Sinn Féin, the Past and Political Strategy: The Provisional Irish Republican Movement and the Politics of 'Reconciliation'

Abstract *This article examines a critical aspect of the contemporary political debate in Northern Ireland regarding 'the past', and how to deal with the legacies of violent conflict. The article will specifically analyse the Provisional republican movement's developing policy in this area. It outlines Sinn Féin's (SF's) policy evolution with regard to ideas of 'truth and reconciliation' in the context of the post-Belfast Agreement era of 'peace'. It proceeds to critically assess the Republican movement's demands for an independent and international process of 'truth recovery', and subsequently engages in a detailed critique of SF's recent promotion of a 'reconciliation strategy', designed to enhance the movement's strategic agenda, and usher in a new phase in the 'peace process'. The article concludes by arguing that SF's approach to 'truth and reconciliation' has been characterised by an emphasis upon the movement's efforts to legitimise its version of the historical narrative of the Troubles, rather than by any authentic attempt to address self-critically the previous commitment to 'armed struggle', or to seek genuine compromise with unionists, loyalists and the broader Protestant population. This approach has also been formulated for an internal audience, with the goal of convincing republicans that progress towards a united Ireland has not stalled.*

Keywords: Northern Ireland; Sinn Féin; reconciliation; truth; dealing with the past; apology

Introduction

> A new agreed Ireland is best achieved by unity through reconciliation. This isn't just an emotional or patriotic or inspirational dream. This is a very hardnosed realisable objective as part of the process of building a new Republic.
>
> (Gerry Adams, cited *Irish Times*, 29 October 2012)

The core leadership group of SF, which has remained largely intact for the past thirty years around Gerry Adams (President of SF since 1983) and Martin McGuinness (Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive since 2007), have maintained that the peace

process in Northern Ireland is a dynamic and transitional entity. Rather than representing a stable (or, to some critics[1], a stagnant) ethno-nationalist communal compromise, which has permitted erstwhile sworn enemies to divide power between them in the Northern Ireland Executive, SF has insisted that the process is ongoing, and that its ultimate destination remains a united Ireland. It is true that the language in which this aspiration is expressed has changed over the course of the fifteen years since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998: SF leaders now talk of an 'agreed Ireland' or, 'an Ireland of equals' (Kearney, 2012a). However, it is clear that the Provisional republican movement's public discourse continues to envisage the future constitutional unification of the island, and the end of partition. Shirlow, Tonge and McAuley (2011: 127) have recognised that former IRA prisoners have largely accepted the SF leadership's claim of continuing 'fidelity to traditional Republican ambition' in the contemporary era. Many have not been persuaded by the 'dissident' accusations of a wholesale ideological abandonment. The 'peace process', in the view of leadership supporters, is emphatically not interpreted as a rejection of previous goals, but rather as a new manoeuvre in an ongoing 'war of position'. This teleological understanding of the end-goal of the 'peace process' has also dictated SF's attitude and policies towards the past, and the increasingly prominent debate concerning the best way to approach the legacies of a bitterly divided society.[2]

This article argues that SF has promoted a version of the past which attempts to recognise the changed circumstances of the post-conflict era and, in particular, the redundancy of the Provisional IRA's campaign of violence, which was formally brought to an end in 2005. At the same time, however, this interpretation permits republicans to claim a credible consistency of aspiration, if not of method. In other words, the SF approach to the legacies of conflict has involved an insistence upon the legitimacy of the use of 'armed struggle' by the IRA during the 1970s and 1980s, whilst also recognising that the circumstances that allegedly justified this resort to violence no longer pertain.[3] SF has sought to establish an historical meta-narrative which claims that institutional discrimination under the Stormont system, and oppressive policing by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and 'occupation' by the British Army, created a collective victimhood amongst Northern Ireland's Catholic population. Interestingly, this narrative has taken precedence in recent years over the more traditional claim that it was partition, unjustly imposed by the British, which provided the mandate for 'resistance' (McKearney, 2011; McIntyre, 2008). In the words of anti-Provisional commentator Eoghan Harris, the Provisional republican movement

has attempted to tell a story of 'stirring dramatic power' (*Irish Independent*, 25 September 2011), in which the IRA's campaign of 'armed struggle' is presented as an extension or completion of the civil rights agenda, promoted in the late 1960s by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). This tendentious claim is based upon an interpretation which argues that the peaceful campaign to end second-class citizenship for Catholics in Northern Ireland was brutally suppressed by a combination of the Unionist government's intransigence, and the UK administration's indifference or, worse, active support for the maintenance of the *status quo ante*. Essentially, this narrative rests upon the premise that the IRA was forced, *as a last resort*, into armed resistance against such oppression. Provisional republicans have recently discussed the IRA's campaign as if it had been part of a broad struggle for equality and human rights, although such terminology is conspicuous by its absence in the republican rhetoric of the 1970s and 1980s (McGrattan, 2013: 76). A great deal flows from this effort to establish the Catholic population as the primary community of victims, and it clearly represents an attempt to place the IRA's violence within the wider context of a struggle for equality and human rights *avant la lettre*. SF National Chairperson, Declan Kearney, who has played a prominent role in the party's 'reconciliation' strategy (see below) gave a good illustration of this rhetoric in a tellingly convoluted passage. Arguing that the IRA campaign of violence was justified, he referred to an 'outworking of injustices and political and economic conditions which created circumstances where many in our society and many within the nationalist/republican community found that armed struggle was a last resort – but a last resort which came about and was not able to be set aside as a result of there being any viable political alternative.' (*Irish Times*, 25 May 2012). The elision of 'nationalist/republican' is of particular significance here, with the implication that nationalists who rejected the Provisionals' violence had no 'viable political alternative' to offer. This narrative has been explicitly and vehemently rejected by 'constitutional nationalists' in the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) (Hopkins, 2013: 98-113). The contemporary political strategy has entailed a pragmatic approach to the past, and unsurprisingly other protagonists to the conflict have been largely unimpressed by, and often unresponsive to, this effort to shape and control the meta-narrative. The article begins with a brief outline of the evolution of SF's policies towards the past, before proceeding to a critical analysis of the Republican strategic agenda, and its slim chances of success.

'The Right to Truth': Sinn Féin's Evolving Policies for the Past

In SF's submission to Strands 1 and 2 of the multi-party talks, which led to the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, there was an initial attempt to sketch an agenda for dealing with the legacies of conflict. The document had called for 'investigations into disputed killings by agencies of the [British] state [...] carried out in accordance with international standards.' (Sinn Féin, 1997) In addition, in a further section entitled 'The right to truth', the party demanded a public enquiry 'to examine all unresolved deaths caused by members of the British Army and the RUC', as well as a specific independent international enquiry into the Bloody Sunday killings in Derry in 1972, and an 'independent official enquiry [...] into the murder of defence solicitor Pat Finucane.' Finally, SF argued for a full independent enquiry into collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries (Cadwallader, 2013).

By such criteria, neither the Saville enquiry into Bloody Sunday (announced by PM, Tony Blair in 1998), nor the Stevens 3 enquiry into allegations of collusion by the security forces with loyalist paramilitaries (Saville, 2010; Stevens, 2003), met the republican movement's demand for 'independence'; both were established under the auspices of the UK government, and reported directly to that administration. In the specific case of Finucane, who had been killed in 1989 by the Ulster Defence Association, the retired Canadian judge, Peter Cory, did indeed recommend such an enquiry, but there has been ongoing dispute between the UK government and the Finucane family concerning the terms of any such enquiry. The review of the case (which reported in December 2012), and the subsequent apology from PM David Cameron, has failed to head off the family's continuing campaign for an independent enquiry (de Silva, 2012). A flavour of the prevailing attitudes within the Provisional movement with regard to victimhood in the late 1990s can be found in the reaction of columnist, Mary Nelis to the news that Colin and Wendy Parry (whose 12-year old son, Tim, had been blown up by an IRA bomb in Warrington in 1993) were planning to set up a peace centre in their son's memory. Nelis argued that what was required was a Truth commission in England, to 'hear of those other children, not talked about at peace camps or rallies, those children who died horrific deaths, their skulls and faces smashed to pieces by plastic bullets fired by British soldiers [...]. Maybe such a centre would give the families of those killed by British forces the opportunity to ask questions about the cover-up of the killers and the character assassination of their loved ones by a hostile media, briefed by British PR officers.' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 26 March, 1998).[4]

SF was also disappointed with aspects of the report by Victims' Commissioner, Ken Bloomfield (*We Will Remember Them*, 1998), a role which had been set up under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). However, in retrospect, some republicans have been willing to recognise that Bloomfield did adopt an 'inclusive' definition of victimhood, thereby including the possibility that republican (and loyalist) 'ex-combatants' (and their family members) would be treated in a similar fashion to those who were more evidently 'innocent' victims of violence (more often than not their deaths or injuries were caused by those very ex-combatants) (McDowell, 2007; Smyth, 1998). In UK government legislation establishing the post of interim Commissioner for Victims (in 2006), this inclusive definition was again used, to the obvious chagrin of many unionist-oriented victims' groups (Nagle, 2008; 2009). Despite the party's misgivings concerning Bloomfield, these decisions chimed at least partially with SF's core demand that there must be no 'hierarchy of victimhood'.

In September 2003, SF produced a discussion document, 'Truth', which called explicitly for a formal process of collective examination and acknowledgement of the past. Although the document offered broad support for the principle of an international and independent (of the UK state) Truth Commission, there was some recognition that 'truth recovery processes have a potential, at least in the short term, to inhibit rather than enhance the equally necessary process of reconciliation.' (Sinn Féin, 2003: 2). SF put forward several general principles that would be required for a successful 'truth recovery' process: there must be no 'hierarchy of victimhood'; the process must be 'politically neutral' (though what this might mean in practice was not spelled out); 'full co-operation and disclosure by all relevant parties is essential'; consideration should be given to the South African formulation that 'the purpose of a truth process is to examine "the causes, nature and extent" of the conflict'; 'the focus of any truth process should not be restricted to combatant groups.' Uncharacteristically, the party offered these thoughts only as a contribution to public debate, and this may have reflected the leadership's distrust (matched by many SF supporters) of the state's motives and its willingness to disclose its role in the conflict. Given the critique of SF's 'reconciliation strategy' that will follow, it is also significant that SF argued that 'humility and generosity should inform the parties seeking to reach agreement on this issue. It should not be about getting one over on one's opponents.' (Ibid: 5). It is also interesting to note that SF supporters were more likely than those of any other party to back the idea that the primary aim of any

Truth Commission should be 'to get the story straight about what happened during the conflict.' (Lundy and McGovern, 2007: 330).

In August 2007, SF sponsored a 'March for Truth' to mobilise its supporters in its heartland of West Belfast. The purpose of the march, supported by a range of victims' groups from the Catholic nationalist community, was to 'draw attention to collusion and British state violence; a policy which resulted in many thousands of victims who were killed or injured or bereaved.' (Adams, 2007a). According to the SF President, the British state 'employed the full weight of their political influence and authority to deny, cover-up and suppress the truth' (Adams, 2007b). Arguing that 'Irish republicanism has defeated British militarism', Adams went on to bemoan the UK state's reluctance to 'face up to its responsibilities' and acknowledge the actions carried out by its army over the course of the conflict, if there was to be the required 'inclusive healing process and a genuine process of reconciliation.' Adams understood the reasons for this reluctance, but he confessed himself 'perplexed' by the opposition of unionist politicians to such a course. He couched this appeal in terms of the need for 'thinking beyond any sectarian, sectional, party political or self-interest. Republicans have clearly acknowledged many times the hurt they inflicted during the conflict. I have expressed my personal and sincere regret and apologised for that hurt.' (Ibid). However, Adams was critical of the Secretary of State's recent announcement of a consultative group (which became known as Eames-Bradley after its joint chairmen) to look into the legacies of the conflict: 'I have problems in relation to its remit and my strong suspicion is that this is really about stringing out this issue and wasting time.' (Ibid).

Nevertheless, despite these misgivings, SF did not dismiss out of hand the Consultative Group on the Past's (CGP's) report in January 2009. Indeed, one of the most controversial recommendations of Eames-Bradley, namely that a 'recognition payment' of £12,000 should be paid to those bereaved during the conflict (whatever the circumstances in which their loved one died), was welcomed by republicans, as implicit proof of the contention that there was no hierarchy of victimhood. There had been some uncharacteristic confusion within SF over this issue, with junior Stormont minister, Gerry Kelly, initially stating that the recognition payment was 'clearly a mistake' (*Irish News*, 8 October 2009). On the other hand, Adams, who was confronted angrily at the launch of the report by some family members of IRA victims, immediately rejected the idea of a Legacy Commission, appointed by the UK government. He noted that such a commission would be neither independent nor international in make-up, two key demands of SF for any truth recovery

process (*Belfast Telegraph*, 8 November 2008). Dennis Bradley appealed to Republicans to co-operate with any Legacy Commission, and dismissed the idea of an overarching enquiry under the auspices of the UN, arguing that 'there is no history of the UN to carry out such an exercise anywhere in the world.' (*Irish Times*, 6 March, 2009). SF responded that any commission needed 'to look at the causes and consequences of conflict – not just the consequences. The British government are the chief protagonists in the conflict and can't be seen as an honest broker.' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2 October 2009; Adams, 2011). Ultimately, the Provisional movement has acted as if the causes of conflict were straightforward, uncontested and self-evident, and this is a critical problem besetting any effort to establish a broader consensus regarding a truth or legacy commission. SF's strategic position has been consistently to attempt to establish the necessity and legitimacy of the IRA's campaign of violence. In 2005, when the Provisional IRA issued a statement formally ending its armed campaign, the movement 'reiterated our view that the armed struggle was entirely legitimate. We are conscious that many people suffered in the conflict.' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 28 July 2005).

'Uncomfortable Conversations': Sinn Féin's Reconciliation Initiative

Following a speech to the SF *ard fheis* in September 2011, the party's National chairperson, Declan Kearney, set out the principles of a new reconciliation initiative in the pages of *An Phoblacht* in March 2012. Kearney made plain the significance that the Provisional movement attached to 'reaching out' to the wider Protestant, unionist population: 'regardless of the stance of others, we should recognise the healing influence of being able to say sorry for the human effects of all actions during the armed struggle.' (*An Phoblacht*, March 2012). Kearney acknowledged the 'deep suspicion' that continued to exist in the unionist community towards such republican 'outreach', but he insisted that an 'authentic' reconciliation process should constitute the next phase in the peace process.

This idea of apologising not simply to 'non-combatants' (as defined by republicans), but also for the hurt caused to combatants and their families, was greeted by some commentators as a new departure (*Belfast Telegraph*, 3 March 2012). However, the extent to which this represented a genuine shift in the Provisional movement's position is at least open to question. Previously, in July 2002 (on the thirtieth anniversary of the IRA bombs in Belfast which killed nine people, seven civilians and two British soldiers, and injured scores of

others, and became known as 'Bloody Friday'; see Gillespie, 2008: 64-7 and McGrattan, 2013: 77-9), the Provisional IRA had offered 'sincere apologies and condolences' to the families of 'noncombatants' killed and injured by the organisation. However, in its statement of 2005, despite arguing explicitly that there should be no 'hierarchy of victims in which some are deemed more or less worthy than others [among the killed or injured]', the IRA nevertheless sought to make some significant distinctions between different categories of victim. "P. O'Neill" (the pseudonym used to sign IRA statements) merely recognised that 'there have been fatalities among combatants on all sides. We also acknowledge the grief and pain of their relatives.' For these 'combatants' (or 'legitimate targets', as the IRA had previously described them), there was to be no direct apology from the IRA; put simply, any such apology would imply that the movement's campaign of violence had lacked legitimacy, and this was not something that the leadership, or many of the IRA's 'foot soldiers', were willing to countenance. Of course, similar misgivings concerning any mooted apologies for past violence against 'combatants' can also be heard from loyalist paramilitaries (Spencer, 2011).

Kearney, therefore, was reiterating a stance developed ten years previously, and only appeared to move the republican movement onto different territory, through the willingness to apologise for the *effects* of the IRA's campaign (upon the families of combatants and non-combatants alike). Yet, this remained a heavily-qualified expression of regret, which certainly did not amount to an authentic or self-critical reckoning with the movement's espousal of violence, and still less an admission that such violence on behalf of republicans had been unnecessary or, indeed, counter-productive. In a nuanced account of the 2002 apology, Cunningham recognised that the timing of the IRA's statement could be understood in a short-term political context, but also in terms of the movement's longer-term and uneven evolution away from 'armed struggle'. (Cunningham, 2004: 84). The immediate context was one in which SF's participation in the Stormont Executive was coming under increasing strain, and the IRA had been accused of involvement with the training of revolutionaries in Colombia, and closer to home, of organising intelligence-gathering or spying activities. Moreover, in the context of the terrorist attacks in the USA of 2001, the Provisional movement faced a markedly more hostile international environment for the use or justification of non-state violence (English, 2003: 331-3). Arguably, the statement also formed another part of the leadership's gradual effort to prepare the 'republican base' for an eventual decommissioning of IRA weapons, and the definitive end to the IRA campaign,

which did subsequently occur in 2005. However, it was a measure of the nervousness of the leadership that 'the qualified nature of the apology [...] was determined, or at least influenced, by the need not to alienate grass-roots supporters and those who had made sacrifices for the Republican cause.' (Cunningham, 2004: 84).

Whilst acknowledging this argument, perhaps we could go further: the Provisional movement's leadership was determined to operate its own unstated hierarchy of victimhood, because to do otherwise would jeopardise the whole strategy of attempting to legitimise the IRA's *past* use of violence, and therefore potentially undermine the movement's efforts to control the historical narrative of the conflict. Moving towards non-violence in the present and future required an even stronger commitment to defend the legitimacy of 'armed struggle' during the course of the Troubles. The leadership of SF displayed every sign of sincerely believing this defence, but it was also felt to be necessary in order to placate a restless rank-and-file within the movement. Predictably, the response to the IRA statement of 2002 was mixed, with the British and Irish governments reacting broadly favourably, preferring to accentuate the signs of 'new thinking' in the republican ranks; on the other hand, many unionists were sceptical or even hostile, believing the apology to be either insufficiently penitent, or 'half-hearted' (in Democratic Unionist Party MP Jeffrey Donaldson's phrase) and opportunistic. Victims and survivors of IRA attacks were also divided in their reactions (Ferguson et al., 2007, 2010).

Engaging unionists?

The strategy of outreach to unionists and Protestants may be understood as part of SF's attempt to drive a wedge between the allegedly recalcitrant representatives of 'political unionism', and those elements within the broader community (particularly, though not exclusively among clergy and lay officers from churches of various Protestant denominations) that show a greater willingness to engage in 'dialogue' with republicans (Kearney, 2009; Bean, 2007: 230-7). This policy may be viewed as having some parallels with the inter-war policy of *la main tendue* (or, 'the outstretched hand'), adopted by the French Communist Party in relation to the country's Catholic population (and bypassing the church hierarchy, which remained unshakeably anti-communist and hostile to any mooted *rapprochement*).[5] The explicit linkage of engagement with unionists, and the idea of 'reconciliation', to an ongoing project for constitutional transition ('moving the Peace

Process forward') makes it very problematic to interpret SF's initiative at face-value. Indeed, it can seem to invite unionists to embark on a 'constitutional mystery tour' with only one possible destination (to adapt Harvey Cox's suggestive phrase).[6] As such, this apparently unobjectionable policy of 'reconciliation' in fact masks a strategic desire to discomfort unionists, undermine the 'dissident' challenge, and at the same time, shore up the Provisional leadership's support base within the movement.[7]

Whether the mixed messages transmitted by SF's reconciliation initiative were a conscious product of design or not, they did betray a genuine problem with the policy: as Liam Clarke pointed out, 'Martin McGuinness claims outreach to unionists isn't meant to turn them into nationalists, but Gerry Adams says a united Ireland will come about by persuading unionists and that is the strategy now.' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 29 May 2012). The major unionist parties tended to respond with scepticism or downright hostility: leader of the UUP, Mike Nesbitt argued that though it would be 'churlish to criticise anyone engaged in genuine talks about dealing with the past', it would also be 'naive not to have some scepticism about the motives of any political party in its initiatives.' For Jeffrey Donaldson, 'the starting point for discussions should be in saying "sorry" for the campaign of terror that was waged against the security forces and civilians [by the IRA]'. (*Newsletter*, 29 May 2012; see also 4 March 2012). For Traditional Unionist Voice leader, Jim Allister, the initiative was so much media hype: 'What is the ultimate goal of what they dress up as "reconciliation"? To IRA/Sinn Fein "reconciliation" is but a euphemism for Irish unification – the same goal as they pursued with the armalite.' (Ibid).

Kearney gave the oration at the Easter Rising commemoration at Milltown cemetery in April 2012, and returned to his theme, unperturbed by unionist criticism. Stressing the collective humanity of all involved in the conflict, he argued that 'we need to keep moving the Peace Process into new phases and onto new ground. National reconciliation is integral to our strategic project. It is the basis from which to persuade for and build a new Ireland.' (Kearney, 2012a). It is surely instructive that the initiative is unabashedly conceived, not in terms of a moral imperative to acknowledge past wrongs, but rather as part of a strategic repositioning of the movement, supposedly in pursuit of the same goal that violence had manifestly failed to achieve. The rhetoric of reconciliation sometimes gives way in SF's recent public relations to a selective or competitive discourse of victimhood. For instance, by turning the spotlight onto alleged killings either perpetrated or orchestrated by the British state, SF can hope to assuage some of the unease that may be felt within the ranks, regarding

a strategy that can appear to distance the contemporary movement from the IRA's 'armed struggle'.[8]

Kearney placed the reconciliation initiative in a direct lineage to the proud inheritance of the anti-sectarian example of the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798, when Presbyterians such as Theobald Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken and Jemmy Hope found common cause with Catholics in attempting to break the connection with England. The question of sectarianism and the Provisional movement has been much debated in the academic literature devoted to modern republicanism, and there is insufficient space to treat these arguments in depth here.[9] However, what Kearney could not acknowledge, was that it was precisely the IRA's 'armed struggle', and its interpretation by the vast majority of Protestants as a sectarian campaign, that fundamentally (and probably irrevocably) undermined any Protestant unionist receptivity to the Provisional claim to be the bearers of such a tradition. As Denis Bradley, who co-chaired the CGP report, observed, 'in all our consultations it is unclear if Republicans truly appreciate the depth of hurt that exists in the unionist community.'[10] Kearney insisted in his Easter rally speech that republicans needed, and wanted, to 'listen carefully to the diverse voices from within the wider unionist and Protestant community'. Such engagement and dialogue should be unconditional, but it could not be a one-way street, as 'political unionism has a responsibility to positively embrace this opportunity and engage with the rest of us. And it should do so.' (Kearney, 2012a).

Yet, the diversity of voices that Kearney is willing to listen to and engage with is tightly circumscribed: in reality, he means those who will, implicitly at least, recognise the territory of reconciliation that has been mapped out *a priori* by the Provisional movement. Therefore, those Protestants who insist that the IRA's campaign was deeply sectarian in its effects, and perhaps, some would argue, also in its inspiration, put themselves amongst the ranks of the incorrigible naysayers (see Simpson, 2009 and Patterson, 2013 for detailed accounts from those with such a perspective). However, to blithely invoke the anti-sectarian inheritance of the United Irishmen is unlikely to convince many, if any, unionists of SF's *bona fides* in their approach to the past. Ultimately, there is no apparent recognition in the self-congratulatory and hubristic tone of much of Kearney's speech ('Our generations of republicans are confident about the future and how to go forward because we are visionaries, leaders and nation builders'), that it is *precisely* the Provisional movement's attitude to both the past (justifying the supposed necessity of the IRA's violence) and the future (a teleological belief in the inevitability of Irish unity) which conditions the view among many

Protestants that there is little or nothing to be gained from engagement on these terms. Of course, that still leaves open the question of whether, *tactically*, it makes sense for Protestants and unionists to simply reject the initiative out of hand, and be seen by many, particularly outside Northern Ireland, as fundamentally opposed to reconciliation (Spencer and Hudson, 2013). Some loyalists, in particular, have argued in favour of a strategy of engagement with republicans, in an effort to expose the tensions at the heart of their 'reconciliation' agenda, but also perhaps to carve out a space for political loyalism that is distinct from the major unionist parties (Novosel, 2013; PUP, 2013).

Therefore, the supposed responsibility of 'political unionism' to engage in the reconciliation agenda is interpreted by most unionists as an ultimatum, rather than an authentic move towards negotiation, in which the *outcome* of the process is uncertain when the protagonists agree to enter into this dialogue (Schaap, 2005; McGrattan, 2013: 67). When Kearney (2012a) asks his audience at Milltown, to give 'deep consideration to what more we can do to help meaningfully heal divisions in our country and build national reconciliation?', one answer would be to subject the Provisional movement's version of the Troubles to a genuine and self-critical reappraisal, asking the tough questions concerning the use of IRA violence, and whether or not it was productive in making unity a more realistic or achievable goal. This is not the process that Kearney had in mind. However, some erstwhile Provisionals have arguably taken up this challenge, and begun to pose such hard questions. The paradox is that some of these 'intellectual dissenters' have been vilified by their former comrades in SF, and have been dismissed as nostalgic for the 'armed struggle' or anti-peace process, when in fact some of them, at least, are seeking a real historical reckoning with the past of the movement, for better or worse. In a recent speech at Newtowncunningham Orange hall in Co. Donegal, Anthony McIntyre reflected that 'the failure of the IRA's armed campaign – notwithstanding the attempts by Gerry Adams to pretend that it was the first IRA campaign not to have ended in failure – has resulted in much soul-searching among independent republicans. This is hardly the first time that I or other republicans have said that what was gained was not worth one human life lost.' (McIntyre, 2013b). It is instructive that there is no equivocation in this judgment; no hiding behind the supposed distinction between innocent civilians and 'legitimate targets'.

Despite the sceptical reaction from many mainstream unionists, Kearney returned to his theme in a speech on 'National reconciliation in Ireland', delivered at Westminster in October 2012. Beginning with a critique of 'British colonial interests' in Ireland, he went on

to argue that the peace process is irreversible, but 'we are still not at peace with each other.' (Kearney, 2012b). Perhaps mindful of his audience, Kearney emphasised the need for the British state 'to reflect and discuss how to address its responsibilities for the adversity and conflict it perpetuated in Ireland, and between Britain and Ireland.' (Ibid). The twin dangers to the achievement of 'national reconciliation' were identified as a 'developing status quo supported by some in the north'; and, the continuing growth of 'instability provoked by militarists opposed to the peace process.' (Ibid). The meeting of Martin McGuinness with Queen Elizabeth in Dublin in 2011 is held up by Kearney as an example of the kind of 'uncomfortable conversations' that are necessary.

Kearney was deeply critical of the DUP, and the leadership of what he characterised as political unionism, arguing that the party had 'caved in to the lowest common denominators of sectarian triumphalism', and that 'the last five years [since the re-establishment of devolved government in 2007] have been a very slow learning curve on equality and respect for the DUP.' (Ibid.). First minister, Peter Robinson, was singled out for harsh criticism: 'he needs to stop talking out of both sides of his mouth, and get with the programme. He cannot be a latter-day James Craig or Basil Brooke [previous Unionist Prime Ministers under the Stormont devolved Parliament], because the Orange State has gone.' (Ibid.). Unionist politicians were accused of legitimising and rationalising sectarian killings by loyalist paramilitaries over the course of the Troubles: 'political unionism's refusal to engage on the development of an authentic reconciliation agenda is also duplicitous and contradictory [...] In recent months it has been breathtaking and bewildering to listen to the recriminatory rhetoric used by representatives of political unionism in public discussions on reconciliation.' (Ibid.). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this tone was not met with a great deal of conciliatory zeal when unionists responded. As Graham Spencer (*Newsletter*, 8 November 2012) has argued, First Minister Peter Robinson's negative reaction to Kearney's London address could be interpreted as a tactical mistake, playing into the hands of SF. Although the speeches and interventions of Kearney were 'clearly designed to provoke DUP animosity', Robinson and unionism would have been better served by 'absorbing the criticisms of Kearney', and proposing 'a national or even international reconciliation strategy which might serve unionism in the future.' Aside from painting the DUP into a corner in which it appears to be the recalcitrant party, it is difficult to see how Kearney or the Provisional movement could really bring any pressure to bear on unionism to play its allotted role. SF cannot unilaterally determine the result of argument about the meta-conflict, or force unionists to

'reconcile' on the ground mapped out for them by republicans: what sanctions have SF got to force unionists to 'get with the programme'? In other words, why would unionists acquiesce in a strategy that is designed to dig republicanism out of the hole they find themselves in (having accepted partition and majority consent for any putative constitutional change in the 1998 Agreement)? All that is left to Kearney is a rather plaintive, and surely forlorn, appeal to 'ordinary unionist and loyalist citizens' who, in his hopeful scenario, are not powerless and do not have to put up with the 'deficits in vision and strategy from the unionist political leadership' (2012b). In a conscious echo of the SF demands during the Hume/Adams talks of 1992, which envisaged the British government as a persuader for Irish unity, the role of London now should be as 'persuaders and facilitators for reconciliation'. But, as we have argued, if the reconciliation agenda is another means to promote the unchanging end of Irish unity, then the UK government certainly has little or no incentive to act in the prescribed manner, especially as Kearney made clear that in any truth recovery process, the British government ought to 'own up' to 'all aspects of its military, intelligence, and black operations campaign in Ireland...' (Ibid).

Declan Kearney concluded by mapping out a 'national reconciliation strategy' with four elements: the completion by the devolved government of the *Cohesion Sharing Integration* policy (which had been left undeveloped within the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister since 2009); the development of local cross-community and multi-agency initiatives to reduce social segregation and promote integration; a united platform designed to tackle anti-peace process militarists; additional strategic interventions in economic and social policy. While much of this agenda might be significant in its own right, and worthy of support from across the political spectrum, it arguably leaves out the really difficult aspects of any genuine attempt to address the legacies of the violent conflict.

'The Good Old IRA!'[11]

Two more specific examples can serve to illustrate the continuing problems associated with the SF approach to the past. First, the unexpected decision of the party to put forward Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, as SF's candidate for the 2011 Presidential election in the Republic of Ireland, was greeted with a good deal of renewed probing into his IRA past, and by extension, the entire Provisional strategy towards the past was subject to sharper scrutiny than had been the norm. Many commentators in Dublin and London were moved to address

the issue of McGuinness' own role and responsibilities in the conflict. As Nick Cohen (*Observer*, 25 September 2011) argued, this scrutiny was overdue; many journalists had been content to 'repeat the conventional wisdom that McGuinness and Gerry Adams deserve praise for becoming men of peace.' However, the plausible campaign of SF, concentrating upon the disastrous state of the Irish economy, and the draconian terms of the EU/IMF recipe for averting total collapse, should only appeal to the 'untutored and forgetful.' (Ibid). McGuinness, according to another longstanding critic, Fintan O'Toole (*Irish Times,* 20 September 2011), should feel 'extraordinarily blessed to have been allowed to escape the consequences of the deeds he has been party to'. The 'peace process' had been a 'tacit arrangement' in which voters helped 'to drag SF out of a cesspit it had dug for itself'; this was based upon a 'carefully poised act of moral evasion, an Irish version of "don't ask, don't tell."' (Ibid). However, SF had interpreted this uneasy reticence about the movement's past as complete compliance. Irish citizens may well have been willing to turn a blind eye to the previous IRA commitments of SF leaders, in the interests of not rocking the unsteady peace process vessel, but how many of them were happy to explicitly endorse SF's view that the IRA campaign had been legitimate and necessary?

Perhaps it might be a coherent position to argue that the past is best forgotten, and the Irish people should move on from a *tabula rasa*, continuing to ignore the atrocities of the recent past. Yet, as O'Toole forcefully pointed out, SF does not itself adopt such a stance; rather, it is determined that the past should be manipulated to reflect its own highly contentious understanding of the meta-conflict, and its historical narrative of the Troubles (*Irish Times*, 27 September 2011). McGuinness proved tetchy at what he characterised as the media fixation with his IRA past, labelling his questioners in the Republic as 'west Brits'. Several commentators pointed out that the McGuinness candidacy was being used by SF in an attempt to 'decontaminate' the party in the eyes of the Republic's voters, and to advance its portrayal of the IRA's decision to use violence as one that had been forced upon it, as a last resort, in the absence of any realistic alternative to resist British 'oppression' in Northern Ireland. Eilis O'Hanlon (*Irish Independent*, 11October 2011) pulled no punches in accusing SF of repeating the 'poisonous untruth that the only choice faced by nationalists was between meek subjugation [to British oppression] or joining the IRA, a calumny against the vast majority of Catholics who never raised a gun.' More recently, Declan Kearney in an Easter commemoration in Monaghan also repeated this insidious claim, arguing that 'for decades, Irish republicans *and nationalists* had no alternative to the use of armed struggle against

injustice. (Kearney, 2013a; emphasis added). This flies in the face of the reality that many Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland (often within the SDLP, but also outside it) believed wholeheartedly that there were alternatives to the IRA's violence available.[12]

The second recent example of the problems confronting SF in its effort to establish its narrative of the Troubles concerned the apology issued by Gerry Adams for the IRA's killing of Det. Garda Jerry McCabe during an armed robbery in Adare, Co. Limerick in 1996. The apology followed hard on the murder by a criminal gang of another detective in Adams' Co. Louth constituency in January 2013. As the local TD, Adams was expected by parliamentary convention to offer his condolences to the bereaved family in the Dáil, and he used this opportunity to make a formal apology for the killing by the Provisionals of Det. Garda McCabe, and other members of the Republic of Ireland's state forces killed by republicans in the course of the conflict. It could be argued that the apology represented another step in the 'normalisation' of SF, and another instance of the movement recognising its responsibility to deal with 'murky' aspects of its past. However, this case posed a number of difficulties for Adams and SF: first, on whose behalf was Adams apologising? After all, he claimed never to have been a member of the IRA, and it was also pointed out that SF and the wider Provisional movement had initially supported the IRA's unequivocal denial of responsibility, and then campaigned vigorously for the early release of McCabe's murderers. Moreover, at the trial of the IRA men suspected of the killing, two witnesses withdrew their evidence, citing intimidation by republicans; as a result, the public prosecutor had no option but to accept manslaughter pleas (*Irish Times*, 2 February 2013). As Matt Cooper asked (*Irish Examiner*, 1 February 2013), 'what "conflict" had been taking place in Adare when Jerry McCabe was shot dead or how was the cause of Irish "freedom" advanced by a straightforward murder at a time of a criminal robbery?'

Second, some victims' groups in Northern Ireland immediately contrasted the full recognition of IRA wrongdoing in the cases of policemen killed in the Republic, and the (relatively) fulsome, though belated, apology to McCabe's widow, with the begrudging regret for the human *effects* of 'legitimate' violence against police officers in Northern Ireland (where 303 Royal Ulster Constabulary officers had been killed). SF MLA, Mitchel McLaughlin, confirmed the unofficial hierarchy of victimhood operated by republicans when he argued that the circumstances in which police officers were killed by the IRA in the Republic were 'vastly different' to the circumstances in which police officers were killed in Northern Ireland (*Newsletter*, 1 February 2013). Ultimately, what explained this distinction

was the IRA's self-generated policy, which prohibited attacks on the state's forces in the Republic, but made RUC officers and other 'collaborators' with British rule 'legitimate targets'. As well as unionist condemnation, many 'constitutional nationalists' were also scathing: Adams was accused by Noel Whelan (*Irish Times*, 2 February 2013) of constructing a 'shield of apology', and Conall McDevitt of the SDLP argued forcefully (*Newsletter*, 1 February 2013), 'You cannot build a reconciled society on historic revisionism and retrospective justification of indefensible acts.'

Conclusion – 'Forward to 1916!'

In a theoretical analysis of the potential for 'reconciliation' in divided societies, Andrew Schaap (2005) has convincingly argued in favour of an 'agonistic' or political approach to this issue, rather than a restorative or moral agenda. We should not presuppose a moral or political community that needs to be 'restored'; 'whereas reconciliation turns towards harmony and resolution, politics thrives on contestability and uncertainty.' (Schaap, 2005: 74). Although the desire or aspiration to reconcile with (former) enemies is necessary and laudable, it is in the *striving* for its achievement and the acceptance of the risk of politics (namely that reconciliation may not, in fact, be the result), that authentic progress towards building a post-conflict political community may be found. In a deeply divided polity like Northern Ireland, the idea of political reconciliation does not and cannot involve the restoration of an agreed moral or political order, but instead requires a willingness to conceive and configure a diverse one: this is the challenge or risk of politics, but also its open-ended and inherently plural character. A final end-state in which all are reconciled may, in this understanding, be impossible to arrive at, but this does not invalidate the idea that a post-conflict community, whilst fragile and contingent, could be the achievement of a reconciliatory political practice (Ibid: 83).

As we have demonstrated, SF's approach to reconciliation is based upon the presupposition of a 'natural' or 'organic' pre-existing moral and political community ('the Irish people' and its right to self-determination). Even if such a community existed, in practice the republican movement has done more than most in helping to fragment this entity. SF displays no genuine sign of being willing to subject its belief in the moral legitimacy of the IRA's 'armed struggle' to self-critical scrutiny, and it is probably futile for those outside the movement to expect such an approach to make headway. However, it is also the case that

the republican movement's emphasis upon the reconciliation strategy as a *means* to forge an 'agreed [united] Ireland' necessarily makes an authentic reconciliatory practice unworkable. Unionists cannot realistically be expected to 'reconcile' with such an agenda, either in moral or political terms.

So, either the strategy is evidence of naivety on the part of SF, or it encompasses other purposes: a significant contemporary objective of SF's political strategy has been precisely to wrongfoot and divide or demoralise unionism. In recent speeches, Declan Kearney has bemoaned the fact that 'the required momentum or willingness [to engage in an inclusive reconciliation discourse] does not yet exist within those unionist parties [...] But that is not representative of all unionist attitudes.' (Kearney, 2013b). This apparent openness to dialogue does have the added advantage for SF of appealing to the court of international public opinion, which in contrast to the Provisional movement, does have a record of naivety when turning its attention to Northern Ireland (Kearney, 2013c). However, in partial tension with the previous claim, Kearney has also continued to argue that 'the strategy pursued by these generations of [IRA and SF] activists to achieve a national republic is working' (Kearney, 2013a). This attempted shoring up of the movement's internal constituency is another important reason that explains SF's willingness to persist with the 'reconciliation' strategy. In the absence of discernible momentum towards unity in the run-up to the centenary of Easter 1916, the strategy represents an effort to create at least the illusion of momentum or dynamism. A final purpose for SF in pursuing the reconciliation initiative is that it affords a further opportunity to shape the historical narrative of the Troubles, and in particular to occupy more firmly the territory that once belonged to constitutional nationalists. As it stands, the concentration of power within the current SF leadership has allowed critics to focus upon its propensity to historical evasion. Adams and McGuinness appear to feel that they have no option but to plough on with an historical narrative that almost entirely exonerates the IRA, but ultimately this has fatally undermined the prospects for the 'reconciliation agenda'.[13] As O'Hanlon has pointed out, SF remains 'dragged down by ghosts' (*Irish Independent*, 3 February 2013), and this will remain unavoidable, at least for as long as the current leadership remains at the helm.

[1] See, for example, Wilson (2010).

[2] For a recent exchange regarding the ethics of a 'truth and reconciliation' process in Northern Ireland, and unionist objections to republican efforts to shape this agenda, see Lawther (2011) and Edwards (2012).

[3] The leadership of SF has continued to proclaim its pride at the heroic 'resistance' of the IRA during the Troubles era. This may well represent a genuine expression of sentiment, but it also serves to undermine the efforts of alternative Irish republican organisations (or 'dissidents') to lay claim to this inheritance. See Frampton (2011) and Hopkins (2013) for further analysis of intra-republican division over the legacies of the violent campaign.

[4] As it transpired, the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace in Warrington did become engaged in significant work on bringing together ex-paramilitaries and victims/survivors of violence in 'storytelling' encounters, including some of those affected by violence from the security forces; see Dover et al (2012). It is also interesting to note that Colin and Wendy Parry invited Martin McGuinness to deliver the annual peace lecture at the centre in Warrington in September 2013.

[5] It is also reminiscent of the communist approach to social-democratic parties during the Popular Front era: there was an inherent contradiction in ostensibly seeking co-operation with organisations which they were 'in due course pledged to destroy and replace with their own leadership.' As the British Communist strategist, Tommy Jackson, stated, he would be happy to take the Labour party leadership by the hand, as a preliminary to taking them by the throat (see Thompson, 1992: 39).

[6] W. Harvey Cox used the phrase in relation to the British and Irish governments' efforts to bring the Northern Irish parties to the formal negotiating table in the early 1990s (1993: 32).

[7] Although it was reported that 84% of SF delegates at the 2012 Ard fheis were supportive of the party's public expression of regret for all those injured or bereaved as a result of the IRA's campaign (*Belfast Telegraph*, 29 May 2012), nevertheless it may be speculated that at least some republicans had quiet misgivings about the idea of a generalised apology for the effects of the IRA's violence, even if some specific apologies, such as those offered for Bloody Friday, the 1972 Claudy bombing, or the 1992 Shankill bomb, might be acceptable. One erstwhile Provisional put it thus: 'If republicanism alone apologises, republicanism alone will be blamed.' (McIntyre, 2013a).

[8] Aside from the *causes célèbres* of Bloody Sunday and the killing of Patrick Finucane, SF has also invested a good deal of effort in support of the families bereaved by a series of killings in Ballymurphy during August 1971 (See *An Phoblacht*, July 2010).

[9] For a recent example of an important exchange regarding the character of the IRA's campaign, and the extent of sectarian effects and/or motivation associated with it, see the debate between Patterson (2010) and White (2011) in *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Patterson (2013) extended his critique of the IRA's campaign in border regions, arguing that there was an element of 'ethnic cleansing' involved in the systematic targeting of part-time and retired Protestant members of the Ulster Defence Regiment.

[10] The quotation is taken from Bradley, from a speech at the Innovation Centre, Titanic quarter, Belfast, at the launch of the preliminary report of the Consultative Group on the Past (29 May 2008). Available at the CAIN website (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/), (accessed November 5 2013).

[11] The phrase is taken from John-Paul McCarthy's critical assessment of Martin McGuinness' campaign for the Presidency of the Irish Republic (*Irish Independent*, 29 September 2011), citing a 1985 essay by former SF director of publicity, Danny Morrison. In this essay, Morrison sought to show the futility of efforts to distinguish clearly between the violence of the 'old IRA' during the war of independence in 1919-1921 (and during the subsequent civil war), and that employed by the Provisionals in their attempt to complete the 'national revolution'. See Hanley (2013) for a detailed discussion of attitudes in the Irish Republic to Provisional republican violence since 1970.

[12] For a fuller discussion of the SDLP refusal to be co-opted by SF into this historical narrative, see Hopkins (2013: 98-113).

[13] Recent commemorations of high-profile IRA activities (such as the march and rally in Castlederg, Co. Tyrone in summer 2013, or the unveiling of a plaque in Ardoyne to Thomas Begley, an IRA bomber who was killed, along with nine Protestant civilians, when his bomb exploded in a fish shop on the Shankill Road in West Belfast), have been organised or supported by SF, with prominent leaders in attendance. It is difficult to believe that SF supporters of the 'reconciliation agenda' do not appreciate the damage caused by such provocative commemorative practice (see Alex Kane, 'Propaganda parades deepen our divides', *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 August 2013).

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