw a flowering of local community activity and the development of community leadership. Those involved tended to reject conventional politics and community action provided an alternative stage from which to work

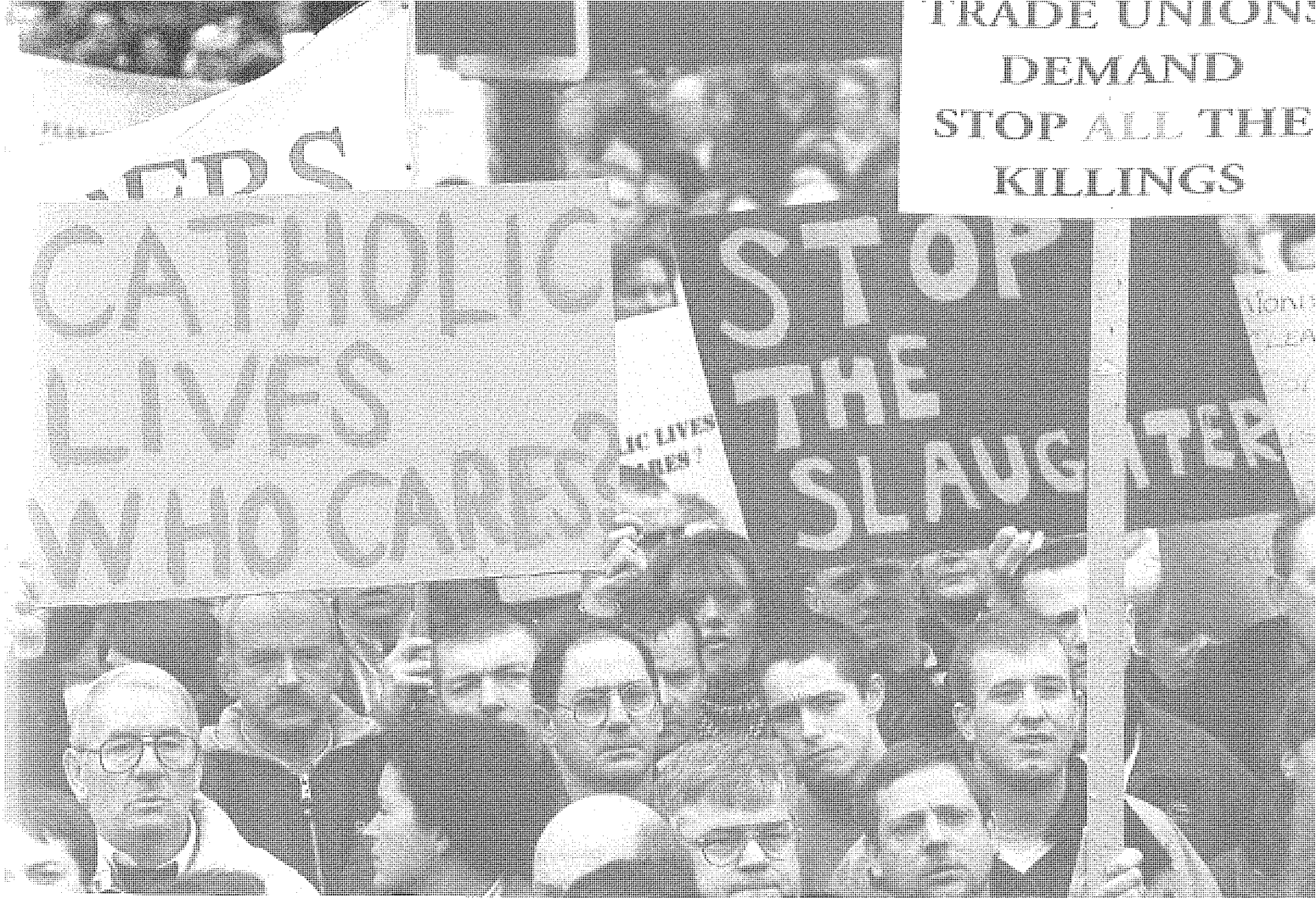


initiative 92

THE OPSAHL COMMISSION

initiative 92

NO ONE ASKED YOU... UNTIL NOW.



Source: Pacemaker Press

for social change. When powers were returned briefly to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1974 one of its first steps was to close down the Commission, arguing that it was no longer necessary now that there was a new representative assembly. But the level of organized community activity in working class neighbourhoods continued to grow.

It was also true that in other sectors of civil society there was a great deal of disillusionment with politics throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Many who did not support the predominant system of sectarian politics found their sphere of activism in the trade unions, churches, and neighbourhoods, but they had little impact on the overall political situation. Most sectors of society, including the churches, were themselves divided about the most appropriate response to the conflict, and in these circumstances intransigent voices were dominant. Perhaps it was inevitable that violence would muffle the voices of those who support accommodation. Intransigent voices speak a simpler and more forceful message that is easier to understand than the more intricate and less obvious arguments in favour of co-operation and dialogue. It has always been difficult for civil society in Northern Ireland to open up a broader middle ground where a settlement might be more likely to be found.

Prophets and reconcilers

Throughout the conflict a number of groups emerged calling for peace. The most notable of these was the Peace People, which in 1976 was able to organize huge rallies and demonstrate a strong desire for an end to violence. Its founders, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but the movement could not find a common basis for a settlement on which its supporters could unite. Soon it had lost its popular appeal and, like other peace groups, worked quietly in the background to raise issues, to help relieve the stress of living in a violent society and to bring together small groups of Protestants and Catholics to learn about each other and develop mutual respect.

Cross-community contact was promoted most vigorously among young people and there were a variety of pilot education programmes in schools and summer holiday schemes, not only in Northern Ireland but also in other parts of Europe and the USA. They were sponsored partly by local host groups and in part by the government. Their experience pointed the way for the eventual inclusion in 1992 of a theme entitled 'Education for Mutual Understanding' in the core school curriculum. Although the education system remains largely segregated, one of the most striking achievements of civil society groups has been the creation of a system of

integrated schools. They started in the 1980s with no official support and are now an established, if small, part of the government-funded education system.

On occasions individual church leaders met politicians and paramilitary groups to urge them to end their violence. The business and trade union leadership tended to speak out in favour of the commercial advantages of a settlement. Trade unions organized actions against sectarianism – in particular against the loyalist-organized Ulster Workers Council Strike in 1974 that aimed to bring down the power-sharing assembly – but these efforts had little support. One of the most consistent and innovative organizations in its methods and programmes is Corrymeela, a Christian community with its own residential accommodation in a quiet rural area. Its members were scattered throughout society and were encouraged to work in their own neighbourhoods and local associations to challenge the prevailing nature of politics. It was also one of the few civil society groups which tried to build links and enter into dialogue with political parties. With notable exceptions, such as the Centre for the Study of Conflict at the University of Ulster, the academic community gradually took a professional interest in the conflict – but tended to analyze its nature rather than attempt to provide critical viewpoints for politicians and policy makers.

Slow progress

The politicians tended to dismiss activists in civil society as naive or unwilling to get involved in the messy compromises of real politics. These initiatives had limited direct impact overall, though it is probable that indirectly they contributed to the development of a climate where new ideas could be explored. Civil society and politics came together in working class areas where community activists and supporters of paramilitary groups overlapped. At times 'community activist' became a convenient title which allowed supporters of paramilitary groups from each side to meet each other or 'constitutional' politicians and government officials. This overlap between community politics and paramilitary politics may help to explain why some of the more innovative and non-sectarian political thinking came first from political parties with paramilitary links.

There was therefore limited interaction between the more conciliatory sections of civil society and the political process. When a conflict seems intractable, there is often a hope that the stalemate could be broken by movement within civil society. Such a scenario is attractive in affirming the importance of the whole community and in suggesting a way forward when progress at the political level seems impossible. But the experience of Northern Ireland gives little evidence of civil society mobilising to

play such a key role. Society remained polarized. There was a growing weariness of the constant hostility and a fear of violence, but the determination not to compromise on core commitments and values remained strong.

Developing synergy

However, as the peace process gathered momentum there were shifts within civil society. In the early 1990s, the UK government carried out a review of community relations work and developed a more integrated strategy. A new Community Relations Council was set up as a co-ordinating body, and local authorities – often forums for sectarian politics in the past – were invited to develop community relations programmes which were relevant to local problems. Financial support was made available and the European Union also established a Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconstruction. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Sinn Féin was interested in opening up contacts with influential members of the unionist community, and individual clergy were prominent in these efforts (such as Ken Newell and Sam Burch), not least because they were more willing and free to meet political opponents.

Perhaps one of the most significant civic contributions was Initiative '92, which described itself as a citizens' inquiry. A group of civil activists established a commission, which sat from 1992 to 1993, to take opinions from the community and political parties on the way forward. It was composed of weighty individuals from Ireland and Britain and was chaired by Professor Torkel Opsahl from Norway. Opinions vary on its impact. Its findings may not have been particularly original, and its lasting contribution may have been its efforts to encourage community groups and individuals to think and discuss the options for the future. As a result the wider community began to have greater confidence in putting forward its views and engaging with the political process and politicians from whom it had felt alienated for so long. For example, the leaders of the seven main co-ordinating bodies of industry, business and trade unions formed a loose group, known as the G7, through which they developed opportunities for dialogue with politicians. Two local newspapers, identified with the sectarian divisions, began to work together, even printing a common editorial on one occasion.

Finding a voice

Nevertheless, peace groups still found it difficult to mobilize public support for their calls to end violence, even when political movement became evident. Most support for peace rallies occurred in late 1993, before the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and after the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire in 1996, but not during the



Source: Paolantonio Press

negotiations when they might have provided encouragement for the risk-taking politicians. It seems that those in favour of an end to violence were worried that public action might make the situation worse and only got involved when the situation looked very bad.

It is noteworthy that the electoral process for selecting the representatives to take part in the negotiations provided an easy opportunity for new groups from civil society to be elected and yet very few civil society groups were formed. Well over ninety per cent of the electorate voted for the existing parties and only one new group, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, was successful. It was able to make a significant alternative input into the negotiations, though it only had one per cent of the popular vote.

Towards the end of the negotiations small groups of pro-Agreement activists had begun to engage in a new type of action. Throughout the Troubles opponents of accommodation have made their views known by assembling outside buildings where significant political meetings were taking place. Now those who supported political co-operation and accommodation also began to appear. Their presence reinforced the realization that there was support for inclusive politics. This message was

perhaps most important for those opposed to the peace process.

Once the Belfast Agreement had been achieved, it had to be ratified by a referendum, and this presented another opportunity for civil society to make its voice heard. The anti-agreement 'No' campaign was more vociferous and the pro-Agreement political parties were rather half hearted in their campaigning. A civil society 'Yes' Campaign was quickly organized with members of Initiative '92 at its core, and they attempted to create a popular campaign involving local celebrities. The will for a settlement did exist and had some influence over politicians.

International influence

The influence of civil society in other parts of the world has also been relevant. Perhaps the most significant of which was that of the Irish-American lobby in the US. It has always been generally supportive of Irish republicanism and one section has given important financial and lobbying support to the IRA. Others have given significant support to community relations and community work, notably through the American Fund for Ireland. Irish-Americans hold important and influential positions in the commercial and political life of the US

and their opinions are taken seriously by political leaders in Ireland. In the 1990s they began to encourage the republican movement in its shift towards a political strategy, and provided it with credibility and legitimacy. For example, they supported the granting of a visa to Gerry Adams after the IRA ceasefire and provided access to influential groups and organizations. The possibility of diminishing its support in America has been a powerful influence on the republican movement throughout the negotiations.

Ideas of conflict resolution and joint exploration of issues, especially that it is possible to find solutions which satisfy the interests of all parties, were beginning to percolate through society and among politicians. A number of initiatives involving politicians and others in off-the-record conflict resolution training or problem-solving seminars were undertaken, mainly by American groups. Their impact is unclear and some of the most intransigent activists, who did not see the need for new alternative approaches, tended to be dismissive of such initiatives. Politicians made a number of visits to countries such as South Africa and met with local leaders from divided communities. Those involved have often said these were their most significant and meaningful experiences, encouraging them to believe that a settlement was possible.

The good offices of civil society

In addition to the attempts to shift public opinion and influence decision-makers and politicians, individuals and civil society groups have tried throughout the Troubles to make a contribution to the search for a settlement by offering their good offices in the form of unofficial private diplomacy. They carried messages, facilitated meetings and helped political groups to evaluate their strategies and goals. Clergy and religious groups were well placed to fulfil this role and were able to maintain contact with key politicians without raising suspicions while continuing with their normal pastoral duties. Some clergy brought with them the institutional authority of their church. Other individuals, including academics and community workers, also played a part. Sometimes individuals had a contact which could be developed or a particular problem or confrontation arose in their area and they were able to respond. Occasionally an approach might be made to someone to act as an intermediary. These efforts were not public but they often had a significant local impact in defusing tense situations and these small achievements may have encouraged a gradual change in thinking about how to deal with the overall situation. These 'good offices' roles were ultimately most useful in opening up communications when in the 1990s the parties themselves began to work towards negotiations.

The experience of the Troubles has been profound for civil society. Many of those who have endured the years of conflict have been energised and become more aware of the nature of their society and the roles they can play in making it function more effectively. A Civic Forum is to be established under the Belfast Agreement to maintain the interaction between civil society and politicians. The lessons already learned and the confidence gained could make a major difference in building a new peaceful society and dealing with the many issues which still exist.