

Making Peace in Northern Ireland

by Breidge Gadd

My original intention was to come here and speak about the role of the terrorist ex-prisoners in reconciliation and restorative justice in Northern Ireland. I will do that, but given the events of September 11th I will shift my talk a bit to address the context that America is facing, and to share some of our own experience with terrorism.

It seems to me that whenever there is any sort of threat to the state, the government of that country goes immediately to the adversarial mode: “We’ve got to win...We’ve got to beat somebody, and they’ve got to lose.” In Northern Ireland when the Troubles re-erupted again in 1968, the government went into the same mode and role of “we must defeat the terrorists,” and they saw the defeat of terrorism as the state winning and the terrorist losing. Just as the court system is based on the idea that someone must win and someone must lose, as the Judge [Merrigan] so eloquently pointed out, this discourages the offender from ever taking responsibility for what they have done.

Community-Based Probation

In Northern Ireland, the probation service is a function of the state. There is only one probation service in all of Northern Ireland. I joined the probation service right when I left university. By 1986, I was Chief Probation Officer for the probation service of Northern Ireland. We always saw ourselves as a social work organization whose job was to help offenders which is a very different concept from a law enforcement organization. Our vision and our purpose would be to help communities deal with their own problems of crime. So we saw ourselves both as servants of the court and of the community.

As the Troubles developed in the early 70s...members of the probation service had to undergo a serious and wide-ranging look at what our role was in the society in which we lived, because the Catholic community and to a lesser extent the Protestant community...both questioned the authority of the state to rule over them.

And to further complicate matters, the police service became the front line people required to seek and find the terrorists and bring them to justice. The policing service, whether they wished to or not, became the security forces out in the forefront of the war against terrorism. And their primary responsibility was to defeat terrorism. It is my argument that once you give that job to a civilian police service you do not enable them to do ordinary policing work in the communities where they are most attacking terrorists and the RUC have continued to live with that dreadful ambivalence in their role

The probation service, at that time, became very clear about what we could do and what we could not do. And we were very clear, that you could not force a probation service on a community that doesn’t want you. You can enforce policing, you can enforce security but you cannot enforce a probation service. We had to win the confidence and the trust of the community. And we had to win the confidence and the trust of the courts.

We were helped by the government, incidentally, which appointed a committee to look at the role of the probation service and this committee decided that a community based service should be run by the community. So it was to our advantage that the probation service in Northern Ireland in 1982 came under a different governance structure. We moved out of central government and came under a community-based board. And this was of critical importance in establishing a kind

of professional neutrality based on the fundamental principle that an organization which serves the community should be governed by the community. So over the period of the troubles, the probation service managed to maintain and develop the confidence of the courts and of communities. And there was lots of work we had to do with this ... we had to reflect the community composition in our make-up. We could never become all Protestant or all Catholic.

A lot of people who work in communities and organizations who are involved in restorative justice don't like the consumer customer notion. I loved it. I loved it. Because what I insisted is that we go to our customers who were the community and to our customers who were the judiciary, and ask them what they wanted from us. And it was very interesting what they told us. They wanted us to go out with them when they had the problems of crime, not to be sitting in our offices when it suited us. And that customer ethos which came from business radically re-defined the way that we worked. The bulk of our staff start at work on Thursday at lunchtime and work right through the weekends because that is when the community needs us to be alongside them. So I don't dismiss the customer notion because if you apply it with the best values...which is critical, you can actually become very near to what people think they want.

Violence: a Road to Nowhere

In Northern Ireland, we have two systems of restorative justice. One is being developed at the court/state level involved in the training of police, probation and other state officials. But we also have grassroots community level restorative justice programs being run largely by ex-prisoners who have seen the need for that way of dealing with crime.

They began in prisons. One of the good things about the government is that it allows prisoners to have education, really good education with the Open University.

The lead in developing restorative justice was taken by Republican prisoners who came into prison with a higher level of educational achievement already. By studying politics and history etc. they realized that violence was a road to nowhere. And they started the peace process in prison. They started to look at how they might use political energy to change things outside. And on the Loyalist side this led to the setting up of a new political party which is referred to as the Extreme Loyalist Party but their politics are the politics of resolution and of problem-solving. Their aim was peace and closing circles.

They also realized in their study that you defeat terrorism by improving economics. Its no surprise that the so-called terrorists, both Loyalists and Republic, came from the areas of highest deprivation, highest poverty, worst housing, low self-esteem etc.

So a group of prisoners came out and became involved in community work. Some of the people, not even prisoners, but activists in their community who did the policing role realized that shooting the kneecaps of children did not stop them from committing crime. And that even extreme punishment does not stop people who become addicted to crime as a way of life. So they started the restorative justice movement in the communities.

Injustice as the Lifeblood of Terrorism

The period of the 70s and 80s was a difficult time for us because the policy of the government was to wage war on terrorism in order to defeat it. What dramatically changed the landscape was the arrival of the Americans and I must pay tribute to Father Helmick and his colleagues...all from the Irish-American community mostly from Boston who actually came in and said, "Look, you cannot win this war by excluding people and labeling them."

Now the first thrust came on an economic development basis...with aid going right into the communities where the problem of so-called terrorist crime was greatest. And that was fairly quickly followed by people coming in to help us to develop conflict mediation skills to act as

mediators. The other thing that I learned in working with the community is that injustice and grievance is the oxygen and lifeblood of terrorism And you will not reduce terrorism until the community which breeds it cast it out itself. There is no other way around that, you cannot defeat it.

And the British government could not learn that lesson. And there is a very famous saying in Northern Ireland from a middle of the road Catholic politician which is that “every time the IRA was on its knees, the British government gave it the kiss of life.” Bloody Sunday recruited more people into the IRA than any other single act....The people in Derry after Bloody Sunday simply wanted the government to say, “We’re sorry...we made a ghastly mistake. We are sorry that our army did this,” and they couldn’t say that and they wouldn’t way that.

And now 25 years on, we have a huge judicial inquiry which is costing many millions of pounds...which will inevitably come to the conclusion that everybody knows...that the army went in there to take out the terrorists and to teach the community a lesson. Now the people did not even want compensation, they did not even want this public, highly expensive lawyer-led drama which will in its very nature alienate further the Protestants in Northern Ireland. They simply wanted somebody to say, the Prime Minister to say, I’m sorry - we got it wrong. We will learn our lesson; we will not do this again. Again, a big message for what is happening with America in Afghanistan at the moment.

Taking Personal Risks for Peace

As chief PO I was in a unique position of belonging to the state system of justice and also being very in touch with what was going on in the community. I was going into prisons. I was meeting the paramilitary leaders in prison. I was meeting their political representatives in the community.

One day, my daughter was sixteen, she is now nearly 25, it was a Saturday morning...and I was reading in bed and she came in and told me she was going downtown to shop. And I said to her, “Oh, no love, don’t do that” because their recently had been some bombs...and my best friend was blown up in an explosion and we all have had experiences like that...I suddenly realized that my daughter was sixteen and she did not know what it was like to be downtown shopping on a Saturday afternoon. And I thought to myself and I talked to my husband and I realized that people like us have got to do more than we are doing at the moment.

I’ve always been a big mouth and a loud mouth and I already had a reputation of saying what I thought and had quite a high media profile in Northern Ireland. I suppose both of us consciously took a decision that if the conflict was ever going to be over, or ever brought to a close, we had to put our heads higher above the parapets and take personal risks for peace.

My husband who is middle class Protestant...my background is Catholic... started to actually go out and talk with businessmen and talk to politicians and to work with other people to get a large group of the business sector to start saying “This war against terrorism is the wrong way to fight a war. We need to make peace with the people in our society who are so determined in what they believe in that they are prepared to kill for it.”

And I suppose my contribution was to actually say to people that “I have met these guys and they have changed. They no longer want to die for their beliefs. They realize that they want to make peace.” And say that very publicly. I was not alone in doing that. There were other people who were saying that...what I said publicly one year, a year later, ten people were saying the same thing, then twenty people and to actually get as many people as I could to meet these released prisoners or even when they were in prison who were working so hard to bring peace in their communities.... and gradually that movement built up.

I would have to say that civic society supported by outsiders brought about the peace process in Northern Ireland. The people who forged the way for peace, were people in the communities

especially, women in the communities. But you will never separate the so-called terrorist from the community in which he was born. You cannot isolate terrorism if terrorism is caused by a sense of great injustice within those communities.