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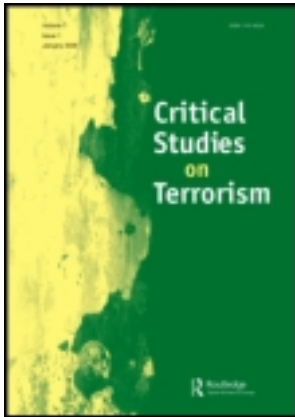
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CONVERSATIONS IN CRITICAL STUDIES ON TERRORISM

From paramilitarism to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: an interview with Noel Large

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Noel Large is a community worker with Interaction Belfast, an organisation working to promote reconciliation and build trust among the Catholic/nationalist/republican and Protestant/unionist/loyalist communities, particularly those living along the Shankill/Falls/Springfield Roads Interface of West Belfast. A former gunman for the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), he served 16 years before being released on licence following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Although he still strongly supports Northern Ireland's union with Britain, Large has used his standing in the loyalist community as an "ex-lifer" to advocate for non-violent engagement with loyalism/unionism and to promote dialogue between the loyalist and republican communities.

Harmonie Toros and Ioannis Tellidis: Could you tell us about your background and how you came to work in peacebuilding?

Noel Large: I am a former loyalist ex-combatant, a life sentence prisoner, released on licence and committed to helping to build lasting peace in my country, Northern Ireland, and to fostering good relations throughout the whole island of Ireland. Thirty years ago, I was a member of a loyalist paramilitary organisation, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and between 1981 and 1982, I was one of its most active gunmen in Belfast. I was arrested several times and held for up to seven days at a time for questioning in Castlereagh Police Station for terrorist type offences or what the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) described as "serious crime". In October of 1982, I was arrested and charged with a whole range of terrorist type offences.

I was held in Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast. After two-and-a-half years of being held on remand, in June 1985, I was sentenced to four life sentences and 357 years for all other offences. These offences included "attempted murders, conspiracies to murder, bank robberies, armed robberies and possession of weapons" and more. After sentencing, I was taken down to the H Blocks of the Maze Prison. I was 27 years old and was still committed, by

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force or otherwise, to keeping Northern Ireland British and out of a united Ireland.

So, what changed? Well, I still want to remain British and don't want to be part of a United Ireland. But, I no longer believe in the use of violence by anyone to achieve or maintain your position or objectives. The change began in me when I was about 30 years old. I began to mature as a person around that time. I began, for the first time in my life, not to automatically take things at face value, and I began to try to understand and see things from more than just my own perspective. Over time, I began to realise that the violence in Northern Ireland, known as "The Troubles", was achieving nothing, except sowing more bitterness, misery, suffering and loss, fear and hatred. I also came to the conclusion that all the violence was doing was adding numbers to the death toll and was neither entrenching our position within the United Kingdom nor bringing republicans any closer to their goal of a United Ireland. Eventually, we would need to stop killing for the sake of killing and begin to talk.

Although my journey from terrorism to conflict resolution is, I believe, an ongoing process, there have been key turning points for me along the way. As a boy and a young man, I was heavily influenced by Ian Paisley, especially his oratory skills. He had a way of "getting one's blood up" or inciting or enflaming passions. I finally got my eyes opened to him watching the 6.00 pm news in the H Blocks one night in 1987. This was like a watershed for me, as though the scales had fallen from my eyes, where Paisley was concerned. I saw him for the first time as a "Rabble Rouser". A man who was all about threatening bloodbaths and telling the people of Ulster we were always at some sort of crossroads. I believe Paisley felt Britain was trying to withdraw from Northern Ireland and his way of keeping them here was always to threaten bloody mayhem. The problem with that was he was always "bluffing", but many young men did not know that and went to early graves or spent the best years of their lives in prison after joining loyalist paramilitary groups fired up by Paisley speeches at such rallies.

I also began to see violence from both loyalists and republicans as futile. I linked these turning points to me growing up in prison and becoming more mature in my thinking. I have to be honest and say that these changes also happened at a time with me being reconciled to God through His Son, The Lord Jesus Christ. I don't believe my change in outlook at this time was merely a coincidence. I am not sure if that feeds into what academics want to hear or read, but it's the truth.

But my own input into what is now generally termed "The Peace Process" really began during the period from about 1994–1998. During this time, I was on the Command Staff for UVF prisoners in Her Majesty's Maze Prison. After the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) announced a ceasefire on behalf of the loyalist paramilitary groups in 1994, the Prison Service relaxed the regime to allow more and more access to the prisoners, loyalist and republican. The Northern Ireland Office, which had responsibility for the running of the prisons through the Prison Service, also recognised the potential the prisons had to destabilise the Peace Process, so the majority of prison officers in the Maze Prison were moved to other duties, which made contact with loyalist and republican prisoners minimal. This vastly reduced

tension on the loyalist and republican wings of the H Blocks. During this period, the UVF Command Staff met many different people from all walks of life, including Secretary of State Mo Mowlam, archbishops, the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party – David Trimble, Jeffrey Donaldson, John Taylor – as well as experts on Conflict Resolution like John Paul Lederach, and many others. And of course, we met regularly with the leadership of the Progressive Unionist Party, who gave political analysis and insight to the UVF and its prisoners.

Looking back on those meetings and everything else that was happening, inside and outside the prison, I suppose I did have a sense that history was being played out before my very eyes. After the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998 and the ratification of the referendum supporting the agreement, I was released on licence on October 28th 1998.

HT/YT: Did you feel you were being supported in making this transition or being hindered?

NL: At first, my transition was simply a personal choice, it was how I felt. I was also never ostracised for becoming a “Born again Christian”. Later, as the Peace Process gained momentum in the early 1990s, my influence within the UVF in the prison grew. I was appointed onto the Command Staff for UVF prisoners in the H Blocks. I was also the close confidant, and if you like, a “Special Advisor” to the Officer Commanding (OC) of the UVF prisoners in the H Blocks. The Brigade Staff of the UVF on the outside would have been aware of my position and influence within the H Blocks and did nothing to hinder my influence. In fact, I was seen as a positive influence for change and someone who supported the CLMC Ceasefire and the pursuit of dialogue and peace.

HT/YT: How did your involvement continue once you were released?

NL: My involvement in what I consider peacebuilding on the outside began when I got a job in a youth project in Inner East Belfast about six months after my release from prison. I was working with young people from the unionist/loyalist community, who were growing up in the area where I was born and raised. They were young people “at risk”; in other words, “likely to come to the attention of the police”, mostly from rioting with youths from the nearby nationalist/republican enclave of the Short Strand. It was a good grounding and gave me valuable insight into the conditions and issues facing those young people as we prepared to enter the new millennium. It also showed me how many young people from Protestant working class backgrounds, with little prospects of meaningful employment and a decent future, “looked up” to people like me as “ex Lifers” and saw this as a badge of honour that they would be happy to attain!

I was contracted to work there for 12 months until my funding ran out. I then had an interview for a job with a community development project called Springfield Inter-Community Development Project (SICDP), now known as Interaction Belfast. Interaction Belfast was established in 1988 by two former enemies, loyalist Billy Hutchinson and republican Pat McGeown. Interaction is committed to peace and reconciliation. It’s a cross-community project that is recognised in the Community & Voluntary sector in Northern Ireland and in the unionist/loyalist and nationalist/republican communities as a neutral environment. I work alongside and share my office

space with my colleague, community development worker, Daniel Jack, who is a Sinn Fein activist and committed Irish republican. We work at capacity building and establishing positive relationships within and between the communities of the Shankill/Falls/Springfield Roads interface, which has the longest and quietest peace wall in Belfast. If you had suggested to me, when I was 24 years old, that in 30 years time, I would be involved in a project like Interaction Belfast, I would have suggested you needed to be certified insane!

HT/YT: What conflict resolution approaches have you found unhelpful or even dangerous in your work?

NL: My biggest hang-up in terms of unhelpful approaches to conflict resolution would be aimed at the “Do Gooders” who are funded with European Peace money to do what I call “Cardboard Cut Out” Community Relations work and try to sell it off as an approach to conflict resolution. The sort of thing I am talking about might be written up well by someone who knows how to tick all the boxes when filling in a funding application or a shiny brochure afterwards, but if you try to measure the short- or long-term impact the work had on the community/group they were supposed to be working with, it is nil!

I am also a bit wary of groups who continue to apply for funding for “Single Identity” projects and insist their community/group is not yet ready to make the step of reaching out or visiting the other side yet. That is a cop-out in my opinion. When funders continually throw money at these projects, in many cases, all they are doing is entrenching positions and giving self-appointed gatekeepers credibility in their area, which only serves to make them stronger gatekeepers!

HT/YT: Which initiatives have you found to be successful on the ground and which have worked against peacebuilding?

NL: Much of what I have learned in trying to establish a lasting peace in terms of what works and what doesn't has been learned by experiences gained by working for Interaction Belfast: communication, commitment, integrity, trust-building, and respect work. The key to much of our success and progress at Interaction comes down to communication. Many people in Belfast who live in an Interface community behind the peace walls have grown up knowing nothing else but division, distrust and fear. They rarely, if ever, meet the people who live on the other side of the peace wall. I was 40 years old before I set foot for the first time on the nationalist/republican Falls Road. Even now as I speak to you, I realise that we enhance these boundaries by describing areas as republican or loyalist, unionist or nationalist. Our project encourages the interface communities to meet in Interaction's office, a neutral environment, and look at issues of common concern.

A key component of the groundbreaking work of Interaction Belfast was the formation of the Springfield Inter-Community Forum (SIF) in 2001. Like most things worthwhile, it did not have the greatest of starts! The first meeting of what became SIF was held in one of the rooms at Belfast City Hall. It was a room with an enormously long table. The Protestant/unionist/loyalist reps sat at one end, and the Catholic/nationalist/republican reps sat at the other. They were so far apart

that my colleague from Interaction and I, who facilitated the meeting, had to turn on the microphones so that we could all be heard. Both sides came with a list of grievances, and it could easily have degenerated into a slanging match with each side blaming the other for violent incidents across the Interface. But, at the end of the meeting, both sides agreed to meet and talk again. Eventually, the meetings were held on a fortnightly basis and then a weekly basis.

It did not happen overnight, but gradually, both sides began to realise that there was a commitment among those who attended regularly to see the incidents of violence across the Interface stop. Each week, there would be a log kept of reports of incidents of violence and who responded. Some of the SIF members were also members of the mobile phone network¹, and an increasing number of community activists who were members of SIF began to volunteer as members of the mobile phone network. The phone network was introduced to the Shankill/Falls/Springfield Interface by our current CEO, Ms Roisin McGlone, who had helped establish it originally in North Belfast in the late 1980s.

We took all members of SIF down to Cookstown in 2001 for a residential. The SIF members came back from Cookstown with a three-year Action Plan based on issues that affect the lives of people living in Interface communities along Shankill/Falls/Springfield. They also strengthened bonds of trust and respect, and the beginnings of some friendships could be seen between former enemies when they socialised at night during the weekend residential. SIF returned to Cookstown in 2005 to formulate another agreed three-year Action Plan, 2005–2008.

These relationships have had a positive effect on reducing tension, especially in the run-up to the Whiterock Parade and the 11th and 12th July celebrations. The work of SIF and the mobile phone network has also led to a significant reduction in the number of incidents of violence along the Shankill/Falls/Springfield Interface, the longest peace wall in Belfast.

As for what doesn't work: the Blame Game, media bias, sectarianism and intolerance. Politicians are great at playing the blame game. They may not be seen in an area where they are elected to represent the people. But, as soon as there is an incident, particularly near or on the Interface, and there are television crews, you will invariably find politicians playing the blame game! It was the other side who started it, and so on and so forth. But, in my personal experience, it is only when you move away from the blame game and show real leadership that tangible progress can be and is made. Will standing around blaming each other ever get it fixed? No. In fact, it usually only makes things worse and those of us who are married, for any length of time, know this.

In terms of media bias, there is a popular view held by many in the unionist/loyalist community that there is a concerted effort by many in the media and the press in particular to portray loyalism, whether it be the Loyal Orders or loyalist paramilitaries, in as negative a light as possible. This leads to both a feeling that our culture and identity is constantly under attack from all sides and can lead to frustrations, which can often be played out on the streets in violent scenes.

However, in my opinion, one of the biggest stumbling blocks we face to establishing a lasting peace in Northern Ireland is sectarianism. Sectarianism is deep-seated in my country. It has been handed down by parents to their children for generations, and it will not go away overnight. If we are ever to eradicate it, I believe it will take generations. I have linked the word intolerance with sectarianism because in almost all cases where we have a contentious parade and protest against a parade, the one thing that is clearly missing is a tolerance towards each other's rights, beliefs, culture or identity. Many of those who come out to parade or protest are completely ignorant about the history, richness and diversity of our culture and identity and are only there to subdue the expression of anything they see as not belonging to them.

HT/YT: What is your ideal end goal in the transformation of the conflict in Northern Ireland?

NL: In the wake of the recent discovery of an under-car booby trap bomb, believed to have fallen off the car of an off-duty police officer a short distance away from a primary school in North Belfast, and the recent murder of a serving Prison Officer, near Lurgan, by a dissident group of Irish republicans, it would be easy to become pessimistic about the future of people in Northern Ireland. But, I believe that those who still see "armed struggle" as a legitimate tactic are without any meaningful support in both Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland as a whole. Certainly, these people have the capability to kill and maim and are dangerous, but they do not have the capability, nor do I believe, the appetite, to wage an effective campaign on a daily, weekly or even monthly basis. If they did, they would have targeted either a prominent loyalist or unionist leader to try to provoke a violent response from loyalists in a cynical attempt to justify and escalate their campaign.

My ideal end goal is, I believe, summed up beautifully by the Vision Statement of Interaction Belfast, which is "to create a dynamic, vibrant, diverse and well resourced community, where the need for walls and barriers no longer exists". My dream would be that my grandchildren and other children are raised without the labels that we grew up learning at our parents' knees. These labels separate and divide us. Others, in positions of power, use these labels to create fear, suspicion and hatred. I dream we would put an end to that. I believe everyone in Northern Ireland can play a positive role in developing a culture of tolerance and promoting an understanding of identities and cultures other than your own. It would help enormously if our elected representatives were to promote this more-tolerant attitude and developed strategies that encourage people to refrain from adding or using labels to differentiate between us all.

Note

1. Numerous mobile phone networks have been set up along Interfaces in Northern Ireland. The primary function of the networks is to counter the "rumour mill" when violence occurs across the peace wall to ensure that what often starts as a stone-throwing match among teenagers does not escalate into an armed clash among paramilitaries, fuelled by the fact that one cannot see who is on the other side of the peace wall. Thus, when an incident occurs, phone holders from both sides investigate and report to their counterparts on the other side of the wall, who in turn inform their communities and when necessary, the paramilitaries, of the situation and how it is being dealt with.

Notes on contributors

Harmonie Toros is Lecturer in International Conflict Analysis at the University of Kent. She researches the relevance and applicability of conflict resolution and transformation frameworks to conflicts marked by terrorist violence and is the author of *Terrorism, Talking and Transformation: A Critical Approach* (Routledge, 2012). She has published in *Security Dialogue* and *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.

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