

The New Battleground?

David Miller on community relations and cultural traditions in Northern Ireland

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Twenty-one years ago the British government imposed Direct Rule on Northern Ireland, promising reforms to ameliorate the worst excesses of Unionist rule. First targets included housing allocation, voting rights and an end to job discrimination. Over the years priorities were made of the Northern Ireland economy, of combating job discrimination, promoting inward investment and attracting tourists. Initiatives in this area have had some political success, although underlying problems such as the weakness of the Northern Ireland economy and employment inequality remain. Attempts at regulating relations between the two communities were joined, in the late 1980s, by a focus on how nationalist and unionist communities saw each other. Community Relations and Cultural Traditions work represents an attempt to enter the cultural sphere and promote explorations of cultural diversity with a view to fostering tolerance and understanding. Previously such work had been focussed on emphasising the commonalities between nationalist and unionist, often leading to an unrealistic portrait of people working together. More recently tolerance of diversity and difference has come to the fore.

Community Relations work has grown out of a widely scattered range of groups and organisations engaged over the last twenty years in explorations of local history, culture and politics and in attempts at peace and reconciliation. The creation of the Community Relations Council (CRC) represents an attempt to bring these tendencies together and to promote and expand their work. The job of the Council, as expressed by its Chair, Dr James Hawthorne, is to "encourage the people of Northern Ireland, at all levels, to acknowledge and respect their differences. Community relations work is about helping people from the two sides to share activity in common without hatred and distrust. It assumes no political outcome but recognises that mutual respect and understanding are preconditions for any workable political solution. We have much to do to help create

a climate in which cultural diversity and toleration can thrive."*

This seems an entirely laudable aim which should have the support of everyone in favour of diminishing the hatred and sectarianism characteristic of the conflict in Northern Ireland. However, some signs of disquiet are beginning to be heard as the Council enters its third year of operations. This article examines the history, philosophy and practice of the CRC and one of its subcommittees, the Cultural Traditions Group (CTG) and asks whether cultural traditions are becoming a new battleground in Northern Ireland.

The CRC and CTG were, in part, a response to an increase in groups working in the area of peace and reconciliation, emerging from youth and community work in the North and from the remnants of peace groups of the 1970s. In 1985 a government working group report stimulated official thinking in the area and in 1986 a report for the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights recommended both a central government unit and an independent Community Relations Agency.* In 1987 the government set up the Central Community Relations Unit responsible directly to the Secretary of State. In late 1988 NI Minister Brian Mawhinney, himself of Northern Irish origin, received a letter from a group of community workers, peace and voluntary organisations, seeking the creation of a new Community Relations body independent of Government. That same year the CCRU sponsored a conference which led to the formation of the CTG with former Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary, Maurice Hayes as its chair. Its brief was to promote "tolerance" and "mutual understanding" between Catholics and Protestants by broadening "appreciation of cultural diversity".* A little over a year later, in January 1990 the CRC came into being subsuming the CTG as a subcommittee. A prime mover in setting up the new council was Northern Ireland Education Minister Brian Mawhinney. He had set up a committee of inquiry headed by James Hawthorne, former Controller BBC Northern Ireland, in June 1989 and accepted its proposals for a council, of which Hawthorne himself was appointed Chair. On the launch of the Council, Mawhinney issued a statement welcoming the council as "a significant milestone on the long, hard road towards bringing historically-divided people together."

The work of the Council involves facilitating community relations work and providing funds for inter-community and reconciliation initiatives. In the field of cultural traditions it gives grants to enable the publication of books and to fund local cultural events, seminars, performances and conferences. It also gives media grants for the production of broadcast television programmes.

According to Mawhinney "the establishment of this new body is an important milestone in the continuing efforts by Government and all well-intentioned organisations and individuals to tackle the

*James Hawthorne, "Living with our Differences", *Community Relations* No. 2 (1986).

*Hugh Fraser and Mari Fitzduff, *Improving Community Relations*.

*Clem McCartney, "Council of Hope", *Fortnight* (Jan. 1993); *Cultural Traditions* (Community Relations Council Leaflet).

* "NI Community Relations Council: A Catalyst for Community Harmony", *Northern Ireland Information Service News Release* (4 Jan. 1990).

underlying divisions in this community."* Mawhinney's statement is predicated on the official position that the underlying divisions in Northern Ireland are based in the mutual hostility of the two traditions and that, therefore, any well intentioned person must be simply in favour of attacking sectarianism. The virtue of this perspective is that it strongly implies that its opponents are in the business of fostering, or at least failing to challenge, sectarianism.

This is also an essential strand in justifications of the Community Relations approach. Anti-sectarian work is held to be apolitical. As James Hawthorne has argued: "Let it be clearly stated then, at the outset, that the Council has no magical political solution which it is trying to impose, nor some uniform common culture that it seeks to develop. The Council will not devise theories for others to implement nor tell people how to behave." The Director of the CRC, Mari Fitzduff, has described their work as "pre-political" and important "no matter what political solution people would prefer to see put in place".*

Such statements sit uneasily with one of the arguments in the original report which contributed to the setting up of the Council. There Fitzduff and her co-author stated that the success of any community relations initiative depended on movements at the political level, noting: "That local politicians could at least commit themselves to political accomodation, if not reconciliation within the province." In a conflict where the key dispute is over the very existence of the state, it is hardly apolitical to advocate accomodation within its structures.

The method and theory of the CRC draws extensively on, but also adapts, multiculturalism as practised in Britain. Attempting to apply work done in British inner cities to the conflict in Ireland immediately runs into conceptual difficulties. For example, which is the host community and which the incomers'? The Unionists can be seen as both host and incomer, thus creating immense problems in understanding and combating sectarianism.* In practice, both cultures are treated as equal and there is a kind of cultural relativism in which, for example, traditional Irish music and orange marching bands are simply mirror image expressions of sectarianism or, alternatively, of legitimate cultural expression. This definition of sectarianism — "a plague on both your houses" — highlights the missing dimension both of multiculturalism in Britain and its adaption in Northern Ireland. It fails to come to terms with the question of power. In the community relations approach all cultures are equal; in reality, some cultures are more equal than others. Orange marching bands are a good example of the cultural expression of domination, but such a recognition is apparently beyond the remit of Cultural Traditions work in Northern Ireland.

*Maire Nic hAnnaidh, "Culture... is it!", *Iris: The Republican Magazine* (Nov. 1988).

*"Early Days First Questions", *Community Relations* No. 1.

The model underlying this is that sectarianism in Northern Ireland is an expression of personal prejudice founded on ignorance. This assumes that hatred and sectarianism (or in the British model of multiculturalism, racism) are irrational and not linked to the interests and material circumstances of social groupings. As sociologist Des Bell, has argued in the context of youth culture:

To treat sectarianism as a structure of personal prejudice capable of quantification by objective psychometric measurement is of course to operate within an interpretive framework — a distinctively ideological one. This methodological approach reduces sectarianism to a pathology of individual sentiment. It conspires with "official" definitions of sectarianism in deflecting attention from the political realm. At the same time, it scapegoats the working-class child, or his/her culture, community and "traditions", identifying these as the origin of sectarian conflict.

(*Acts of Union: Youth Culture and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland*, London 1990.)

The prime methods for tackling the ignorance on which sectarianism is supposed to be founded, are encouraging contact between Protestants and Catholics, as well as encouraging explorations of both diversity and commonalities between the two communities. Such a strategy can be summarised as promoting understanding and tolerance.

The CRC has come in for some sniping from parts of the media in Northern Ireland* and is viewed with suspicion by many politicians. In some ways this is only to be expected, since the appalling state of politics there must to some extent be laid at the door of local politicians, and any attempt to challenge the log jam may threaten the interests of those who are happy with the *status quo*. However, the deficit model of working-class culture implicit in the approach of the CRC, in which there is a heart-felt plea for more civilised behaviour, is vulnerable to criticism as naive and condescending. Social, Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) Belfast Councillor, Brian Feeney, has commented that:

You have a group of very nice well meaning people. Intelligent, able and articulate, but they've absolutely nothing to do with either community in Northern Ireland. I remember complaining bitterly about the make-up of the Community Relations Council, saying "there are no nationalists on it". There are Catholics on it and they are quite nice and there are some who had some credentials some time ago. And this guy said to me "But there aren't any Unionists on it either." And that's the crunch.

*Andrew Boyd, "Building No Bridge over Troubled Waters" *Irish News* (Dec. 1992). Also the Right to Reply from CRC officer Ray Mulan, "Frontline Push Better than Sideline Carping", *Irish News* (9 Dec. 1992), and further critique by the editor, Nick Garbut "Mickey Mouse Bal Out Wealthy Auntie" *Irish News* (14 Dec. 1992).

You've got nice people from the fringes of both groups who are acceptable and they are middle class. At a different level what concerns me is that what they are saying to the communities in the sort of areas that I would represent, is "Look, be like us. Behave yourselves. Nice people don't throw stones at each other." Now in that is an implicit criticism of those people, who are beleaguered and unemployed and impoverished. What I think should be done is that money should be put into those communities, full stop.

(In conversation with the author, 25 February 1993)

The most fundamental problem for the CRC analysis, however, is that it views Northern Ireland as an ethnic conflict between two ancient traditions. This accepts a major plank of the official view, that the rôle of Britain in the conflict is to hold the ring while the two sides sort out their own problems. This is the taken-for-granted background of the work of the Council, but it is not simply an uncontested perspective on the causes of the conflict.

The rôle of Britain is underlined by the fact that the CRC came into existence as a result of government action. The Northern Ireland Office nominate one third of the members of the 24-member Council and supply the largest proportion of funding. Although the CRC is "independent" of government it does depend on government support which would no doubt be removed if the Council displeased the NIO too much. A lot of the progress of the Council and the CTG, therefore, depends on government support. It is to be hoped that this particular branch of the Northern Ireland Office takes a more enlightened attitude to open debate in and between Community organisations than the NIO has recently shown. The discriminatory political vetting of community groups in the last few years suggests that those with which the NIO has political disagreements are vulnerable to the removal of their funding.* The research agenda sponsored by the Central Community Relations Unit does not give much cause for hope in this area. It's general framework is quite explicit in referring to the "essential division" from which "violence flows" in Northern Ireland as the existence of "two separate groups with different political aspirations, religious beliefs, cultural traditions and social values." Accordingly, research objectives include only investigations of the two communities.

When exploring varieties of Britishness and Irishness, as the CTG did in its first two conferences,[†] it is easy to slip from the former into a confining exploration of "Northern Ireland Protestantness", or to fail to recognise that there are not just two sides in the conflict. It is significant that anti-sectarian work, and explorations of cultural diversity, are confined to the two traditions. One key improvement to cultural traditions work would involve looking seriously at the

**The Political Vetting of Community Work in Northern Ireland* (NI Council for Voluntary Action, Belfast, Oct. 1990).

†Maurna Crozier, ed., *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Irishness* (Inst. of Irish Studies, Belfast, 1989); and Maurna Crozier, ed., *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Britishness* (as above, 1990).

third dimension of what is conveniently called the Irish problem; that is, the British. Explorations of the cultural heritage of British soldiers, politicians and administrators in Northern Ireland might be able to raise questions about anti-Irish racism and might prompt British personnel to reflect on exactly why they remain in Ireland.

So far I have treated the CRC and the CTG as if they were synonymous, but there is some suggestion that key players in the CTG, which was formed before the CRC, were opposed to being incorporated into the CRC. It is said that members of the CTG have complained in public that the government forced the two groups into a shotgun wedding. This uneasiness may be connected to the potential contradiction between a concern for community relations and a programme of exploring cultural diversity, which may turn out to be different things.

The stalemate in Northern Ireland is undoubtedly part of the inspiration for groups like Cultural Traditions and there is a lot to be said for increasing the currently tiny public space for real discussion about the future of those six counties and their relationship with both the other 26 counties in Ireland and with England, Scotland and Wales. The CTG may prove useful in this respect despite, rather than because of, its apparently rather limited founding assumptions. If the group can provide a public space for debate which goes beyond the certainties of the current log-jam then it will have been worthwhile. That debate must, and on occasion has, included critical reflection on the rôle of Britain.* It must be acknowledged that the official view — that Britain holds the ring in Northern Ireland — is not a simple truth but an actively promoted perspective on which significant resources are expended by the British government.[†] Debate must also include those voices which are continually marginalised by the political process and by British policy. These are the unheard voices of ordinary members of the public and those of republican and loyalist groups which are excluded from much public discourse. Remember, it is illegal to broadcast the sound of an interview with representatives or supporters of either Sinn Féin or the UDA on British television and radio. Remember also, the next time that television news talks of "all-party talks" in Northern Ireland, that one political party — Sinn Féin which takes around 11 per cent of the vote in Northern Ireland — is excluded, while the less electorally popular Alliance party is not.

If explorations of Cultural Traditions are open to all, then they will gain much more legitimacy and be much more worthwhile than if they are confined within the rubric of official (British) thinking. If not then the whole enterprise will be vulnerable to accusations that it is another tool in the already overstocked warehouse of British Propaganda in Northern Ireland. Let us hope that it will not turn out that way.

*Martin McLoone, *Culture, Identity and Broadcasting in Ireland, Local Issues, Global Perspectives* (Inst. of Irish Studies, Belfast, 1992).

†David Miller, "The Northern Ireland Information Service: Aims, Strategy, Tactics" in Glasgow University Media Group, ed., *Getting the Message* (London, 1990).