

Peace in Northern Ireland at last?

First hand reflections on learning in and from Ulster

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30 September 2008

Northern Ireland's Troubles

- Centuries of conflict and complexities
 - ethnic: Irish v English and Scottish
 - religious: Catholic v Anglican and Protestant
 - economic: working class v middle and upper classes
 - Catholic-nationalist-republican v protestant-unionist-loyalist

- 1969 to 1998: the Troubles
 - The political issues
 - The socio-economic issues
 - Civil Rights Movement
 - from 1969 to 2006, 3717 deaths (*Lost Lives* David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton and David McVea)
 - 2084 were civilians (726 Protestant and 1257 Catholic and others)
 - 1039 were security forces
 - 395 republican paramilitaries and
 - 167 loyalist paramilitaries
 - Locations of deaths
 - 1687 Belfast (691 West and 566 North)
 - 520 Co Armagh (highest per capita)
 - 128 Great Britain
 - 121 Republic
 - Responsibilities for deaths
 - 58% republican
 - 30% loyalist
 - 10% security forces (138 Catholic civilians and 20 Protestant civilians)
 - 2% unknown

- Comparables
 - 100,000 if England
 - 44,000 if Australia
 - In area, less than a quarter the size of Tasmania (22%)
 - No family and no community unaffected

The Peace Process

- Informal contacts began in the 1980s, through intermediaries
- Formal negotiations in the 1990s led to the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 10 April 1998
 - 69 deaths in 1994 but only 9 in 1995, still 58 in 1998
 - 12 July 1998 three Catholic brothers, 10, 9 and 8, in firebombing (loyalists)
 - 15 August 1998 29 killed in Omagh market bombing (dissident republican group)
- Issues
 - Ceasefire and renunciation of violence
 - Release of prisoners
 - Decommissioning of paramilitaries
 - Power sharing
 - Policing
 - Devolution of law and justice
 - Human rights

Human Rights

- Pre-Forum
 - the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement
 - the NI Human Rights Commission
 - the St Andrews Agreement
- the Bill of Rights Forum
 - composition: 14+14+1
 - mandate: to make recommendations to the NI HRC
 - timetable: one year
 - process: plenary, working groups and outreach

- issues

“To produce agreed recommendations to inform the [Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission’s](#) advice to Government on the scope for defining, in Westminster legislation, rights supplementary to those in the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), to reflect the [particular circumstances of Northern Ireland](#), drawing as appropriate on international human rights instruments and experience. These additional rights to reflect the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem, and – taken together with the ECHR – to constitute a Bill Rights for Northern Ireland.”

- trust
- capacity: nationalists and unionists and NGOs
- legal: our mandate
- historical: two views
 - of the problem
 - and of the Troubles
- political: UK or NI?
- ideological: legislature v judiciary - economic, social and cultural rights

- results

- a report but little consensus
- clarification of views and positions
- a year of talking about human rights: the safe space!
 - shared human dignity: mutual respect as a basis for dialogue
 - valuing diversity: fostering harmony, willing to listen and learn in order to understand
 - personal integrity and shared reflection as the basis of seeking truth together

Learnings

- Australia’s Bill of Rights debates and Australian history
- the two views of history
 - is reconciliation of views possible?
 - if so, how?
- the role of a Bill of Rights

- why there is none in Australia
- do we need one?
- would a Bill of Rights have prevented the Troubles?

- process
 - public understanding
 - community ownership
 - safe space
 - good proposal

- nn

Websites

www.billofrightsforum.org

www.nihrc.org

www.billofrightsni.org

www.caj.org.uk