

‘Building a Commons’

methods of repair in sensitive regions

Transcription of Interview with Barney Devine on intercommunity development and conflict management in post conflict Northern Ireland.

Barney Devine has over 25 years of experience working in community and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland. He was director of a Peace and Reconciliation Centre in Derry/ Londonderry for 5 years and is currently Business & Development manager with the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation which since its foundation in Omagh in 2002 has provided a specialist trauma treatment, research and training service for those affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland, known as the ‘Troubles’. Its programmes are based on evidence based cognitive therapy for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other trauma related psychological conditions.

Barney has a Masters in Peace and Conflict studies through the University of Ulster.

Anna Macleod - *Can you outline the key historical factors that led to the development of parallel or multi faceted communities in Northern Ireland who identify themselves with different cultures, traditions and jurisdictions.*

Barney Devine - Irish history and the history between Ireland and Britain goes back a long long way, some would even bring it back to Strongbow who was a Norman lord who came to Ireland at the request of the Irish Chieftains, that would go back to 1100’s but it very quickly became a strategic target for England that Ireland would come in under its domination particularly from Elizabethan times onwards so from about 1550 Henry the V111 had pretty much come to the eastern seaboard of Ireland and Elizabeth 1st found it important to bring Ireland in under her dominion because of the wider European context which was around the reformation, counter reformation, and the rise of nation states, particularly England and the rise of Spanish influence on Europe and the attempt to overthrow Elizabeth.

Queen Elizabeth’s wars were long and brutal but eventually from about 1594 to 1603 England eventually defeated what were the Earls of Ulster and the Chieftain’s of Ulster who held out to the very last, were defeated in what became known as the Flight of the Earls. Thereafter came the most important even in recent Irish history and that was the Plantation of Ulster, where England, under King James decided that he needed to have his own people from Scotland, Scottish Presbyterians and English planters who would take over the land in Ireland, farm it, turn it into good production that they would be good citizens in the realm and they would be beholden to him in a most subservient way. So, the Plantation of Ulster occurred from 1610, right the whole way through there were rebellions by the Irish, 1641 being a major one. Cromwell was sent over to suppress it so the history thereafter is a series of very oppressive violent periods whereby the Irish at different times under the banner of religion or liberty, freedom or rights rose up against the English, violence was rampant throughout the whole of the country. It wasn’t really until Nationalism as a European philosophy got embedded in Ireland that you had the United Irishmen coming after the French revolution, you had Nationalism growing in Ireland in the 1800’s with the Land League, where you had Irish men trying to get land back for themselves, religious toleration and freedom.

The ascendancy at that time was the English plantation, English Protestantism and the link with England was then eventually forged parliamentary with the Act of Union in 1801.

So from then on you had strong European influence, political and philosophical influence right up until the 1st World War when Ireland, as it was then, was brought in and asked to become part of the great conflagration that consumed Europe in the 1st World War. It was at that time during the 1st World War that what was called the 1916 Easter Rising began when a group of Irish Republicans and Nationalists decided that it would be a good time to push militarily for freedom from Britain, it failed and all or most of the leaders of the 1916 rising were executed by the British who put the rebellion down very quickly and very brutally.

The mistake they made was in killing and executing the leaders who then became National heroes and in time, once the war was over and importantly the Northern Protestants had sent out most of their young men to fight in Flanders Fields. They were killed and the Protestants felt that they had given a blood sacrifice to England and were very clear that they didn’t want home rule, they wanted to remain with Britain. The Home Rulers were very insistent that home rule should come very soon in some form whether it be outright Independence or Home Rule this carried on through until eventually Britain granted Independence to the Republic and maintained Northern Ireland as part of the Union to curry favour with Unionists and Protestants in the North much to the chagrin of the Nationalists and Republicans in both the Republic of Ireland as it later became and Northern Ireland.

You had the division of Ireland into two separate entities, one that was part of the United Kingdom and one that eventually became the Irish Republic which was its own independent nation with its own systems, policies and structures. Northern Ireland became an entity in 1922 and it was very clearly set up as a region within the United Kingdom, Nationalists who were the original Catholics of Northern Ireland made up a third of the population and Protestant Unionists made up two thirds of the population. So you had an inbuilt minority and an inbuilt majority based upon cultural and religious lines. Politically one third wanted to be reunited with the rest of the island and two thirds wanted to remain as part of Britain. So you had an inbuilt schism, politically, culturally within this falsely created entity as Nationalists would see it and Unionists saw it their historical birthright to remain with Britain.

They set up a separate parliament in Northern Ireland, Britain didn’t really involve itself too much politically with what was happening in the Assembly or Parliament in Northern Ireland at that time. There was a whole series of civil rights issues that the minority felt were not being looked at properly, they felt very much like 2nd class citizens and at various times throughout this period in the early 1950’s there was a border campaign where there was a flare up of Nationalist Republican fervour but it very quickly died down again.

But in 1968/69 there was a civil rights movement sparked off in Northern Ireland, in some way influenced by the French Parisian riots of ‘68 and that whole push in America as well for black rights, human rights, civil rights that was taking over in various parts of the world. The rise of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland was misread by Unionism, they saw it as a Nationalist Republican movement that was trying to destabilise Northern Ireland but in actual fact history has shown that it really was a civil rights movement where Nationalists and Republicans alike felt that if they got equality and the opportunity to play a full part within Northern Ireland, while they might not be completely satisfied with that, it certainly would not lead to open conflict.

However it quickly deteriorated, violence erupted it went quickly back into the schism of sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants. The British Army were on the streets very early on and inevitably they were seen to take the side of the status quo, of Protestant Unionism and the State(let). Nationalists very quickly found themselves out in the cold and some seminal tragedies took place such as Bloody Sunday and other events whereby the British Army was seen to be directly responsible for the killing of innocent civilians on the streets of Northern Ireland.

The IRA, Irish Republican Army, grew out of that very quickly and the more atrocities or tragedies that were committed by the State very quickly polarised the community and led to the recruitment of the Republican paramilitaries and the rise of Unionist Protestant paramilitaries and from 1969 until 1998, a period of 30 years almost 4,000 people were killed, over 50,000 people were physically injured, there were over 30,000 bombings and innumerable shooting incidents that over a period of time, polarised society and led to a very vicious internecine, intercommunity violent conflict in a way that had an impact on the population, probably more so than in other conflict areas because of the close proximity with in which people lived, because of the sectarian nature of the geography of housing both in urban and rural areas and because of the fear and mistrust it engendered and because of the occupations that neighbours were doing in either upholding or sustaining the state within the police force or within the militia forces and the way that the violence was handled by the British state and indeed by the porous nature of the border and the fear that Protestants had of being swamped by the Republic and so on and so forth. So from all points of view it led to a complete breakdown of trust within the community and the nasty, brutal nature of the conflict left a terrible mark on the community.

AM - *Can you describe how you became involved in peace and reconciliation work in Northern Ireland, what the situation was like at that time and how you and your colleagues developed methods of working within and across diverse communities?*

BD - I am of an age where I grew up at the very heart of the Troubles, the Troubles flared up in 1969 and it was in the early 1970’s where the Troubles really made an impact, from the hunger strikes of the Republican prisoners to Bloody Sunday and various other events. So as a very young man I was very much aware of it and indeed my parents were very concerned that we wouldn’t get wrapped up in it and indeed one of my brothers was sent to school in England because it was felt he was vulnerable to a political ideology such as Republicanism.

I, fortunately at the time, managed to get out of Northern Ireland and go to college in England. Indeed the violence was so pervasive that some of my mates in school joined paramilitary organisations and were killed, rioting was commonplace everyday and the shop that my father ran, he was a business man in a small market town, was blown up three times, which caused a lot of financial hardship. I came back to Northern Ireland as a young man and very quickly got into what we call the voluntary sector or community sector, very keen to do something to ameliorate, to assist where I could and was of a mind that it was important to work bottom up approaches to peace building, peace making.

In the very early days I was involved in development education, which looked at rights and justice, looked at issues of poverty and how people can overcome these in order to achieve rights and justice. From that I then moved into overt inter community work between Catholics and Protestants looking at how best we could work together, overcome fear, build trust. This was very, very difficult work because it was happening against a background of violence, people were being shot and killed, premises were being blown up, soldiers were being shot and killed and people were moving out of their houses, there was intimidation and fear, people were gathering themselves into very clear single identity communities which made the work all the harder.

I worked in various roles, once for a period as a director of a Peace and Reconciliation Centre, which at the time was scoffed at by Republicans, in particular, because they felt that the work we were doing was the soft underbelly of the British state mechanism, whereas in actual fact we very clearly saw it as a way to overarch and to bridge the fear and mistrust that there was. Ironically it was behind a British army barrier that we were working and we were trying to bring Republicans from one part of the city, which was a divided city, Derry, on one side was wholly Protestant and the other side was wholly Nationalist and Catholic so right away it was not unlike Mostar or some of the other cities we have today in Bosnia. Some Protestants saw themselves as having been ethnically cleansed from the main part of Derry city to the other part of the city as a result of the fear that they felt and the intimidation that they felt as well. These were processes that were going on in the background and the work we did was political, it was about trying to bring paramilitaries, trying to bring people who were protesting around parades and marching, people who saw the others culture as offensive, trying to educate one side with the others culture, trying to do anti sectarian work, trying to understand peoples religion and denominational viewpoints trying to bring people to be aware of their own prejudices and bit by bit trying to build peace through trust and engender awareness of each other in each of the two communities.

During that time the premises where we worked were petrol bombed, we had telephone calls telling us to get out we shouldn’t be there etc and we lost people because they didn’t want to work in those types of environments. From there I moved to Enniskillen which had suffered a very poignant event, the Enniskillen Poppy Day bomb where the IRA had planted a bomb on Remembrance Sunday where civilians came together to commemorate the 1st World War, the IRA planted a bomb knowing that those who commemorate that event would be largely from the Protestant Unionist community. 11 people were killed, scores were injured and that had a big impact on the Peace process at the time because it really showed the IRA that they had carried out an event that was really seen as almost a ethnic cleansing target, if you like. I came to work in Enniskillen to work on two significant community buildings on the site of that bomb because the local community were very keen that it should be seen as a phoenix rising from the ashes, and that it should be seen as something that would bring the communities together as part of the peace process.

It was a comprehensive development programme to be built with the theme of peace and reconciliation and included a whole series of economic development, the arts and community engagement, education and development. I then moved on from there to work around the mental health aspect of Northern Ireland, coming out of conflict because we were now post Good Friday agreement, post political settlement and we were of the view that whilst the political issues were being settled piece by piece there was a whole range of other issues that were not being met.

AM - *What are the differences between working 20 years ago and now? What would you say are the specific challenges facing peace activists in ‘post conflict’ Northern Ireland?*

BD - Working now and working 20 years ago is very, very different indeed. Depending where you are, of course, there are still parts of Northern Ireland that are still very deeply divided, we still have concerns about marching and parading and there is spontaneous violence and of course we still have dissident Republicans who have recently killed police men and British army soldiers but that said the violence has dropped radically. However there are still major concerns on major issues that were not dealt with as part of the political process. We had the political settlement in 1998 (Good Friday Agreement) it was a three way settlement. It was an internal settlement within Northern Ireland and out of that we got the Assembly, elections, we got human rights, equal opportunities and fair employment but equally it couldn’t have happened without London and Dublin overarching to work together to ensure that the internal settlement worked and there was no wriggle room for those who may want to get out of it either way, looking south or looking east to London.

The last one was then looking at these islands as a whole, bringing Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man and the Irish Republic, England and Northern Ireland together and more importantly the American influence and the European influence made sure that everything was copper fastened, it was a triple lock internal, cross border and intra-UK jurisdictional so that one wouldn’t work without the other. Once that was in place however there were several issues that were not looked at, there were the victims of the troubles themselves, the justice, the commemoration, the acknowledgement, reparation and how this society was going to move on through a possible Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Bit by bit some of these things started to get sorted, such as the policing has been sorted, justice has been sorted, we have a Minister for Justice, it’s a devolved matter, its no longer held in London.

But the other matters still remain and this society now still picks over the scabs, for example the Kingsmill massacre was on television the other night where the IRA killed 10 people, took them out and shot them. Bloody Sunday was only resolved at great cost last year, Bloody Friday was talked about with the IRA bombing campaigns in Belfast that killed many, many people. The politicians haven’t been able to wrestle that issue down at all. How this society commemorates the violence hasn’t been sorted, if you are victim of British state violence, if you’re a Republican and if you are a Unionist Loyalist Protestant, if you were impacted by violence, if you are a victim of Republican terrorist violence and indeed the victim support organisations that grew up in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s these were people who broke themselves into the sectarian camps, if you like and saw themselves as very clearly being victims of one or the other, one persons terrorist is another persons freedom fighter, that’s still a problem in Northern Ireland. The Truth and reconciliation issue is something that remains and something we are still wrestling with.

The work that I now do 20 years on from the peace process culminating in the settlement is that we find ourselves in a post settlement phase, we see ourselves in a post conflict phase but its largely, in my view, a conflict management rather than a conflict resolution phase. We still have a lot of concerns around the mental health need of victims in particular. When we first began to look at this, those who were bereaved were very clearly identified, those who were injured were being seen as victims but the mental health needs of those who were intimidated or those who witnessed or those who had been in acts of violence in the blue light services such as army, police, fire fighters and ambulance services have huge needs in that regard. The work that I have been doing has been working to identify the numbers of people impacted to provide effective treatment for those who we have subsequently identified as suffering from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and also looking at how this population, as it ages, is moving forward and how the health service hasn’t dealt with it. How the services have been as much as if they were in Dublin 4 or Essex in England, they weren’t put in place to address the special needs of victims of violence and the mental health needs of the conflict.

AM - *How successful do you think Truth and Reconciliation commissions are, such as those that have operated in South America and Africa and would such a commission be useful in the Northern Ireland context?*

BD -This is a very big issue and something that this society is probably not yet at a point that it can examine or address and consume within itself comfortably just yet. A lot of talk has been around the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience and how that transformed the post conflict situation. That may have been so for South Africa but I am not exactly sure to what level it is true and I am sure there are still lots of issues there because of the speed that it was implemented after the conflict was over.

Northern Ireland is different in that regard, Northern Ireland was a deeply divided society and whilst the levels of deaths is not on the same scale as in other conflicts nor the numbers of injured necessarily on the same scale, when you look at it proportionally it is never the less had a very high impact on a very small population and, because of the nature of the communities, because of the experience of the communities, the mistrust and the fear there’s still a very long-lasting legacy there. The communities here and the politicians in particular are still very reluctant to deal with this. There has been several attempts to do it, the Eames Bradley report that came out maybe two or three years ago very bravely attempted to look at all this but at the time the report wasn’t looked upon very favourably. But I think its coming back into fashion again.

They looked at Justice, they looked at reparation, they looked at commemoration and how we look at commemoration, how we look at the past, how we acknowledge what was done by each other in the past and how we are going to address the hurt that remains within this society. There is interestingly as we now talk, movement politically, Republicans in particular are trying to address the reconciliation thing and it’s interesting that it should come from them. The mistrust of Unionist towards Republicans politically and socially is still very much there. The Republicans have recently, through the media and through attempts to engage politically with Unionism, attempted to talk about how this society can move on into that next phase, we have had the political settlement, we have had the institutions put in place we have had the workings out of that, we have had the support from the European Union and from Dublin and London but how now as a society can we examine what we did in the past. I do believe there is movement, I don’t know how quickly it will come about, I don’t know what form it will take but there is something moving and I welcome that very much.

Whether or not they can bring their own constituencies with them to the table and whether or not it will involve an amnesty, whether or not the real truth for victims will ever come out, whether this can happen in time because we are an ageing society, the peak of the troubles where the most deaths and injuries occurred and where the most traumas occurred was away back in the mid to late 1970’s and early 1980’s. We are now in a phase where people are coming into their 50’s early 60’s and there is an urgency now that this society begins to grapple with all that. In mental health terms from the traumas that people faced we now know that there is a long tail, that people are still suffering from PTSD and other trauma related conditions don’t seek help for about 20 years ago those people are still feeling the pain and the angst and the incapacity that that condition has brought to them, and its very rare, it hasn’t gone away, and the political movements need to come now, need to come within the next ten years before those people pass away.

Indeed there is also, what a lot of people refer to as intergenerational traumas and intergenerational concerns about passing on the hurts and alienation and the disaffection that has occurred and that needs to be settled now as well. So whilst things are slow and whilst we may not have a Truth and Reconciliation commission as we know it, there needs to some process whether that is adjudicated from outside by a commission of wise persons who are amenable, who are accepted by all parties of the conflict to be seen as that and who will get the support of the politicians in order to engage in such a process is yet to be seen but there are movements, there is talking and I would be hopeful of something coming along the line in the not too distant future.

AM - *I would imagine a lot of time is spent building trust between communities, can you talk a bit about methods of trust building that have been successful and projects or initiatives that didn’t work and why you think they didn’t.*

BD -In Northern Ireland we have been fortunate in having a lot of outside support, Northern Ireland, at the end of the day is a western country, it has had the support of those people who left Ireland for whatever reasons to go to Canada, America, Australia & New Zealand etc. who are part of the Irish Diaspora who wanted to put something back and assist with the peace process and a lot of outside organisations, the International Fund for Ireland, The Ireland funds and indeed then the Irish government and the British government all want to support the peace making process.

Even at the height of the conflict there were attempts at whats called community relations work, now this was seen at the time a complete misnomer, why would you want to reconcile communities when they were very clearly at odds with themselves and a lot of it was seen at the time with raw scepticism by the protagonists and combatants to the conflict. However it has grown over the years to become quite a rich body of work and quite a rich body of practice in the sphere of peace building and conflict resolution.

The European Union developed a series of peace building programmes and it has pumped billions of Euros into Northern Ireland into ensuring there is a bottom up as well as a top down approach, and the bottom up, I suppose has involved communities in a wide range of activities, woman’s organisations, youth organisations, urban rural organisations working at different levels to build capacity to build confidence to overarch, to engage with each other, to discuss culture, to discuss history, to discuss the conflict, to discuss identity, what it is to be a British person living in Northern Ireland, what it is to be an Irish Nationalist living in part of the UK but still having aspirations to live in a united Ireland, and how it can be possible to bridge those two almost exact opposite aspirations, how to support the peace process and indeed how this would be embedded within a society that cant even educate its children in the same schools and have different education systems. So we have worked with funding from different outside organisations, from European and from National governments in a variety of ways and they have included things like very simple confidence building.

There was a very clear piece of work that had to done in the early 1980’s, Nationalists and Catholics were seen to be confident, were seen to come from strong communities, culturally they were very cohesive, whereas Protestants came from a multitude of different denominations within the protestant panoply. They were seen as being less confident, more under attack, more insecure, so there was an area of work called ‘single identity’ work where it was felt more money had to be put into Protestant single identity work to build their capacity, to build their confidence to engage more with their Catholic neighbours. Very difficult conversations about identity and political sense of where they thought they wanted to be. This was something that was done throughout the early 80’s and into the 1990’s as the peace process began there were very contentious issues around parading and marching and cultural dominance and how culture can infect and instill fear within other communities. There was money put into how to engage confidently in negotiations, to bring your view to the table, to be aware politically of the others religion, the others culture, the others political aspirations and the peace programme itself brought together funding mechanisms by which councillors locally, politically had to come together in order to share out the funding to appropriate community activists. They had to make decisions so they had to have the leadership to come together, and then if they could show that leadership, well then those to whom they were dispersing the funds to at a bottom up level, could also do that. Bit by bit you could see that if politicians could engage locally, why couldn’t they engage in a reasonable assembly, the pressure then began to come on those politicians to come around the table and to engage with the difficult issues.

So there was a whole range of programmes that were built in and around that as well, the communities had to be consulted there were fora a set up to engage with a lot of these issues and a lot of skills around facilitation, a lot of skills about conflict resolution, a lot of skills around negotiation came about as a result of that. A lot of these skills then were used in other parts of Europe and elsewhere where there was ethnic conflict, where there was conflict around identity, where there were movements of people, where there were peoples who were seen as a majority, as a minority, within borders they themselves didn’t shape nor did they give allegiance to. The legitimacy or illegitimacy of how they viewed their position within that and how some form of reconciliation could be attained.

Now I don’t think we are in a position yet where we can say that we are reconciled in Northern Ireland and indeed I don’t know if we can ever be reconciled in the wider definition of that term but I do think we have moved from a position of overt conflict to a position where we’ve had a peace settlement. We are in a position where the conflict is being managed and until we get to the point where we have a Peace and Reconciliation Commission and totally feel comfortable in our own skins, until we can overarch all of that with the assistance of a European identity as much as national identities, whether you call yourself Irish or British or Northern Irish, even more people are interestingly calling themselves Northern Irish to identify themselves with their neighbours and to identify themselves less with their cross border neighbours in the Republic and their cross the Irish sea neighbours in Britain and that’s a very positive move actually.

So we are in a position where are moving to conflict management but not quite at conflict resolution but that is a work in progress and the skills that will be used in that are different from the skills that were used in the early phases of the conflict, skills that eventually brought the politicians to the table and will hopefully bring the politicians to some form of Peace and Reconciliation Commission as well in the future.

AM - *Given your experience and expertise in the area of conflict management what advise would you offer to politicians and community leaders in Europe who are experiencing inter-community tensions?*

BD -The lessons of Northern Ireland I have no doubt are transferable but every conflict has its own unique topography, has its own unique footprint, has its own unique history, it has its own unique political pressures and Nationalisms and borders that were imposed or were brought down, willfully on some part of the population. We had Versailles after the 1st World War that reshaped the European map, we had the 2nd World War that reshaped the post war map and the legacy of that is still cascading down upon us.

I look at Belgium and I see the Waloons and the Flemish and I find that a very interesting scenario, they are all Catholic but they speak different languages and they have different aspirations politically. I’ve been to Bosnia and I’ve been to Srebrenica and I’ve seen body bags that they are still trying, through DNA sampling, to identify the families and the names of the victims. I am acutely aware of the hand that history has played and will continue to play.

I haven’t been to Baltic countries but I am aware broadly of the influence and the affect that Russia and Germany in particular has had in the Baltic countries since the 2nd world war and the outfall of that, the holocaust and how modern Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are wrestling with their entrance into the European Union and the hope that they have that the European Union, like Northern Ireland, have a overarching influence which can in some way dilute a lot of the Nationalisms and identities, and that people can associate with a wider European family because I would consider the European Union as a wonderful peace process that is an experiment that doesn’t have a road map, that is trying to reshape Europe in a way that we can never go back to the European wars and configurations that we’ve had in recent memory.

I have no doubt that the lessons of Northern Ireland, being what they are can indeed contribute to the processes and debates that are happening elsewhere but I am also acutely aware that each one has its own stamp and unique problems but I am also, I said this earlier, given that the work we have done there are very clear societal impacts that we are in a post conflict situation dealing with and I am sure that we can share those readily within a European context and indeed global context. That again, is how we treat victims and survivors, we don’t do enough about victims and survivors, we have never done enough about victims and survivors, the presumption is the people will get over it and as long as there is not overt physical violence on the streets then we are in a position of peace. So the need to develop services and systems, mechanisms and commissioning for all of those things is a critical piece of work that I think Northern Ireland in particular could assist greatly in and I would like to think that all of those not just the physical parts that we have referred to before, the injured and the killed but the living, that the living give an opening to future generations, we must ensure that there is no intergenerational impact from current conflicts.