

REFLECTIONS ON THE TURMOIL, PAST AND PRESENT

by Rowland Dale

As a supporter involved with the Peace People both professionally as a Quaker peace worker and as a student, may I humbly and in gratitude offer some observations on the situation in Northern Ireland.

The war in Northern Ireland is essentially a working class war and male. It has for well over a century been the case that loyalists and nationalists have rioted and clashed on the Falls and the Shankill. There is no doubt that social conditions—poor housing, endemic unemployment involving perhaps the majority of adult males, and low wages—have been a crucial factor in these clashes. The economic regeneration of Northern Ireland, and of West Belfast in particular, is undoubtedly one major route to the reduction in the scale of the present conflict. No-one who has experienced the misery and stress of Peggy Deery* and her family in Derry can have any sort of loyalty to the status quo.

The war is almost wholly a male affair. Of the thousands who have actively participated in the killing and maiming, only a relative handful have been women. Women, ipso facto, have no interest in the ridiculous and lunatic activities which are carried out by a few thousand paramilitaries at any given time, aided and abetted by thousands of others. The majority of these people, and the vast majority of the active paramilitaries are, and always have been, male. It is men who have created the war in Northern Ireland and men who perpetuate it.

Another way of confirming this analysis is to look at the movements to end the war. Apart from the laudable organisations which are basically middle-class, such as PACE, Peacepoint, the Society of Friends and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the chief protest movements against the war have been organized by women. The protests of the women of Andersonstown and Derry in 1972 were among the earliest such protests. The biggest, however, was the "Peace Women", as they were originally called—of 1976. The story of how an overwhelmingly (c. 95%) female movement became ultimately directed largely by men is one of the key questions of recent Northern Irish history.

Clearly, the women who gathered in large numbers at the rallies of the summer and autumn of 1976 were often badly lacking in self-confidence. Many of them had done nothing remotely resembling this all their lives. They lacked the essential skills and experience to organize and sustain a protest movement in such difficult circumstances. Such factors were a reason for the two courageous leaders of the "Peace Women", Betty and Mairead, to seek support. The fact that the two leaders, overwhelmed by the flood of protest they had created, turned to a man, and one from the media in particular, for much-needed succour, was to be highly significant for the movement. From that moment on the "Peace Women" in effect became the "Peace People". The whole character of the movement changed, and Ciaran McKeown, with his intellectual gifts and skill with words, became a dominant force. As early as the elections for the first Executive, a predominantly female membership elected a majority of males to serve (October 1977, the ratio 9:7).

I would argue that this development was a sad one, which left a lot of the original supporters lacking a clear sense of purpose or even understanding of what was going on. It is undeniable, however, that the original protest was a gut reaction, a cry from the heart, and that the women involved often had little notion of what detailed measures were needed to end the violence. There is indeed some indication that some of the women from loyalist backgrounds simply wanted the violence to stop without perceiving the need for any structural change in society. This could never be. What does seem to have rendered the "Peace Women" less potent than might have been expected was the much slower development of women's consciousness in Northern Ireland when compared to the rest of the U.K. The whole gist of my reasoning here is that a large part of the momentum for peaceful change in Northern Ireland must come from women, and that its chances of success will be greater in proportion to how far the women in Northern Ireland have achieved equality with men.

Your readers will have no doubt noticed that so far I have refrained from the use of the clichés "Protestant" and "Catholic". There is no way that religion—TRUE religion—can be anything to do with the war. No self-respecting "religious" person would allow themselves to be tainted with the least association with it. It will be a salutary and uplifting experience when we commonly find the gruesome paramilitaries deprived of the religious condonation which these traditional labels give to a murderous and barbaric minority. Religious factors, it is true, form a part of the texture of grievances, especially on the loyalist side, but these factors are woven into a fabric which is basically nationalistic, cultural and even racial.

One area of religious import concerns me here, nonetheless, and that relates to attitudes towards integrated education. The creators of 'All Children Together' deserve our unstinted praise: all the evidence points to crucial weaknesses in the segregated system. To this extent the British government may at last have got it right. What is a bit worrying is the intransigence of Catholic clerics on this issue, an influence perhaps which has partly prevented the Peace People being more strongly supportive of integrated education. It is not only clerics who still put up resistance, but some intellectuals, fully committed to the ideals of conflict-solving, seem unable to grasp the obvious. Certainly it is the people of Northern Ireland who for years have massively endorsed the idea of integrated education, and who, on this issue, have got their priorities right.

The problem in Northern Ireland is of course basically political. When the Ulster Workers Council defeated the power-sharing experiment of 1974, it was objecting to the link with the Sunningdale Agreement rather than the power-sharing arrangement.* Power-sharing was not defeated by the 1974 strike: it was still on the agenda. It has always represented the only hope in Northern Ireland: it has to come. When Ciaran McKeown responded to the acclamation of the Peace People for the idea of power-sharing at the Drogheda rally, 5th December 1976, by turning down the idea, he effectively

closed any avenue for direct political reconciliation the Peace People might have had. He also, of course, closed an obvious route down which the bulk of the membership seemed to want to go, thereafter leaving such people thinking they were in a blind alley.

Leading on from this point, it seems to me, along with other commentators such as Dervla Murphy, that an arrangement to produce co-operation in the government of Northern Ireland is of more immediate importance than the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The ultimate question here, of course, is whether the Unionists, in order to achieve their objective, are willing to play ball and deliver the goods. Are they, indeed, willing to offer anything in the way of compromise, or is their function simply to say "no" to everything? It would be my view that what the Unionists want has called the tune for too long in the North of Ireland.

May I state my gratitude to Ann Fannin, whose B.A. dissertation, *The Peace People Experience, 1976-9*, (School of Peace Studies, Bradford University) is a mine of valuable comment on the early years of the movement: and also to Rob Fairmichael, whose "The Peace People Experience", Dawn Train, no. 5 is remarkably akin to Ann Fannin's work in his general conclusion? My own M.A. dissertation *How Do the Two Communities in Northern Ireland View Each Other?* is available in the J. B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford. Should any reader wish it, I will send a copy of the dissertation, which is a radical analysis of the problem, for £10 including postage and packing, or £8 excluding notes and bibliography. Likewise, I will send a copy of my M.A. essay, *Discuss the Failure of the Peace People to Contribute More Effectively to the Ending of Violence in Northern Ireland* to anyone who sends me £4, including postage and packing.

Editor's note—the title "Peace Women" was a media term.

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Ciaran McKeown writes: When Betty Williams, Mairead Corrigan and I founded the movement of the Peace People on the afternoon of August 17, 1976, we decided on the name Peace People for the very explicit reason that we did not wish to replace sectarianism by religious label with sectarianism by gender label: nor did we wish to divide people by any other sociological, psychological, personality factor such as age, wealth, poverty, manner of earning a living, height, weight, health, illness, past activities, gifts or the lack of them.

My physiological maleness, allied to the perception that I was intelligent, has tempted many into the cliché that I must therefore be a power-mongering male, and other clichés such as "architect", "philosopher", "driving force" etc have been used for the role played by Ciaran McKeown. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone to consider whether or not the intuitions, through which Ciaran McKeown conceived much of what became the Peace People, were in fact "feminine".

In my obviously subjective view, they were, and they certainly inspired my rejection of the

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