

Ulster after "Yes"

by Elisabeth Rae



Recently people all over the world watched with varying degrees of interest as the people of Ulster and the Irish Republic went to the polls to decide

if they would give peace a chance after one of the most intransigent and seemingly inexplicable conflicts of the 20th century. Northern Ireland is made up of 6 counties from the Province of Ulster (and often called Ulster although there are still 3 counties from the original Province that are now part of the Republic of Ireland). Northern Ireland came into being as a separate entity when Ireland was campaigning for Home Rule instead of British rule. In Northern Ireland there was a majority of Protestants – largely Presbyterian descendants of Scottish settlers from former centuries. These people vigorously opposed Home Rule as they feared for their fate within a united and largely Catholic Ireland without the protection of Britain. So Ireland was divided and the first Northern Ireland parliament opened by King George V in 1921.

From the very beginning the Catholic minority, which makes up about one third of the population of Northern Ireland, has opposed the idea of the division of Ireland and British rule in Ulster. Also from the beginning the Protestant community has been obsessed with maintaining power and fighting off the threat of the ever increasing Catholic percentage of the population. There has been sporadic violence ever since 1921, but the most recent "Troubles" which began almost 30 years ago are the longest lasting and have attracted world wide attention to Northern Ireland.

Although there are significant differences between Northern Ireland and Quebec, there are some interesting similarities. In Northern Ireland, like Quebec, there is a group of people who are in the majority in the region but are in a significant minority in the country as a whole. The Ulster

Protestants, like the French Canadians, have always felt that their culture and way of life was vulnerable to assimilation and for this reason they have gone to great lengths to protect it. This has contributed to discomfort amongst other residents, the Roman Catholics in Ulster and the Anglophones and Allophones in Quebec. In Northern Ireland the last 30 years leading up to this year's Good Friday Agreement has been a history of a struggle between two groups of people with very different aspirations for the future. In that struggle, and in the Good Friday Agreement, there have been winners and losers and the future is not yet secure. However a closer examination of the historical and current context provides some pointers to Ulster's future.

The most recent round violence in Northern Ireland began in the 1960's. The Prime Minister at the time, Captain Terence O'Neill, tried to make the government more acceptable and responsive to the Catholic population. This was regarded with great suspicion by the Unionist majority who eventually forced him out of office. At the same time Catholics were being inspired by the civil rights movement in the USA and began to demand change in the way the government and local authorities handled issues such as housing allocation and electoral boundaries. It is quite common for families in all areas of Britain to live in housing which they rent from local authorities. In Northern Ireland this housing was often given to people who were Protestant, even when Catholic families on the waiting list might have much more need. An unfair voting system was another significant grievance. Because the population living West of the River Bann was predominately Catholic, there had been a practice of fixing boundary lines to ensure the continued election of Unionist politicians to the Northern Ireland Parliament.

The spark that ignited the smouldering unrest was the allocation, in 1966, of a house to an unmarried Protestant woman in Caledon, Co. Tyrone, when there were many Catholic families on the waiting list. The initial protest and the Unionist reaction

eventually led to such a degree of intimidation that huge numbers of people were forced to leave homes in mixed areas. Today most people live in areas that are over 90% either Catholic or Protestant (Dunlop, 1995). After their arrival in the Province in August 1969 British troops actually erected a fence between Protestant and Catholic ghettos in Belfast. This fence was made permanent over the years and it is still in place today.

At first the Catholics regarded the Army as their protectors, but that attitude changed as the search for illegal paramilitary weapons began. As Protestants too had reason not to want the security forces searching their homes and possessions, both Catholics and Protestants barricaded certain areas of Belfast and Londonderry to keep police and soldiers out and called them no-go areas. (*A History of the Troubles: Belfast Telegraph web page 1998*)

Over the years that followed some matters were so poorly handled by the authorities that instead of improving the situation, they had the effect of increasing the support and determination of the Catholic IRA. One such event was the introduction of internment in 1971 during which about 300 men who were suspected of terrorist involvement were rounded up and held without trial at a variety of locations in the Province. Another tragic and inflammatory incident in the same year was the shooting of 13 people who were taking part in an anti-internment rally in Londonderry. They were killed by British soldiers who opened fire on the crowd, claiming that they had first been fired on by snipers. This incident became known as "Bloody Sunday" and recently an inquiry was set up by the British government to determine how the original investigation was handled.

This was a time of terror in Northern Ireland. People had to flee for their lives as homes were torched. Bombs were planted in many locations, innocent people were killed, and even on the British mainland and in the Irish Republic there was bombing and killing. The bombing and the killing was not all done by the IRA and its splinter

groups. Protestant groups such as the UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) and the UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters) were also involved in a sectarian murder campaign.

Ten years after the introduction of internment, another major cause of anger in the Catholic community was the deaths (in 1981) of 10 prisoners who were on hunger strike to draw attention to their demand to be treated as prisoners-of-war. These deaths increased support for the IRA yet again. The security forces were unable to stamp out the terrorism and it became clear that a political solution was the only hope for a lasting peace. Since the beginning of these troubles and even with thousands of British troops present in Ulster, there have been 35,000 shooting incidents and 10,000 explosions. Obviously the military solution was not a successful one. (*A History of the Troubles, Belfast Telegraph web page, 1998*)

It would be inaccurate to give the impression that during these years there were no efforts to obtain a settlement, or that there were no people who honestly desired to live in harmony with their neighbours, whatever church they attended. However, any potential agreements were always short lived as both sides demanded more concessions than the other side could live with. The simple analysis is that Unionists have always wanted the link to Britain to be guaranteed while Catholics want to unite with the Irish Republic. Any move that looked as if it would give a significant "Irish dimension" was rejected by the Unionist (Protestant) majority.

Sometimes beliefs held about the opposing side are not as well founded as we might believe. There is in reality no unanimous wish among Catholics to unite with the Republic, as they realise that there would be costs involved – but Protestants believe this to be the case (*Marger, 1997*). The Republic is unlikely to want to take on such a troubled area without mixed feelings of its own. On the other side, there is no love lost between Northern Ireland and England. Unionists in Northern Ireland often appear more loyal to the Crown than the English themselves – not because they feel a real affinity with the English, but rather because they so not see any other viable option for the survival of their culture. They know deep down that Britain does not really feel that they belong (*Ignatieff, 1993*).

Whatever the majority of people hope

for from the Good Friday agreement, Ulster has shown the world that violence is easy to start and difficult to stop. Conor Cruise O'Brien points out how vulnerable democracy is to violence. Most people in any situation want peace and terrorists exploit this desire to their advantage. To explain his theory he uses the example of the policy of appeasement adopted by the Western democracies towards Hitler before World War II. This policy assisted Hitler greatly. Leaders who do not want to take a tough stand, for fear of having their electorate think that they are warlike, often miss opportunities to stop mounting aggression. In a reference which also seems pertinent to the Quebec situation O'Brien has also observed that breaking up countries does not always work out as well as people hope. For example, Slovaks are now having second thoughts about breaking up Czechoslovakia because, although the Czech Republic is doing well economically, Slovakia is not (*O'Brien, 1995*).

Although it is true that peace in Northern Ireland would be welcome news to many, it is also true that there will be winners and losers if violence ceases with the Good Friday Agreement. An economy has grown up around security personnel, construction work and the support systems necessary for the police and army. There would be jobs lost and some of the people affected might not have the necessary skills for peacetime work. Even the arms dealers will have to look for new customers. There is also the excitement factor to be considered. Northern Ireland had a very high unemployment rate and many of the people who became involved in the violence were previously unemployed. Through their participation they gained status, power and prestige. These individuals became leaders of men engaged in exciting and high risk activities with access to guns and money that would have been unthinkable in their ordinary existence. Unemployment is still relatively high in Northern Ireland with figures from a few years ago showing 23% for Catholic men and 11% for Protestant men (*Dunlop, 1995*). Unemployment and welfare look unappealing when access may be had to a more exciting life. Added to this is the realisation that no one group has had all their wants and dreams satisfied by the Good Friday Agreement, and there is always the possibility that some extreme splinter groups on either or both sides will be unwilling to give up the struggle.

Given that the Agreement is not perfect in anyone's eyes, the main areas of potential conflict for the new Northern Ireland Assembly (to consist of 108 members elected by proportional representation), will likely centre around such topics as decommissioning arms and the release of prisoners. Many find it hard to swallow that, over the next two years, murderers and bombers will be released from prison without serving their full sentences and be regarded as heroes by their own side of the community. So many families have been affected by death or injury that it will be difficult to forgive, and impossible to forget. Although Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA) will be allowed to serve on the Executive – the equivalent of the cabinet – only after the beginning of weapons decommissioning (which is being orchestrated by the Canadian General de Chastelain) there is deep distrust about their intentions. There are many potential disagreements possible here as each side views the handover of weapons and the "democratic, non-violent means" expected of Sinn Fein through a different lens.

On the Unionist side also there is the potential that the Agreement may be derailed. To be sure that at least 50% of Protestants voted "yes" in the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement, there needed to be an overall majority of 70%. The final figure was just over 71%. While a majority of Protestants did vote in favour of the Agreement, there is still a significant number who voted "no". Rev. Ian Paisley, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, continues to be a negative voice, and is still a force to be reckoned with. Paisley has claimed that the majority of Unionists (all Unionists are Protestants but not all Protestants are Unionists) voted "no", and in his opinion that makes the situation unworkable (*Belfast Telegraph 23 May, 1998*). The longer he has to work on his supporters and sow the seeds of doubt and distrust in their minds, the greater potential there is for serious opposition to the Agreement. Paisley sees the Agreement with its North-South council as an embryonic all Ireland government – a sell-out – while more rational people see it as practical co-operation between neighbours.

The Good Friday Agreement has been ratified, and although it can be interpreted to mean different things to different sections of the population (as Barry White writing in

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greater range of clients may be effectively served through family mediation than presently. For example, those unable to effectively negotiate as a result of an inability to come to terms with the termination of the marital relationship, or to separate previous marital issues from their ongoing parenting responsibilities, can be helped via the use of a therapeutic / family systems approach, and not excluded from mediation as many are presently. A feminist-informed approach may be effective where situations of woman abuse and power imbalance are identified; such situations are often excluded from mediation at present. Where one of the issues in dispute relates to grandparent-grandchild relationships, mediation can expand its focus in utilizing a multigenerational approach. Finally, it is only with the development of culturally-specific models of practice that the field can engage members of racial and ethnocultural minorities; to date, in North America, family mediation is largely a white, middle-class phenomenon.

The research also points to the need to reexamine the training of family mediators and certification requirements. Most practicing mediators still consider the structured negotiation approach to be the foundation of family mediation. But most Canadian family mediators now see this only as a "starting point," and use elements of a variety of models in an attempt to address the diverse needs of the parties with whom they work. They have rejected an exclusive reliance on the structured model they were initially taught and have embraced a variety

of approaches. The 'structured negotiations' approach by itself is seen by many as inadequate; mediation training programs and certification standards need to emphasize the application of a range of practice theories to allow mediators to adequately understand and deal with a greater diversity of client and dispute characteristics (situations of high conflict, abuse and power imbalance, cultural diversity, extended family relations, and so on).

When one examines the findings of this study to previous mediation research, it becomes clear that family mediation appears to have made a profound shift in the last decade. In its eagerness to establish itself as a distinct and viable profession, it focused initially on the development of a highly structured, neutralist approach that would unify a diverse group of professionals working in a range of practice settings. This has had the effect of restricting the use of family mediation to certain client groups and dispute characteristics. As the field develops alternative practice approaches and models, however, it is likely that mediation will be rediscovered as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism for a much larger group of clients. There is thus tremendous potential for growth, as Canadian family mediation continues to struggle through important issues and controversies, refines its working methods, and embraces a range of practice models and approaches to fit the diversity of families and communities it attempts to serve. ▲

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Edward Krug, Ph.D. is an associate professor at the University of British Columbia, School of Social Work. The research upon which this article is based was funded by a research grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council. The author wishes to thank all of the participants in the project who contributed their valuable time in completing the questionnaire.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Edward Krug, The University of British Columbia, School of Social Work, 2080 West Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 2Z1; email: krug@unixg.ubc.ca.

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the Belfast Telegraph after the vote points out), it does give Northern Ireland the opportunity to move beyond violence. Ulster could become more like Scotland or Wales in its relationship to Westminster while also having a greater involvement in all-Ireland affairs. White notes, "the Agreement gives us the freedom to expand our horizons and drop our obsession with exclusiveness, either British or Irish" (White, 1998). If this is to happen then some of the people who currently feel like losers will have to be made to see the positive aspects – perhaps in terms of jobs or freedom – and adopt a new dream for their future.

Perhaps one thing Ulster can teach us

about the Quebec situation is that any solution must aim for a "win-win" solution that both sides can sell to their supporters. Opportunities for increasing understanding and good will should be seized eagerly. Dividing nations is never easy and may well never bring all its benefits that the proponents expect. Violence leaves lasting bitterness and is so much easier to start than it is to end. It is to be hoped that for Northern Ireland the violence is now over. ▲

Elisabeth Rae is a former nurse and a registered social worker. She is presently the co-ordinator of a bereavement support and education group, along with other volunteer commitments, in Calgary Alberta.

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