A Trojan Horse? Unionism, Trust and Truth-telling in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between trust, testimony and truth recovery processes as part of post-conflict transition. The paper uses the case study of unionist attitudes toward a community-based truth-telling project in Northern Ireland to demonstrate the impact an absence of trust can have upon what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has described as the 'space of controversy' that emerges between the 'certification' and the 'accreditation' of testimony. The paper suggests such distrust is a legacy, not only of conflict, but also of the particular circumstances of transition and the specific mechanisms of truth recovery adopted. Ultimately the paper argues for a holistic, community-centred approach towards truth-telling and raises issues relevant to other violently divided societies undergoing transition and grappling with ways in which to deal with the legacy of political conflict.

Introduction: No Time to Talk? Trust and Truth-telling in Northern Ireland

There is deep suspicion amongst loyalists in Northern Ireland about the high potential for a 'truth process' to be abused by republicans to suit their political agenda. A repeated concern expressed by this group has been that republicans – who are seen to be very skilful in the art of propaganda – would use a truth commission as a stick with which to beat the British state.¹

Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in April 1998, which signalled the end of 30 years of armed conflict in Northern Ireland, there has been an ongoing (if generally muted) debate on how to deal with the legacy of the past. However, discussions of any substantive truth-telling mechanisms, that have become the norm of post-conflict transition practice internationally, have rarely come to the centre of the Irish political stage.² There have been some important and innovative civil society efforts to advance the debate on truth recovery, most


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obviously in the work of Healing Through Remembering (HTR), which recently published a report containing five possible options for a truth recovery process. Yet even now, some nine years after the Agreement, not only is there no society-wide truth-telling mechanism in place, there is also little consensus about whether any such outcome should emerge from a recently announced consultation process. Why is this so?

At the most obvious level, the fragility of the political settlement achieved by the Agreement has clearly been a major influence. While prospects for progress in the peace process look better now than they have done for many years, following the signing of the St Andrews Agreement in October 2006 and the re-establishment of power-sharing government in May 2007, the repeated collapse of institutions of devolved government has delayed progress on a number of fronts. Yet, if looked at another way, such political instability may be seen more as a consequence than a cause. A key goal of truth-telling is taken to be the reconstitution of the social and political environment and forging ‘shared narratives’ of the past to make future agreement possible. Looked at in this light, the very fragility of the North’s institutions of governance makes a good case for truth-telling to start as soon as possible.

However, what has also emerged is an often stark divergence of views between nationalist and unionist parties, victims’ groups and community representatives on what truth-telling itself could or should mean. It is clearly not insignificant that this apparent polarisation of views replicates the very divisions that defined the conflict in the first place. It also illustrates the way that the supposedly universal concepts and language of human rights, truth and justice are in danger of becoming part of the lexicon of post-conflict political and communal competition.

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5 The St Andrews Agreement (signed by the British and Irish Governments and all the major political parties in Northern Ireland in October 2006) and the elections for the devolved Assembly at Stormont, held in March 2007, opened the way for the return of a power-sharing Government - a cornerstone of the GFA. For the first time this is made up of representatives of the DUP and Sinn Fein; the two political parties previously most clearly opposed to one another.


7 ‘Nationalist’ refers to those people (mostly from the Catholic community) who would like to see Northern Ireland cease to be part of the United Kingdom, partition ended, and a unified, independent Irish state created. ‘Unionist’ refers to those people (mostly from the Protestant community) who would like to see Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom and oppose nationalist calls for re-unification with the Republic of Ireland.
This article is not intended to be a comparative analysis of attitudes to truth-telling between nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist communities. The authors have critically examined intracommunity tensions and nationalist and republican attitudes to truth-telling elsewhere. The aim of the paper is to explore unionist/loyalist attitudes to the debate on truth-telling and to contribute to the international understanding of perceptions of truth-telling processes in deeply divided societies. It does so by emphasising the centrality of trust as the basis for testimonial work, and exploring the reasons why, in Northern Ireland and in certain unionist communities in particular, trust appears to be absent. The theoretical framework of the article draws on the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur regarding the relationship between testimony, trust and history, and on Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of social capital. It argues that it is the absence of trust, as an attribute of social capital, which is one key influence upon unionist (particularly working class) attitudes to truth-telling.

The article is divided into four parts. First, it outlines Ricoeur’s conception of trust and testimony and Bourdieu’s social capital, and explains how these may be linked to current international debates on the role of truth-telling in post-conflict transition. Second, it examines evidence of general unionist distrust with the political process and the outcomes of the GFA. Third, some of the key developments on truth and justice issues in Northern Ireland since the signing of the GFA in 1998 are outlined, providing the context for understanding the dilemmas over trust and distrust within post-conflict transition. Finally, the article examines the nature of distrust over truth-telling within sections of unionist working class opinion (in particular) and places this analysis in the context of cross-community commonalities on such issues. In detailing the nature of distrust, the article is also seeking to establish what grounds exist for engendering trust and ensuring the difficult, but potentially positive, business of truth-telling in the future. The analysis is based primarily on research conducted by the authors to assess the impact of a community-based truth-telling initiative: the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP).

Ardoyne is a predominantly nationalist and republican working class area of North Belfast. Ninety-nine of its residents were killed during the 30-year conflict. The ACP was established by local people in 1998 to document the experiences of people who lived through the conflict.

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8 Like ‘nationalist’, ‘republican’ describes those who support the aim of Irish re-unification and independence but who are more radical in the pursuit of these goals (for example, historically, via the use of physical force by the Irish Republican Army). Support is greatest in working class Catholic areas. Like ‘unionist’, ‘loyalist’ describes those who support the aim that Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom and/or separate from the Republic of Ireland but who again tend to be more radical in terms of the means used in pursuit of those goals (for example, historically, through support of armed campaigns by pro-state paramilitary organisations such as the Ulster Volunteer Force). Support is greatest in working class Protestant areas.

9 Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, Community, Truth-telling and Conflict Resolution (Community Relations Council: Belfast, 2005).


11 The conflict in and about Northern Ireland essentially lasted from 1968–1998. During that time over 3,600 people lost their lives as a result of the conflict, over 30,000 were injured and many thousands more were sent to prison for conflict-related offences.
ences of relatives, friends and eyewitnesses of the community’s conflict-related dead. The result was a book containing over 300 in-depth testimonies, titled *Ardoyne: the Untold Truth*, which was published in 2002. The authors were both members of the ACP and in its aftermath conducted research designed to assess the strengths, limitations and possible lessons that could be learnt for similar projects. Reactions to the book and the model of truth-telling adopted by the ACP were also sought from representatives of a range of victims’ groups and human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A total of 50 interviews were carried out and included people from organisations working mainly in nationalist or unionist communities. The majority of the unionist community representatives were from the loyalist working class areas bordering Ardoyne in North and West Belfast and therefore represent a particular constituency in political and socio-economic terms. This needs to be taken into consideration when assessing their views, although the paper also seeks to place these within a reflection on wider unionist attitudes to truth, justice and victims’ issues.

**Trust, Conflict and the Past: Theorising Testimony, Trust and Transition**

The relationship between trust and testimony is central to the writings of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur whose work has become increasingly concerned with the ethics of ‘remembering and forgetting,’ the public role of history and its place in the constitution and reconstitution of civil society and community. For Ricoeur, the ability of members of a given society to have ‘confidence in the word of others’ is a fundamental ethical and social goal because what it ‘reinforces is not just the interdependence, but the shared common humanity, of the members of a community.’ It can also be said that it is precisely the absence of such ‘confidence in the word of others’ and the lack of a sharing of a ‘common sense of humanity,’ which are key dilemmas for societies emerging from violent conflict and/or mass human rights abuses. But why does Ricoeur place such emphasis on the role of trust in truth-telling?

To understand this, it is necessary to first establish the expansive claims that Ricoeur makes for ‘testimony’ itself. For Ricoeur, testimony constitutes the ‘fundamental goal of human speech.’

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12 This research was carried out by the authors and involved the selection of interviewees within Ardoyne that represented a cross-section of those who had given their testimony (i.e., by age, gender, identity of victim and agent responsible for the victim’s death). Other interviewees were chosen as representative of different sections of opinion on victims and truth recovery issues. For a fuller account of the methodology adopted, how the key themes were identified in the analysis and the findings of the research see, Lundy and McGovern, supra n 9.

13 North Belfast, where Ardoyne is situated, is made up of a mosaic of mostly working class areas clearly defined as either nationalist/republican or unionist/loyalist. The representatives of these areas were selected to represent a range of perspectives on victims and truth recovery issues. See, Lundy and McGovern, supra n 9.


15 Ibid, 166.
mental transitional structure between memory and history. This is because testimony represents the articulation of memory and, he argues, we have ‘nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place.’ This is not to deny that there are numerous potential hurdles and pitfalls whereby memory (from perception to retention and on to declaration) can fail. However, there remains for Ricoeur a fundamental ‘truth claim’ of memory, tied as it is to ‘an ambition ... of being faithful to the past.’ Indeed, implicit in the critique of memory as being potentially ‘unreliable’ is the fact that ‘it [memory] is our one and only resource for signifying the past character of what we declare we remember.’

Testimony exists as a central aspect of everyday life, but performs two key roles in the work of post-conflict transition, meeting what might be termed the archival and judicial imperatives of truth-telling. However, whether provided to establish or clarify a historical record or to bear witness in the course of judicial proceedings, the nature of testimony contains the same essential components as it does in everyday usage. For Ricoeur, these essential elements are the assertion of reality through the self-designated authentication of the author of the testimony – ‘I was there.’ The moment of testifying is one in which the giver of testimony is making a claim to act as a third person observer of what happened. This reveals what Ricoeur terms the ‘dialogical structure’ of testimony: at the moment of bearing witness the testimony-giver is also asking to be believed. What the dialogical structure ‘immediately makes clear [is] the dimension of trust involved,’ says Ricoeur. To share testimony, Ricoeur argues, ‘is to exchange trust. Beyond this we cannot go.’ This is the step from the ‘certification of testimony’ to its ‘accreditation,’ a process not completed until the testimony is accepted as authentic. Critically for Ricoeur, this relationship between the giver and the receiver of testimony is also the point at which the tension between confidence and suspicion enters, resting on the balance between trustworthiness and untrustworthiness. The rise of suspicion also creates a ‘space of controversy,’ that is, the confrontation and/or assimilation between various testimonies as bearers of the truth of the past. In other words, this is precisely the space created by post-conflict truth-telling processes.

Ricoeur also argues that testimony and trust can be viewed as cornerstones of the ‘set of relations constitutive of the social bond,’ framing the ‘habitus’ of the community under consideration. In this sense, testimony and trust can be seen as potential collective resources or conceived as elements in the formation of

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16 ibid, 21.
17 Ibid, 162.
18 Ibid, 21.
19 Ibid.
21 Ricoeur, supra n 14 at 163.
22 Ibid.
24 Ricoeur, supra n 14 at 165.
social capital. Indeed, social trust has been identified as a key measure of social capital. There has been a great deal of academic debate as to the meaning, significance, character and application of the concept of ‘social capital’ and its possible role in understanding processes of post-conflict transition. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is one of the foremost contemporary theorists of social capital. For Bourdieu, social capital can be understood as:

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – in other words, to membership in a group.

Group membership produces a specific combination of (stronger or weaker) social and cultural resources upon which the group member can depend (or not) as a means by which to negotiate the world around them.

In this sense, attributes of social capital, such as the capacity to trust, are not merely reducible to a ‘set of properties individually possessed.’ Nor are they purely the result of a particular moral or cultural outlook. The capacity to trust, as a key aspect of social relationships, will be shaped by the ‘habitus’ within which community life is lived. Habitus, in this sense, is a concept that can be understood to ‘incorporate the objective structures of society and the subjective role of agents ... a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour people acquire through acting in society.’ The ‘habitus’ will, in turn, be conditioned by a range of social, cultural, historical and (last, but by no means least) economic factors. Indeed, for Bourdieu, economic capital is key, as changing collective access to economic capital will impact upon the nature and quality of social capital and the social networks to which it adheres.

Bourdieu’s conception of social capital is by no means unchallenged. Nevertheless, numerous authors have followed Bourdieu in exploring the extent to which the conditions of late capitalism can significantly impact upon the character of social capital of communities and thus the capacity to trust. It could be argued that trust (as the basis upon which testimony provided as part of a process of post-conflict transition is either accredited or rejected) is critically dependent upon the structural context within which that transition takes place. This has important implications for strategies of conflict resolution and truth-telling designed to tackle the problem of distrust.

27 Bourdieu, ibid, 248.
29 Ibid.
A Partial Peace? Unionism, Distrust and the Peace Process

For some commentators, distrust has been the key motif of the Irish peace process. The GFA was in essence the product of a political leadership-focussed conflict management strategy. Central to such an approach was the belief that ‘ethnic group’ leaders had to maintain support within their communities even while they increasingly moved away from their long-held political positions. To do so, they had to mask change by maintaining a façade of continuity through political rhetoric. The result was a peace process and agreement (so the argument goes) defined by what has been termed ‘constructive ambiguity’: the coordination of apparently irreconcilable statements and contradictory reading of developments directed toward different (ethnically-defined) public audiences. The peace process was, in many ways, a matter of language. That is to say, political developments were often couched in terms which allowed the various major political actors to place emphasis or frame an interpretation of what was being proposed in terms they could sell to their own constituencies. This has led a number of authors to see ‘constructive ambiguity’ as the root cause of distrust. For Paul Dixon it amounted to ‘organised falsehood’ and the ‘choreography of political lying’ leading to a mood of ‘cynicism and resentment’ amongst unionists.

The political compromise arrived at between Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in the St Andrews Agreement, and the inclusion of both parties for the first time in the re-established power-sharing government soon after, is likely to give rise to a new wave of optimism about Northern Ireland’s future. However, before these developments there was a great deal of evidence that unionist pessimism was a significant political factor. From the late 1980s and early 1990s onward, the issue of ‘Protestant alienation’ and ‘defeatism’ increasingly occupied the time of academics and policy makers. In the wake of the signing of the GFA, initial cross-community optimism for the future was soon replaced (at least as far as unionists were concerned) with a far more sceptical outlook. This was generally expressed as a commonplace belief that Irish republicanism had defined the North’s post-agreement political agenda, evi-

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enced in surveys of unionist/loyalist opinion. For example, in the 2003 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT), 74 percent of self-declared Protestants felt that they had not done as well as Catholics from the deal. Only 18 percent thought both communities had ‘benefitted equally.’ Precisely none thought that Protestants had done better.36

In part, such findings are undoubtedly linked to the ‘equality agenda’ and the introduction over time of measures to tackle relative Catholic advantage.37 There may also be ‘some signs for optimism’ in recent community attitudes to such questions.38 However, it is difficult not to feel that a ‘zero-sum’ logic has underpinned some of these developments and what Henry Patterson has described as ‘Protestant disillusion with the outworkings of the Belfast Agreement’ has led to the emergence of the DUP as the largest voice in contemporary unionism.39

Until the signing of the St Andrews Agreement the rise of the DUP, with its strident anti-republican and anti-Agreement message, provided the most substantial evidence that unionists had become less than enamoured with the GFA and distrustful of the peace process as a whole. This was also borne out by opinion surveys. In a poll conducted in early 2003, only 36 percent of Protestants said they would vote in support of the GFA, compared to 55 percent at the time of the referendum in 1998.40 In the NILT 2004 poll that figure had fallen to a mere 28 percent, with 42 percent declaring they would vote against it. In stark contrast, 74 percent of Catholics said they would vote for the agreement again, with only 4 percent stating they would vote against it.41

Unionist distrust of ‘constructive ambiguity’ was accentuated (in the view of many) by the long-term failure to reach an agreement on the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, particularly those of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). While the decommissioning issue has since been resolved (following the IRA decision to get rid of all its weapons), and aside from the issue’s practical significance, it might also be seen as symbolic of the levels of distrust engendered by long-term structures of sectarian separation and the costs and consequences of conflict itself. Such deep-seated problems and the distrust they produce have been important in shaping debates on the ‘outworkings’ of the GFA.

37 McGovern, supra n 31.
39 Henry Patterson, ‘The Limits of New Unionism: David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party,’ *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 39 (2004): 163. In the March 2007 elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly, for example, the DUP emerged as by far and away the largest single party within unionism, winning 31 seats and 30.1 percent of the vote compared to the Ulster Unionists with only 18 seats and 14.9 percent.
40 Ibid, 163.
A Piecemeal Approach: Dealing with the Past in the Wake of the Good Friday Agreement

The GFA was a highly complex document designed to deal with a wide range of issues and concerns. Notable by their absence, however, were any comprehensive recommendations or mechanisms for dealing with the legacy of the past. There were, it is true, certain broad principles outlined for dealing with victims’ issues including the ‘need to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence.’ But these amounted to little more than vaguely defined aspirations.

The GFA had also been preceded by a report written by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, briefly installed as a Victims’ Commissioner until the report’s completion. Whilst it focussed primarily on outlining the service needs of victims and survivors (providing the platform for subsequent policy development in this area), the ‘Bloomfield Report’ also made some general comments on the potential cathartic benefits of ‘providing greater recognition for those who have become victims.’ Again, however, there was little in the way of concrete suggestions on how this agenda could be taken forward. Indeed, Bloomfield was all but silent on dealing with ‘truth and justice’ issues and his non-discussion of state killings was severely criticised by many nationalist groups. In the wake of the report, government agencies given responsibility for victim-related policies have concentrated on ‘practical help and services.’ For example, the key policy document produced by the Victims Unit (VU) in 2002 specifically avoided any discussion of truth and justice issues because of their ‘political sensitivity.’

The lack of a substantive post-conflict ‘truth and justice’ mechanism in Northern Ireland has largely been a consequence of realpolitik concerns. None of the major actors involved in the conflict saw a specifically past-focused process as a priority during the negotiations leading up to the signing of the GFA. In fact not examining the causes and possible competing explanations of the conflict was, if anything, deliberate. The ‘constructive ambiguity’ of the peace process and the Agreement led to what Christine Bell has called a ‘piecemeal approach’ to dealing with the past in the North.

That is not to say, however, that there have not been a number of highly significant developments. These include: the Saville Inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday; the Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations, 10 April 1998. Kenneth Bloomfield, We Will Remember Them: Report of the Northern Ireland Victims’ Commissioner (Belfast: NIO, 1997). Victims Unit (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)), Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve: Delivering Practical Help and Services to Victims of the Conflict in Northern Ireland (April, 2002). Christine Bell, ‘Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland,’ Fordham International Law Journal 26(4) (2003): 1095–1147. The Saville Inquiry was set up to re-examine the killing of 14 unarmed civilians by members of the British Parachute Regiment in Derry on ‘Bloody Sunday’ in 1972. Due to deliver its conclusions in 2008, the Saville Inquiry has been a unique, innovative, historic and often controversial judicial process. See, Bloody Sunday Trust, http://www.bloodysundaytrust.org.
the Stevens Inquiry into state collusion;47 and the report of the Cory Inquiry issued in April 2004.48

Aside from the importance such events and initiatives had for those most directly involved, their significance also lies in the impact they had upon developing attitudes toward the ‘truth and justice’ debate. There are several reasons for this. Each had come as a consequence of long and often difficult campaigns by human rights NGOs, political parties and the relatives of (almost exclusively nationalist/republican) conflict victims. Building on campaigns highlighting state violence and human rights abuses throughout the conflict, the search for truth and justice and the ‘politics of memory’ had emerged as important areas of concern for many nationalists and republicans.49 In such communities, there is a growing number of ‘bottom up’ or community-based initiatives attempting to address the legacy of the past in various ways.50

Many unionists viewed such developments with scepticism or outright hostility. Unionist political parties and groups had themselves been involved in bringing forward their own concerns on victims’ issues. The early release of conflict-related prisoners as part of the GFA led to the formation of several victims’ organisations, which argued for a distinction between the ‘innocent victims of terrorism’ and others. Similarly, the plight of the families of the ‘disappeared’ (people killed by the IRA whose bodies were never found) formed the basis of a very high profile public campaign, as did the attempt by the families of victims of the 1998 Omagh bombing to bring those who carried it out to justice. In the main, however, unionists increasingly seemed to view truth and justice initiatives negatively. In this regard, the Saville Inquiry has become an icon around which their opposition has coalesced. Subsequently derided as costly, unproductive and politically motivated, the inquiry was opposed by the Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble from the moment it was announced on the grounds that ‘opening up old wounds is likely to do more harm than good.’51 The British Government also appears to have become increasingly concerned that its attempts to ring-fence past-focussed conflict-related issues have not thus far succeeded. Former Prime Minister Tony

47 The British Government established the Stevens Inquiry (chaired by the then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Force, Sir John Stevens) to investigate persistent allegations of widespread and systematic collusion between Loyalist groups and British intelligence agencies. Steven’s report issued in April 2003 largely supported such contentions. The full text of the report has not been released. See, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/northern_ireland/03/stephens_inquiry/pdf/stephens_inquiry.pdf.

48 The report of the Inquiry under retired Canadian High Court judge Peter Cory into four high profile cases of alleged collusion (including, most notably, the murders of human rights lawyers Rosemary Nelson and Pat Finucane) found sufficient grounds for further public inquiries in each instance. The controversy was deepened by the subsequent introduction of a new Inquiries bill by the British Government. See the website of the Pat Finucane Centre at http://www.serve.com/pfc/pf/inqubill/inqubill.html.


50 Grainne Kelly, Audit of Storytelling Initiatives in or about the Northern Ireland Conflict (Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2005).

Blair’s overt support for public inquiries as a truth-seeking mechanism to deliver ‘reconciliation,’ signalled by the creation of the Saville Inquiry, apparently subsequently waned. However, a number of important recent developments help to illustrate the likely shape of future provision on victim-related issues. Broadly speaking, these fall into three main areas: the provision of victim and survivor services, investigations and ‘storytelling.’ Such initiatives have been developed within the context of ‘consultation initiatives.’ Reactions to such developments have, unsurprisingly, been mixed, although it is important to note that not all have, by any means, followed traditional political and community lines. That said, for Jeffrey Donaldson, a leading figure within the DUP and spokesperson on victims’ issues, the creation of the office of a Commissioner for Victims was warmly welcomed as establishing an ‘independent advocate for the innocent victims of over 30 years of terrorist violence.’ The appointment of a Victims’ Commissioner with a primarily service-led focus was one of the key platforms of the DUP policy document on victims’ issues. In contrast Relatives for Justice (RFJ), a victims group set up to campaign on behalf of the ‘families of victims of state violence,’ has led a campaign of outright opposition to the move. Deploring the lack of consultation with victims of state violence on the issue, RFJ spokesperson, Mark Thompson, argued against the creation of the Commissioner’s office and called for a ‘completely independent process’ for investigating unresolved killings. Indeed, such dissention was further illustrated by the subsequent controversy (including High Court Rulings against the Secretary of State) over the appointment in December 2005 of the widow of an RUC officer as the Interim Victims’ Commissioner. Such issues illustrate some real differences that have emerged on the way forward on post-conflict truth and justice issues.

‘Sapping Confidence’? Distrust and Unionist Attitudes to Truth-telling

It was against the backdrop of these developing divisions on truth and justice issues that the authors set out to explore the views held by unionists on such questions. This formed part of a wider project to assess the impact and reactions to the work of the ACP, a community-based truth-telling initiative carried out in the Ardoyne area of North Belfast.

Ardoyne is a nationalist/republican working class community that witnessed one of the highest levels of conflict and loss of life of any community in Northern Ireland. It is also an enclave community, bordered on three sides by

53 Relatives for Justice, A Response to the OFMDFM Consultation on Services for Victims and Survivors and the Establishment of a Victims’ Commissioner (March 2005).
54 Ardoyne Commemoration Project, supra n 10; Marie-Therese Fay, Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth, Northern Ireland’s Troubles: The Human Costs (London: Pluto, 1999).
Distrusting the Other

For many interviewees, questions of ‘truth and justice’ were seen as ‘republican issues.’ It was for this reason that for some, even talking about such issues could leave them open to accusations of ‘moving too close to a republican agenda’ and that ‘a truth approach for republican areas is yet another string to the bow of republicanism to attack the state.’ There is an echo here of a longstanding problem for grassroots community workers in interface areas: any challenge to state policy or cooperation with representatives of republican areas can lead to accusations of betrayal. This is particularly significant in a community where the concept of ‘loyalty’ is a key ethico-political principle.57

A widely held suspicion was voiced (often vehemently) by a number of respondents that ‘truth,’ ‘justice’ and ‘human rights’ were a ‘Trojan horse’ for wider Irish republican ends. Certainly there are grounds that should not easily be discounted for arguing that republicans have promoted campaigns on such questions and that this has, in part at least, shaped the debate on truth recovery. However, the ‘Trojan horse’ contention contains a number of elements that need to be examined more closely. Republicans, it was suggested, had long shown themselves to be

55 Lundy and McGovern, supra n 9.
56 Snodden et al., supra n 1 at 11.
far more adept than their unionist and loyalist counterparts at ‘selling themselves,’ particularly abroad. Republican adoption of ‘human rights,’ ‘equality’ and the ‘victim agenda’ were therefore seen as the latest phase of a political initiative that ‘explained’ antipathy (particularly international antipathy) to the unionist/loyalist cause. As we shall see, this construction of an invariably insincere republican ‘articulacy’ (combined with Sinn Fein’s alleged party machine efficiency) is often married to a notion of unionist ‘inarticulacy’ drawing at times upon some very dubious sectarian/ethnic portraits. The ‘articulacy-inarticulacy’ dichotomy can therefore act as a rationalisation for what is perceived as the oft-maligned and misunderstood position of unionists and loyalists. In turn, many unionists feeling that the ‘media is always against them [because] they were always being seen as the perpetrators,’ obviated against engagement with truth-telling. As a result, there was ‘no point’ taking part in truth-telling, one interviewee argued, ‘because no one is interested in listening to us anyway.’ A similar argument has been put forward to, at least partially, account for unionists’ lack of engagement with the concept of human rights. As one commentator noted, ‘previous attempts made had been rejected,’ the right to freedom of assembly had ‘failed the Orange Order’ and early prisoner releases made meaningless ‘the right to have the perpetrators of violence held to account.’

More specifically, republicans were seen to be engaging in a comprehensive attempt to ‘re-write the past.’ The Ardoyne Project was criticised for being ‘partial’ in its telling of the past, both in the sense that it was ‘biased and unfair’ and ‘not total and complete.’ More significantly, this was seen to be part of a far wider attempt to rewrite an understanding of the conflict through ‘republican revisionism.’ The implication was that a ‘truth commission’ would only further this process. Such suspicion of the partiality of truth-telling calls into question the potential of such a process to attain one of its key aims; the reconstitution of divisive readings of the past into a ‘shared narrative.’ Indeed, when asked about the impact of truth-telling on community relations, one interviewee felt that the work of the ACP had ‘shattered them.’ It was even suggested that airing such stories of the past might potentially generate a sense of grievance amongst young loyalists that could feed into a future justification for violence.

Certainly such distrust of republicans (as a political movement) needs to be seen in the context of both 30 years of conflict and the longer-term ideological divisions of Irish society. It also cannot be separated from the general atmosphere of distrust evident toward the peace process and surrounding the decommissioning issue. However, this may also be evidence of a continued non-acceptance of mutual responsibility for conflict. The binary opposition of the collective self as victim and the collective other as perpetrator is certainly not an outlook unique to

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Ulster unionism. A juxtaposition of the ‘respectable’ and the ‘rough,’ the ‘innocent’ and the ‘guilty’ though, has been evident at many junctures during the peace process; for example, in Ian Paisley’s (leader of the DUP) rejection of republican moves on the decommissioning of IRA weapons on the grounds that they should ‘wear sack cloth and ashes’ for the violence they had perpetrated.60

It is important to recognise that, in terms of individual families and their stories, there was a great deal of sympathy, goodwill and mutual recognition of loss expressed by interviewees. However ‘victimhood’ was sometimes portrayed as part and parcel of the self-identity of the nationalist/Catholic community. At such times more problematic images of imagined community cultural differences emerged. The projection of a (specifically Protestant) self-persona – unemotional, practically-minded and wanting to ‘simply get on with things’ – was contrasted with what was seen as the more emotive character of Catholics/nationalists and their tendency to ‘feel sorry for themselves’ – born out of a ‘culture of victimhood.’ Such views undoubtedly owe much to the long-term nature and role of sectarian ideology in Northern Irish society.61 However, they fail to reflect the clear mark that the memories of past traumatic experiences has left on the very person expressing such views. Indeed, the self-projection of rugged self-reliance appeared to act as a defence against the emotional residue of distressing, resurfacing memories of their own and to maintain emotional and psychological distance from victims’ stories.

There was, in other words, some evidence of Stanley Cohen’s literal, interpretive and implicatory ‘variants of denial’ in unionist responses to the issues raised by the ‘truth-telling’ of the other.62 As Cohen suggests, these can be seen as the principle means by which individuals, communities and states exist in a state of ‘knowing and not knowing,’ meeting the ‘need to be innocent of a troubling recognition.’63 The specific circumstances of North Belfast have to be kept in mind here: the conflict in North Belfast was often characterised by intercommunity violence and sectarian assassination and many loyalist victims were killed by people from Ardoyne during the 30 years of conflict. The ‘need to be innocent of a troubling recognition’ is certainly not the sole preserve of unionists and loyalists in the wake of the conflict. However, 50 percent of Ardoyne’s victims died at the hands of loyalist paramilitaries, most of whom would have come from the surrounding loyalist streets. When people were being confronted with the loss and experience of others, these were not distant memories but ones in which, in this sense, they shared. As a result, they were probably all the more difficult to confront. Creating spaces of trust to deal with issues quite so close to home is clearly going to be no

easy matter. Yet it also suggests that it is precisely at such localised, community levels that the engendering of the trust necessary for testimony to aid the process of post-conflict transition needs to be directed.

Certainly this was the view of many of the unionist community activists interviewed, and it highlights a number of contradictions that need to be kept in mind when considering the level and nature of distrust of testimony evidenced above. Many of those who voiced fears of ‘republican revisionism,’ the problem with the ‘partiality’ and/or a nationalist ‘culture of victimhood,’ also felt that only a process of truth-telling rooted in communities ‘would be able to get to the truth.’ The value of ‘conversations’ rather than ‘agreement’ stemming from such encounters was lauded by one respondent, while another argued for the value of an ‘interchange and dialogue.’ The very ‘partiality’ of testimony was seen as a veritable strength by one interviewee who argued that ‘truth ... is highly subjective and needs to be recognised and accepted as such’ and called for a ‘community-based platform whereby people can tell their story from their own perspective and express their pain in the safety of familiar surroundings.’

What we might conclude, therefore, is that the consequence of distrust is not so much a total lack of faith in the possibility of testimony promoting positive transition, but a yawning gap between hope and expectation.

**Distrusting the Self**

Perhaps even more striking, however, than the distrust of republicans and nationalists reflected in the interviews we conducted was the evidence of an atmosphere of distrust within sections of the unionist/loyalist community itself. This, again, took a variety of forms but its implications for attitudes toward truth-telling are, if anything, even more significant.

One important caveat that should be noted from the outset is the specific nature of the community that the bulk of the interviewees represented. Most of the respondents came from loyalist working class areas of North and West Belfast that have witnessed some very particular social and economic changes in recent years. Urban redevelopment has seen a rapid decline in the community’s population; many of the most economically active members have left, leaving behind a community characterised by high levels of unemployment and underemployment, an aging population and amongst the lowest levels of educational attainment in the North: a community that has, in other words, been very much on the receiving end of post-industrialisation and social exclusion. This does not mean that its economic and social situation is worse than that of its nearby nationalist counterparts. Indeed, evidence suggests the opposite, that is, that the impact of these changes may have been experienced differently because the social relationships constituting the collective life of the community have been the result of a different history.64

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There is much (often highly sensitive and politically charged) contemporary discussion and analysis in Northern Ireland on the nature of social capital, why it sometimes appears to be lacking in certain (particularly unionist or Protestant) areas and the impact this has upon non-participation in local development initiatives and alleged disparities in funding.\(^{65}\) It has been argued that social networks within unionist areas of West Belfast tend not to be as strong as those in nearby nationalist areas.\(^{66}\) However, recent studies have argued that there is little or no significant quantifiable difference in the social capital, community infrastructure and capacity for self-organisation within nationalist and unionist communities.\(^{67}\) There may also be a need to adopt a more nuanced and complex understanding of the nature of social capital. For example, the important role of church and faith-based organisations in social networks is often overlooked.\(^{68}\) The real difference, it has been suggested, lies less in differential resources and capacities in the two communities, but in the beliefs and perceptions about them. This has important ramifications, as we shall see, in shaping attitudes toward testimony work and truth and justice issues.

One of the greatest contrasts drawn by many of our interviewees was the acceptance of all those killed, injured or bereaved in the conflict (including members of non-state armed organisations) as equal victims within nationalist communities. In unionist areas, on the other hand, many argued that an internal ‘hierarchy of victimhood’ was the norm. That many of our respondents were either ex-members of loyalist organisations, or continued to have political links with fringe loyalist parties, undoubtedly heightened their reaction to the distinction they felt existed in large parts of the unionist community between ‘respectable’ (meaning security forces) and ‘non-respectable’ (paramilitary) victims. This impacted on the nature of victim organisations, and, for one respondent, immediately raised longer-term memories of the vilification and estrangement encountered by relatives of loyalist prisoners – even within their own communities. Loyalist paramilitary members were overwhelmingly drawn from working class areas and this division over the ‘equality of victimhood’ is an echo of a far more fundamental social change as the last two decades have been characterised by the demise of the cross-class alliance that had once been the foundation for unionist hegemony. This has also led to a deep distrust of government and a sense in many working class loyalist areas of their loyalty being unreciprocated.

Recent research has indicated that some working class unionist communities were considered to be experiencing community ‘fragmentation and low political

65 Ed Cairns, Jon Van Til and Arthur Williamson, Social Capital: Collectivism-Individualism and Community Background in Northern Ireland (Belfast: OFMDFM, 2003); Kate Healy, Future Support of Areas of Weak Community Infrastructure (Belfast: CFNI, 2005); Weak Community Infrastructure Policy Working Group, The Future of Areas of Weak Community Infrastructure (April 2005).

66 Leonard, supra n 64.

67 Brendan Murtagh, Social Activity and Interaction in Northern Ireland: NILT Research Update 10 (2002); Cairns et al., supra n 65.

68 David Berek, Voluntary Action in Faith-based Organisations (Unpublished PhD Diss., University of Ulster, 2004).
integration with institutional or political elites.69 If the state–community relationship was once viewed positively, what tends to remain is a nostalgic harkening back to former eras. The power of nostalgia as a means to cope with the present may also impact upon the debate on dealing with the more immediate past. If the ‘desire to be free of a troubling recognition’ is a shared phenomenon for communities emerging from conflict, the narratives available to different communities to explain the past to themselves are not necessarily the same. ‘Truth and justice’ issues, evidence of collusion and the suggestion that all victims are equal, calls into question unionist narratives of the conflict in which republican culpability for ‘terrorism’ explains all.

Transition brings complexity and part of the growth in the appeal of the DUP may have been in providing a simpler, straightforward ‘right–wrong’ binary reading of the conflict. For one interviewee, the alternative was one of facing up to a history of the state which he saw as one of ‘discrimination, not only against Catholics but also against the Protestant working class,’ founded on a ‘sense of guilt’ and resulting in ‘a denial of the past.’ Rather than confront such guilt and denial, there was a need for a continued defence of the state; ‘we cannot rock the boat because it is our boat.’ This reflects what has been described as a ‘culture of complacency’ within unionism, which has resulted in a lack of engagement with issues (if not the very idea) of human rights.70 Another interviewee echoed this understanding in explaining attitudes towards policing. While arguing that relations with the police (particularly amongst young loyalists) were extremely poor, this went hand-in-hand with the defence of the police ‘as a symbol’ of the community and of the collective self, which meant that ‘you still have a reticence to criticise the state.’ Again, allegations of collusion therefore cast doubt on the moral rectitude of the collective past and were seen as nothing more than an attack on all aspects of the state’s existence.

Sharp divisions within unionist/loyalist working class areas were also highlighted as a specific problem that made engagement with truth-telling difficult. The repercussions of both conflict–specific issues and wider social and economic change were evident here. At the time the research was conducted the eruption of a number of deeply destructive violent feuds between vying loyalist paramilitary groups (particularly in the Greater Shankill area) severely undermined the internal cohesion of the community.71 Loyalist feuding has had a negative impact on community development. Progress, it has been argued, has been hindered or deliberately stifled because it was seen as a threat to the fragmented power bases of paramilitaries. While the situation with regard to loyalist feuding now appears to

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69 Cairns et al., supra n 65 at 5.
70 Foster, supra n 58.
71 Steve Bruce, ‘Turf War and Peace: Loyalist Paramilitaries since 1994,’ Terrorism and Political Violence 16(3) (2004): 501–521. Shankill is the main unionist/loyalist working class area in West Belfast. It has seen a significant decline in its population in the last two decades (from around 70,000 to roughly 25,000) and continues to suffer from high levels of unemployment and other indicators of social exclusion.
have stabilised, it did claim a number of lives and created real divisions and tensions. The feuds have usually been far less about political differences than they have been the product of turf wars over drug and related criminal activities – the mainstays of a post-industrial, ‘underclass’ illicit economy. They have also had a devastating impact upon the sense of trust, reciprocity and mutuality that constitutes social capital. Such divisions have also had a real, physical presence: Shankill itself became increasingly divided geographically, as rival loyalist groups controlled its upper and lower sections, which added to the ongoing threat of violence.72

A number of interviewees argued that you could not have post-conflict truth-telling when the conflict was not yet over; but they were in fact almost always alluding to intra-loyalist violence when doing so. If truth-telling was liable to unleash a ‘can of worms,’ as more than one interviewee put it, the fear of repercussions within loyalist communities having to confront the consequences of such internal violence was, if anything, greater than that relating to nationalists and republicans. ‘The Shankill is still reeling from all the duping that went on,’ one representative of a victims’ organisation commented, ‘do we really want to know who was an informer? Or that someone who killed someone close to you lives a few doors away?’ Silence was therefore a preferred option because trust was absent within.

As community workers, the interviewees may have been more aware than the general populace that the atmosphere of distrust was impacting on existing social networks, or, as Bourdieu has put it, was resulting in the lack of ‘a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.’73 This fragmentation makes cooperation within unionist communities extremely difficult and seriously inhibits their development. Whatever the reality of such fragmentation, there was also an oft-expressed and acute sense that the same was not the case for nationalist areas. One respondent argued that it would be difficult to carry out something like the Ardoyne project in his area because of the limits of community development and infrastructure. A number of reasons were given for this: people in unionist areas were more likely to adopt an individualist rather than a collective response to problems; they would not ‘come out on the street unless something was happening at their door.’ This was seen as different to the situation in nationalist areas where, it was suggested, people had become used to organising themselves on a community basis during 30 years of conflict and in the years prior to the conflict. Indeed, the difficult relationship of the nationalist community with the state from its inception may have provided the community with the resources to cope better with contemporary problems of post-industrial social exclusion.

72 Ibid.
73 Bourdieu, supra n 26 at 248.
Similarly, the social problems facing unionist working class areas were identified as leading to a ‘lack of confidence’ and ‘inarticulacy’ that impacted on the feasibility of engaging in truth-telling projects. This idea of ‘inarticulacy’ is also one with longer-term ideological resonance. Individualism, practical-mindedness and ‘plain-speaking’ have often been constructed as part and parcel of a specifically Protestant and/or Ulster cultural milieu: the persona of the ‘honest Ulsterman.’ Irish nationalism and Catholicism, on the other hand, have sometimes been identified with emotiveness, collectivism and an otherworldly romanticism. Such ethnic stereotyping, as one of the interviewees himself argued, may have more than a small part to play here too.

The notion that the two main communities in Northern Ireland possess different ideologies of collective or individualistic action has been challenged by recent research. This work found that there was no significant difference between Catholic and Protestant respondents as far as their adherence to individualist or collectivist attitudes or behaviour (at an individual level) was concerned, but that there was a widespread belief that such differences existed and persisted, if in an increasingly weakened (and at times ironic) form.

That said, a number of interviewees argued that the limits of community infrastructure were linked to more material matters. These were identified as a ‘lack of leadership’ and a ‘culture of deference’ within unionist working class areas that prevented them from looking to themselves to resolve social and political problems. In other words, the long-term relationship of the Protestant working class with the state had resulted in a lack of the social capital necessary to deal with the nature of post-conflict transition and post-industrial social and economic change. In the absence of trust, the prospect of a society-wide process of giving testimony on a divided and traumatic past is therefore also one that might be looked upon by some within the unionist community with a degree of hope, but this is invariably mixed with a large dose of trepidation and fear.

**Conclusion: Testimony, Transition and the Future of the Past**

If trust is necessary for testimony to act as the bridge between memory and history, and truth-telling is to make a positive contribution to social change, then the chances of this particular transition taking place in Northern Ireland would seem to be facing some formidable challenges. It is unquestionably the case that unionists are far more wary and sceptical of any form of truth process than are nationalists, although recent evidence from an attitude survey carried out by the authors suggests that views are not as polarised as is sometimes thought. Distrust with the peace process, the ‘outworkings’ of the GFA and the role of republicans in

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74 Cairns et al., supra n 65.
particular has contributed to a lack of trust in truth-telling. Indeed, as we have sought to show, the absence of trust is a result of more deep-seated changes than the purely political changes. Conflict itself leaves a legacy of suspicion and, in certain communities in the North, this has been accentuated by the social and economic consequences of post-industrialism. It is also no coincidence that it is precisely such communities which witnessed the highest levels of conflict-related loss of life and where ongoing problems of interface violence and paramilitary feuding are most acute. Trust is, perhaps not surprisingly, a rare commodity in such situations.

However, it is easy to paint an overly-pessimistic picture. Many of the community representatives from unionist/loyalist areas interviewed, even as they voiced their concern with the ‘sapping of confidence,’ did not view a testimony process as undesirable in itself. On the contrary, many saw the value of ‘community-based’ approaches in particular as the means by which people from their own areas might give voice to their experiences and in so doing, combat social and historical marginalisation. In a sense, testimony was viewed as a possible means to reconstitute the social bonds of mutuality and trust that were felt to be fragmenting. This pinpoints the active role that truth-telling can play in post-conflict transition and the way that community-based projects might also feed into a wider process of truth recovery.

If testimony work relies upon trust, it may also be a means of helping to create it. The relationship between the two is reciprocal and interactive, woven together in the dialogue and exchange that a truth-telling process would necessarily involve. A House of Commons Inquiry was recently held into ‘Ways of Dealing with Northern Ireland’s Past.’ The Inquiry’s report stated that the House of Commons was ‘supportive of the idea’ of a ‘formal truth recovery process’ but could not recommend such a thing at present because of a lack of ‘community consensus’ and ‘confidence.’ This may be so, but there is a danger of accepting the word of political players that consensus is further away than might be the case, and of underestimating the active role that testimony work can play in creating consensus. Since the signing of the St Andrews Agreement and the restoration of power-sharing governance there is also real potential for space to open up in order to deal in a more comprehensive way with the legacy of the past. While many challenges await, it may be well that policymakers keep in mind Ricoeur’s argument that an important corollary to the ‘abuses of memory’ are the ‘abuses of forgetting’: not sharing memory comes at a cost.

There may be wider lessons for other societies emerging from conflict here too, particularly in terms of the role that community-based approaches to truth recovery can play. One of the major criticisms of formal truth and justice mechanisms,

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76 This refers to the violence (riots, low level disturbances) which occurs at the boundaries, or the interfaces, between adjoining Catholic and Protestant areas.
78 Ricoeur, supra n 14 at 500.
particularly those organised by international bodies, is that they can become dis-
tanced from those whose needs they are ostensibly designed to meet – most obvi-
ously victims and survivors.

In a sense, what emerges is another problem of trust; this time between those
involved in the structures and institutions of post-conflict justice-making and/or
social transformation and the bearers of testimony. This is particularly so where
such testimony becomes a primary vehicle to engender wider social and political
change. While community-based approaches should not be seen as an alternative
to formal mechanisms, either operating as parallel processes or embedding the
ethos of participation in more institutionalised structures is one means of avoid-
ing this other potential ‘abuse of memory.’

Nor should we lose sight of the need to address wider structural issues. If truth-
telling is to make a meaningful contribution to post-conflict transition rather
than become mere political window dressing, it cannot be divorced from the
structural context within which it takes place. Again, these are lessons that apply
not only to Northern Ireland, but also to many other societies and, if anything,
more so where underdevelopment and the social and economic devastation of
conflict are even more significant issues. There is a need to recognise that real eco-
nomic change, addressing social inequalities and placing a redistributive concep-
tion of justice at the centre of transition is part and parcel of bridging the gap
between the ‘certification’ and ‘accreditation’ of testimony. Developing the collec-
tive capacities of communities, building on social capital networks to engender
trust and mutuality are needed for truth-telling. A holistic, community-orientat-
ed approach is required if the opening up of ‘spaces of controversy’ is to allow tes-
mimony to be translated into an exchange of trust. Beyond this, as Ricoeur might
have said, we cannot go.