A History of the Belfast Anarchist Group and Belfast Libertarian Group

1968–1974

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Contents

In October 1968 a small group of mostly young people formed the Belfast Anarchist[1] Group [BAG], to give a voice to those who believed in radical social change and new forms of participatory democracy. Later, they would also declare themselves totally opposed to the inherent sectarianism and authoritarianism prevalent in both physical force Irish Republicanism and reactionary Ulster Loyalism. Sadly, both those forces were too deeply ingrained in the psyche of the population and the clash between them led inexorably to the appalling conflict we euphemistically call 'The Troubles'.

For a while the BAG struggled against the tide of events but was eventually subsumed. A remnant of the group then formed the Belfast Libertarian Group [BLG] and once again attempted to open up a challenging debate on the unfolding events. However, by 1974, it too had to admit defeat and was disbanded.

Nevertheless, it was felt that this brief history was worthwhile recording, even if only to highlight one of the dissenting tendencies within the Left which was present right at the inception of The Troubles.

Belfast Anarchist Group 1968–72

On 5 October 1968, at the same time that an historic Civil Rights march was taking place in Derry, four young people met in Belfast for the first meeting of what was to become the Belfast Anarchist Group (BAG). The individual who had called the meeting explained:

> I've been in touch with others who intend joining us, but they can't be here today as they're taking part in the march in Derry.

So, right from its inception the BAG found itself enmeshed in a wider socio-political struggle, and while BAG members certainly helped to mould events during the next three years of agitation and upheaval, it was only on rare occasions that the group's influence was exerted in an independent capacity.

The first meetings got off the ground after a hesitant start, taking place in a small candle-lit room above a restaurant in Upper Arthur Street, in downtown Belfast. Attendance at these meetings varied in number – sometimes only ten would gather, at other times two dozen or more, but within those early meetings a hard core of about fifteen was forming. At the meetings Anarchism as a political philosophy achieved a surprisingly low position on the agenda. Other, seemingly more pressing, topics dominated – most of them centred around the Civil Rights struggle, and in particular the radical grouping known as the 'People's Democracy' (PD). The PD was itself a loose body which brought together students/young workers/young unemployed, most of them politically of the Left – socialists, republicans, anarchists – but including (at least in the very early stages) a small number of unionists.

[1] *This is not the place to begin to dispel whatever stereotypical notions the reader might hold about a philosophy which has been so pejoratively presented in the media. Suffice to say that the Anarchism which I find appealing has nothing to do with either bomb-throwers or chaos, but is something highly creative and life-sustaining.*

Some of the BAG had been present at the sit-down demonstration in Linenhall Street on 9 October 1968 which later that day resulted in the formation of PD. With an active political situation developing on the streets the anarchists' talk and plans were predominantly associated with their involvement within PD and the Civil Rights struggle in general. Already the Young Socialist Alliance had dissolved itself so as to be able to devote its time and energies to PD work and propaganda. To anarchists and young socialists alike the opportunity to influence and work within a large body of spontaneously-gathered students and non-students was not to be thrown away. Accordingly, all the different factions – which otherwise might have stood aloof from one another – immersed themselves in PD, providing the ideological pressure groups that the PD was finally to be led by.

But the BAG had become heavily involved in PD at a time when most of its members only knew the rudiments about anarchist theory itself. Indeed, if it had not been for the suitcase full of books which one member brought to sell at the early meetings – not just anarchist material from Freedom Press, but general material on Vietnam and Cuba – many of the BAG members might have been left with little or no means of accessing the history and philosophy of Anarchism and libertarian socialism. And the fact that the anarchists were not really involved in PD as an 'anarchist section' but as individuals also hampered the BAG's development. The only opportunity when they could discuss and learn as an independent, anarchist body – at their meetings – was hampered by their concentration on the subject of PD politics. At this time, however, none of the BAG members thought that this would have any negative effect on them. In fact, they assumed that their involvement within PD could only enlarge their influence and membership. This was true to a certain extent: at one stage the anarchists felt they could reckon on 60-plus sympathisers. One member, however, did notice. He complained:

> I wanted a picket to be organised by the group outside Australia House, after recent exposures regarding the plight of Australian aborigines. We all agreed to the picket, but it kept being put off due to this Civil Rights march, then that one, and so on. In the end, I finally gave up trying. Everyone was too engrossed in PD.

Yet, in the early days of PD politics, the anarchists within PD did stand out, not as a distinct section, but as a definite 'tendency'. In comparison with later days the early PD always had a libertarian voice, which harassed or even prevented others from proposing or adopting non-libertarian structures.

Events in Northern Ireland escalated rapidly. A number of BAG members took part in the PD's 4-day march to Derry which was attacked at Burntollet Bridge on 4 January 1969, most of them receiving injuries of some sort. Two (the author being one of them) were injured in a skirmish in Irish Street on the outskirts of Derry, in which they also lost possession of the group banner. As they dashed along Irish Street they could see the banner burning away behind them.

Just after the Derry march the BAG did engage in activity which was to be one occasion where the BAG acted in a totally independent capacity. A few of the group members were still attending grammar and secondary schools and in January 1969 their interest was drawn to a situation developing in schools in England: the Free Schools Campaign. Thousands of 'Free Schools' leaflets (printed by the Anarchist weekly, *Freedom*, in London) were distributed widely among grammar and secondary schools in Belfast (including the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and St. Dominics). Several of the distributors were hastily expelled and the press gave it an extra

bit of publicity by reprinting the offending leaflet. The reaction from the schools, media, and 'worried parents' was somewhat hysterical, with comments and letters from principals and parents expressing concern that 'International Anarchists' were trying to 'destroy our educational heritage'.

Some of those expelled later joined the BAG (if they weren't already members), others were removed by their parents to other schools. As for the campaign, it died as suddenly as it had begun, with just a few liberal headmasters disturbed enough to talk of a few reforms and student committees. But throughout the whole affair it was the rank and file members of the BAG who had involved themselves, not those members who were proving to be vocal leaders in PD politics.

Throughout all the Civil Rights/PD marches and meetings there had been no sign of the supposedly 'inevitable rift' between anarchists and socialists/communists. Indeed, when confronted by aggressive crowds of Loyalists and Paisleyites at these marches the 'enemy without' created more concern than any supposed 'enemy within'. Safety in numbers drew people of all Left persuasions together. It was to take a march which, for once, went outside the confines of Northern Ireland and into the Republic to reveal the as yet unnoticed divide.

The marchers' target was to be Dublin. Influenced by the 'success' of the Derry march, PD decided that another 'long march', this time across the border, would hopefully generate the same publicity; a publicity they, as one PD member expressed it, "so desperately needed, if we are to prove to the Protestant workers that we are as equally opposed to the Southern regime as we are to Stormont."

And yet this march was the subject of the most intense debate yet seen within PD. One meeting would decide that the march was on; another would be convened to cancel it. The reason why a number of the PD leadership, who had been so vocal in demanding action and marches in the North, were now fighting shy, was never made clear. One point of dissension, though definitely not the main one, was that the BAG had publicised the march in the British anarchist press, and a large contingent of English anarchists were coming over to take part. One BAG member said of that occasion:

> At the time it seemed to me that while the non-anarchist members of PD had never resented the small anarchist presence within their ranks, they now took exception to the fact that this time anarchists could be in the majority and they could be in the minority.

However, a march was finally agreed upon – to take place from 4–7 April 1969 – and the participants assembled on the first day of their long trek. A preliminary meeting at Belfast City Hall passed off without incident, except for one ludicrous happening. As the participant, an English anarchist, recalled:

> I jumped onto this flat-topped pillar and proceed to attack the South, the Catholic Church, and telling the Prods that they should join us. But they [a group of what were known then as 'Paisleyite women'] kept shouting at me, and although I wanted to answer their points of angry disagreement, I couldn't make out what they were screeching at me for. At last I made it out. It had nothing to do with us, or the march, or the South, or anything like that. They were shouting: "Get yourself off that monument; you've got your bloody feet on our war memorial!"

[The inscribed granite pillar was dedicated to the American servicemen stationed in Northern Ireland in the build-up to D-Day. It has since been moved from the front of the City Hall to another location in the grounds.]

To avoid a repetition of the Loyalist ambushes which had dogged the Derry march, it was decided, apart from a demonstration and march in Lurgan, to go by bus to Newry and from there march across the border and on to Dublin. The march through the Republic of Ireland was to take place over the Easter holiday and thereby gain as much publicity as possible, as it would coincide with the traditional Easter Rising commemoration parade through Dublin city centre.

In Lurgan, however, the participants were told by the RUC that their proposed march through the town had been banned. A token march was started from where they were assembled but when this was blocked by rows of policemen someone suggested a sit-down and within minutes the road was a melee of marchers and RUC. A dozen of the would-be marchers were bundled into police vans, one girl's screams as she was being dragged away adding to the confusion. Some of the remaining marchers retreated to the hall where they had been intending to stay the night, but which was soon packed with outraged local people. Yet while the local people were pouring into the hall to find out what was happening, most of the PD leaders were outside arguing with the police. Unknown to them, among the marchers in the hall were a number of the English anarchists who were now exhorting the local people to burn this, burn that, destroy the police station – and anything else they could think of.

When the PD members learnt of this they rushed back to calm things down. There followed a situation in which the Belfast anarchists were arguing and glaring at the English anarchists, the English accusing the Belfast ones of a lack of revolutionary spirit, the BAG members retaliating that the English hadn't a clue about the dangers of sectarian violence and that they had 'better wise up' for the rest of the march.

Finally a compromise was achieved with the local people: a six-man delegation would hand in a petition complaining about 'police brutality' and demand the release of those arrested. But they soon returned to say that they hadn't been allowed into the station and that when the petition had been given to a District Inspector he immediately proceeded to crumple it up and throw it away. Tempers flared again and the meeting wavered from one extreme to another. The English anarchists sat smugly saying: "We told you so; what are you going to do now? You can't let the people down." The Belfast anarchists took the PD line which was to avoid anything which could lead to sectarian violence. Furthermore, they reasoned, it wouldn't be much use getting everyone arrested in the North when the purpose of the march was to highlight injustices in the South. Tempers gradually subsided and an uneasy peace returned.

The marchers eventually reached the border and in the no-man's-land just before the Irish customs post a meeting was held to explain to the gathered press the purpose of the march. The speeches were the same ones as had been delivered at previous meetings but this time one of the English anarchists jumped up and exclaimed:

> Not all of us are here for a 32-county workers' republic; not all of us are here for the sake of James Connolly – some of are anarchists and we are against all governments, all republics!

PD members, anarchist and non-anarchist alike, were aghast. Under attack from the Belfast anarchists as well as the socialists and Connollyites, the English anarchists kept a subdued silence,

but as the march proceeded, verbal arguments grew in intensity and it was obvious that emotions were coming to a boiling-point.

The case of the English anarchists was put as follows:

> We came over here because we'd been asked to take part in a march where all shades of left-wing opinion were meant to be represented, and time after time, and public meeting after public meeting, all we've heard is the same old guff – "Forward to the Workers' Republic! Forward to the fulfilment of James Connolly's hopes!" You can't sit back and take that rubbish for very long.

The Belfast anarchist view was:

> We wanted a united, PD march, and we saw nothing basically wrong with the speeches about the 32-county workers' republic. After all, Connolly had syndicalist ideals, so why not mention him?

But hindsight changes many things. One BAG member had this to say:

> The more I think about it, the more I realise that, to some extent, the English comrades were right. We had moved away from our anarchist ideals; we were so immersed and involved in PD that talk of Connolly and a workers' republic seemed quite acceptable to us. But should a Connollyite Republic have been an anarchist objective? The English comrades, having only been in Ireland a few days had not experienced the same sequence of real, live political developments which had thrown the BAG and PD together as comrades, and they were dismayed to notice such a difference between what they deemed to be true anarchist goals and our own compromises with PD politics.

The crisis soon came to a head. Over halfway through the South, the marchers all gathered for a meeting in their accommodation for the night. Arguments quickly arose. PD speakers insisted that as it was Ireland they were all marching in, ideological differences should be submerged for the sake of the 'Irish revolutionary struggle' and that Connolly was a symbol of revolutionary socialism, so obviously all the speakers had mentioned him and his ideals. The English anarchists retorted that as a sizeable contingent of the marchers were anarchists, they didn't see why the march necessarily had to be seen as a 32-county workers' republic/James Connolly march. Michael Farrell and other PD leaders were accused of not even marching, but of coming behind in cars and only making appearances whenever the speeches had to be made. And, the English anarchists noted, except for one Belfast anarchist (John McGuffin), who had followed the PD line, no anarchists had been offered the task of speech-making that had occurred along the route of the march.

For their part, non-anarchist PD members now said that they objected to the large anarchist flags that had been carried at the head of the march because they believed that the press was labelling it as an 'anarchist march'. (Many of the anarchists were also sporting red and black neckerchiefs, hastily sown together in the days preceding the march, and modelled on those worn by the Spanish anarchists in 1936.) Back and forth went the accusations, with the Belfast anarchists sitting dismayed and confused in the middle. The meeting was eventually postponed

and the anarchists (Belfast and English) retired upstairs to hold their own meeting. At first voices demanded a separate march and an end to any association with the PD one. As one irate English anarchist complained: "If they want a 32-county march, let them have it, and we'll see how many are on it!" However, voices of compromise prevailed and the meeting came to the conclusion that, while the anarchists' seeds of discontent were justified, this was no time to fall out, a compromise must be reached. This was finally achieved an hour later at a full meeting of the marchers.

One other notable event occurred (or, rather, did not occur) at this time. While some of the marchers were sorting out their sleeping arrangements BAG member John McGuffin called their attention and made a proposal. It being Easter Sunday the following day his idea was for a small group to proceed in advance to Dublin (the march itself was not due to arrive in Dublin until Easter Monday), and mingle with the crowds waiting for the traditional Easter commemoration parade to pass. Then, just as ageing President de Valera would be taking the salute from outside the GPO, the group would walk straight into the front of the parade and produce concealed placards attacking both the Northern and Southern states. It was acknowledged that for such an affront those involved could expect a severe beating by the Irish Army and the Garda Síochána – maybe not in front of the TV cameras, but soon enough afterwards. (The Irish government was to abandon this commemorative parade a few years later.) 10

Those gathered to hear McGuffin's proposal agreed in principle as long as he could get at least 20 marchers to support it. However, as many marchers were not even in the room and most of those who were present were by that stage exhausted and more concerned with finding somewhere comfortable to lay their sleeping bags, the proposal just failed to reach that figure and the idea had to be abandoned. It was a missed opportunity many later regretted, especially when they saw what an anticlimax their arrival in Dublin turned out to be.

The march proceeded. At a meeting on the outskirts of Dublin, the question of flags arose again. A leading PD member from Derry took the floor:

> Comrades, the red flag is a flag I'm proud to associate with, and in certain circumstances I'm prepared to walk behind the black flag. But I believe that now is the time for neither. I think that we should only have the Starry Plough flying above us as we enter Dublin, the flag of the Workers' Republic.

Argument immediately erupted again. The Belfast anarchists sat dismayed and worried. Once again, they could understand both sides of the argument and were uncertain how to reach. However, mainly due to them a compromise was reached. The 'People's Democracy' banner would be carried at the front of the march, and all other flags were to be carried no further forward than ten ranks from the front.

As already noted, the march ended in anticlimax. Most irritating – to anarchists and PD members alike – was the way in which waiting Republicans in Dublin tried to manipulate the proceedings. Some of them even tried to get the marchers to parade through Dublin in strict military lines, rather than sprawl across the road in typical anarchic fashion. Needless to say, they were told where to put their request.

When it was over the English anarchists departed for home, leaving the Belfast anarchists more than just a little perturbed over what events had brought to light. From this stage onwards, a palpable sense of disillusionment was evident among the BAG members. One by one its members drifted away from PD meetings, but always with a feeling of guilt. One member recalled:

> None of us said out loud, "We are leaving PD", because it seemed to be the wrong thing to do. And although we never attended PD meetings any more, we marched alongside them when political developments motivated us to be active again. PD was still the only organisation we felt we could ally with. We certainly wanted nothing to do with any of the various Republican organisations.

By contrast, a few BAG members from West Belfast did revert to their area's traditional Republicanism. One explained:

> I really like the philosophy of anarchism; there is something about it that appeals to me more than any other. The problem is that my area is being smashed up on a daily basis by the British Army: just the other night a passing patrol smashed my granny's front windows as they walked past – just for a laugh! In such a situation anarchism seems a luxury. Our area needs to be defended, and the only ones who are capable of doing that are the IRA.

A small number of BAG members stayed in PD, but between them and the ones who had left, an ever-widening gulf was growing.

As for the BAG itself, it was as good as dead. At its first meetings, and at the mass PD meetings held in Queen's University Student Union, BAG members had managed to regularly sell 150 copies of *Freedom*. This number had gradually withered away until finally only private subscriptions remained, and eventually most of those elapsed.

Events had moved fast. Hardly had the BAG been formed in 1968 than it was confronted by an increasingly active socio-political struggle, and found its energies subsumed within the most radical organisation directing that struggle, the PD. None of its members had doubted this move at the time, but when the first doubts appeared, it was, in effect, too late. The group members were now isolated from each other as, firstly, membership of PD had caused a rift among them, and, secondly, few of them believed that the BAG itself was a viable group to confront the increasingly brutal situation developing on the streets.

But for the PD too, time was also running out. With the re-emergence of the IRA, the whirlwind of events now bypassed groups like the PD and CRA (Civil Rights Association). The PD's efforts to find a role within the 'struggle' – especially its misplaced attempt at linkage with the Provisionals through the NRC (Northern Resistance Committee) – only alienated still further any of its remaining libertarian supporters. The PD, partly through the force of events and partly by design, had become so identified with the nationalist/republican side that it was sucked along in a web of opportunism. Its membership steadily dropped, until only a handful remained.

Belfast Libertarian Group 1973–74

By 1972, the Belfast Anarchist Group was essentially defunct. A half dozen individuals endeavoured to keep the group together, calling meetings now and then, but few attended. Then, in March 1973, this small core group issued a press statement to local newspapers, denying claims in the English press that the IRA were being aided by anarchists. The full statement read:

> The Belfast Anarchist Group refutes recent accusations from the English police that the Provisional IRA are being aided by Anarchist groups. Anarchist groups, both

> here and in Britain, have continuously refused to support any group that hasn't the interests of the ordinary people at heart, but instead keeps itself in existence through authoritarian means and nationalist ideology (whether Irish nationalists like the IRA or Ulster nationalists like the UDA). Anarchists support the struggles of the ordinary people to control their own destiny, whether Protestant or Catholic, white or black. And while we realise that social and political conditions make the rise of such groups as the IRA and UDA almost inevitable, nevertheless although these people rise *from* the people they can't be considered to be fighting *for* the people. The conditions that divide the working class are perpetuated by these groups through their inability or refusal to escape the trap of nationalism and sectarianism.

One former BAG member, by now a PD stalwart, reacted furiously:

> You can't condemn the Provos, even if you don't necessarily agree with them – after all, they're the only ones who are killing British soldiers!

This stance astonished the small group of BAG members. The Provisionals' 'armed struggle' – wedded to a purely nationalist agenda – seemed to be sucking many radical individuals along in its wake, and the purely internationalist and socialist or libertarian ideals many PD and BAG members had once shared seemed to have crumbled in the process. But it was a final comment from our irate comrade which led to the need for a change of name:

> Your small group had no right to put out a statement on behalf of the Belfast Anarchist Group; you should have convened a full meeting.

And this was at a time when all efforts to convene BAG meetings had proven futile! In response, those half-dozen BAG members now formed the Belfast Libertarian Group (BLG). Its purpose was to maintain an anarchist/libertarian socialist voice in the political situation, no matter how small it might be. Disillusioned with PD – and never 'illusioned' about the Republican movement in the first place – they wanted to create a forum and a vehicle for the promotion of libertarian socialist ideals.

The BLG's first venture was a series of silk-screened posters – five altogether, commonly headed 'Know Your Enemy'. The five targeted 'enemies' were: (1) the Army, (2) the Courts, (3) Big Business, (4) Sectarianism, and (5) the Churches. When posters 1, 2 and 3 were ready for distribution the BLG was approached by members of the Official Republican movement who expressed approval and offered to put up hundreds in Catholic/Nationalist areas.

Here was the group's first dilemma. Should they accept assistance from a group which was listed among those they were meant to be criticising? However, whatever they thought of co-operation with Republicans, one fact was clear – they couldn't possibly put up that amount of posters, especially in IRA-dominated areas. So they warily accepted the offer. Then a problem soon arose. Seemingly, some Provisional IRA supporters were going around Andersonstown ripping down the posters, possibly because they didn't want the Stickies (Officials) to gain any local advantage in the propaganda field. The BLG's contact in the Officials commented:

> Give us more of the posters! The Provies are ripping them down so we're going to put them up again – and stand guard beside them if we have to!

It was bad enough to be cooperating with Republicans, but to be caught up in part of their incessant feuding! The BLG was confused as to what to do. Putting up the posters was a time-consuming task for such a small group, let alone producing them.

Their own attempt to put up the posters in Protestant Sandy Row had ended when local people reported them to the RUC and they were picked up and temporarily detained. The Republicans remained the only ones able to put up the posters on a large scale. Even PD members asked for, and received, hundreds of the posters.

But now an even more serious problem arose. Poster number 5, attacking the Churches, was finally in production. The BLG knew that the Official Republicans had been claiming the posters as their own – how would they react when they saw it?

When their Official contact did see it he looked quite alarmed and asked the group not to do anything with it until he got back to them. He returned the next day, looking extremely worried: "I've been told to tell you that we can't put that poster up. We've been seen putting all the others up, so people will assume they originated with us. And we can't be associated with any attack on the churches." Somewhat ominously, he added that he had been instructed to warn the group that *they* were "not going to be allowed" to put up any either.

Paths had been crossed which, in one BAG member's opinion, were 'getting dangerous'. However, rather than, as the Officials requested, continue producing posters 1, 2, 3 and 4, production was ended. Some two dozen of the offending poster No. 5 were put up in an act of defiance, and then all remaining stock was destroyed.

Another BLG venture crossed similarly dangerous paths. They decided to produce a pamphlet, entitled *Ireland, Dead or Alive?* , which it was hoped would stimulate an ongoing debate at a grassroots level. After stating that Ireland was a "land of old bones, trapped in inherited ideas", it heavily criticised Capitalism, Unionism, Republicanism and Nationalism. Some individuals close to PD immediately expressed disapproval. But the reaction from the Provisionals was more menacing. A message was passed though a former BAG member who was still in contact with the Provisionals [indeed, a few years later he was to join Sinn Féin]. He was instructed to inform [the author]:

> Tell your mate that if he writes anything like that again, he'll get his knees ventilated!

The BLG found itself unable to expand its small membership. Those former BAG members who were approached and asked to give their support took one of three positions. The handful who were still fixated by the ongoing 'armed struggle' expressed hostility, claiming that the BLG's 'message' was divisive. Another section felt that the BLG's efforts to engender a new debate were doomed to failure because "the Republicans have their areas sown up – that's the reality – and we have to work within that reality". Finally, there were those who were so disillusioned by the way events had developed, especially the escalating bloodshed and sectarian violence, that they had no desire for any further political engagement.

Perhaps inevitably, by early 1974 the BLG too had disbanded.

Postscript

Around the same time that I received the Provisionals' threat to kneecap me, I was accosted by two UVF men near my home, who warned me: "We're watching you, you bastard: we're going to

get you one of these days!" However, when I complained about the Provisionals' threat to leading members of PD – who used to meet in Kelly's Cellars every Saturday – the response I received was even more disillusioning: "We've told you this before: it's your own fucking fault – the two extremes have their areas sown up between them, there's nothing we can do about it." Nothing? We had encouraged ordinary people to come out onto the streets with fiery talk of working-class unity. Where were those dreams now? They appeared to have been shattered on the twin rocks of the IRA's renewed and bloody campaign and the equally brutal Loyalist reaction.

Feeling impotent in the face of unfolding events my wife and I found work in Amsterdam and with the money we saved there we travelled overland across Asia to Australia, where we worked for a period, before returning via the Trans-Siberian Railway. When we arrived home I still wanted to confront the agony Northern Ireland was facing. But how? I reflected back on a challenging encounter I had had with working-class Protestants in Sandy Row, which had made me realise that rather than being fixated with an *end-point* – working-class unity, libertarian socialism, etc. – I should focus my energies on a *process* that could assist people to move forward.

I have always had a deep interest in the largely untold story of what 'ordinary' people accomplished during periods of radical social change: such as in France 1789, Mexico 1905, Russia 1917, Spain 1936, Hungary 1956. In most history books – dominated by an academic fixation with political parties and 'leaders' – not only were the creative achievements of 'the masses' either ignored or sidelined, but so too were their voices. However, if you searched the historical material deeply enough, those voices slowly began to emerge. One recurrent thread which linked different historical episodes was that they had often been preceded by, or had given rise to, an intense and often radical grassroots debate. This debate had taken different forms: the radical pamphleteering which emerged during the French Revolution; the energetic discussions in the Spanish working-class community centres *(Casas del Pueblo)* during the 1930s; or the café debates which flowered during Czechoslovakia's 'Prague Spring' in 1968. In the early 1970s in Belfast and Derry radical discussion papers and small pamphlets *had* surfaced sporadically, but had been limited in their impact.

I decided to produce a series of readable and accessible pamphlets, which would hopefully create a vehicle for grassroots debate. And so my 'Island Pamphlets' series was launched, based around informal small-group discussions which were termed 'Community Think Tanks'. Even at an early stage interest in the pamphlets at a grassroots level far exceeded my expectations, and, much to my satisfaction, discussion as to the topics which would be covered by the series increasingly originated not with me but with individuals and groups within the community who realised the potential of such a format. In effect, the pamphlet series had quickly become the vehicle for debate and dialogue I had hoped it would.

The pamphlet series was a world away from my 1973 document. *Ireland, Dead or Alive?* was rhetoric-filled and imbued with the self-certainties of youth. In the Think Tank pamphlets, however, I strive to allow the participants to speak for themselves, and I refrain from passing judgement. Assisting the disempowered to have their voices heard came naturally to me, but back in 1973 I could never have imagined that I would also be sitting down with Loyalists, Republicans, Orangemen – and many others with whom I have fundamental disagreements – and assisting them to not only articulate their views but engage in inter- and cross-community dialogue.

Initially I was denied assistance by the major funding organisations, and early titles were often published at my own expense. Although Belfast's main bookshops refused to stock the pamphlets I managed to establish an extensive distribution network, and soon had over 120 community

organisations and key individuals on my list. When, thanks to the support of Farset Youth & Community Development Project, EU funding finally materialised, it allowed for 2000 copies of each pamphlet title to be widely disseminated, free of charge. To date, 116 titles have been produced, containing within them 1.4 million words of oral testimony, and 196,000 copies have been distributed around the community network in Northern Ireland, and beyond. All the titles are listed on the following website, from which many can be downloaded: cain.ulst.ac.uk

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