



EXPLORING NORTHERN PROTESTANT IDENTITIES & CULTURE IN A SHARED FUTURE

THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF IRELAND - DERRY

**Report of the
Derry People's Assembly,
13th September 2023**



INTRODUCTION

The Derry sectoral event organised by the Commission on the Future of Ireland took place on 13 September 2023 in the Verbal Arts Theatre.

It was entitled: “Exploring Northern Protestant Identities and Culture in a Shared Future.”

Three women from the unionist section of our community – all community based activists - participated in the event. They were: Catherine Pollock – who chaired the event - Catherine Cooke and Alison Wallace.

The opening remarks were made by Pádraig Delargy, one of two Sinn Féin’s MLAs for Foyle. He welcomed everyone to the event and then handed over to Declan Kearney, Sinn Féin’s National Chairperson and MLA for South Antrim. Declan is also the chairperson of the Sinn Féin’s Commission on the Future of Ireland.

Declan Kearney said, “It is important going forward, that we as republicans, not only internalise what we hear, but that we use it as a pathway for opening up new opportunities to expand this discussion. ”

“In turn, this will enable us to become much more sensitised, aware, and informed about the kind of debate that is going to be required, that will lay the foundations for a new inclusive and agreed Ireland. We may never agree on the past, but we can plan a better future together”.



Catherine Pollock then introduced herself and the panellists, Catherine Cooke and Allison Wallace.

Catherine Pollock is from Drumahoe, but currently resides in the Fountain area of Derry and has been a community activist for over two decades.

Catherine Cooke has been a community activist for 28 years and works in supporting local women and women's groups.

Allison Wallace is from Newbuildings in Derry, where she is a community worker with a special interest in educational attainment, particularly in Protestant schools.



KEY THEMES

- ▶▶ The importance of unionist traditions
- ▶▶ Leadership in the Unionist community
- ▶▶ Perception of Irish culture as a threat
- ▶▶ Place of the PUL community in local government structures
- ▶▶ Cross community engagement at a local level

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Catherine Pollock

Catherine Pollock told the audience that she knows there is a need for a better and wider understanding of Protestant identity and culture and what it means to be a Protestant. She feels there are conflicting narratives around this.

Catherine explained that it wasn't easy for any of the panellists to take up the invitation to the event and that it has left herself and the other ladies open

to criticism from within the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) communities, however, they are hoping to keep the lines of engagement open.



Catherine Cooke

Catherine Cooke introduced herself and said that she was "glad to be here". Catherine gave a short history of her Derry origins and told how her family eventually moved to the Waterside area, like a lot of Protestants at the time. She said that nobody has a choice of what family you are born into but "I am what I am, and I make no apology". Catherine

said she is very proud to be the first female community worker in the City, but that she came up against some criticism from her own male-dominated community.

Catherine has also played a major role within the marching bands scene and played the accordion in the John Adam's band. She stated that she loves the 12 July events and watching the parades. She said it is a nice way to meet up with people. Catherine asserted that: "I equate going to the parades with going to a GAA match. We meet up and speak to other families". She said parades and bands are a big part of her life, with her husband, grandson and daughters all taking part. She said her mum used to knit Union Jack cardigans for the parades, she said, "like you do for St Patrick's Day".

Catherine told the meeting that she was in Gerry O'Hara's company a while back and he made a "flippant" remark about the bands joining in with the Fleadh. So, the outcome of this was that the Londonderry Bands

Association was approached and Catherine feels that it was a good idea for the bands to take part in the Fleadh. However she said: "You need to be in those situations for such actions to come about".



Alison Wallace

Alison Wallace told the meeting that she has no links to the bands; however, her daughter plays in an Ulster Scots pipe band, which is "completely different". Alison got her daughter involved in this so as she could learn about her identity and tradition in a more positive way. She said that these pipe bands are not male-dominated, unlike the other bands. Alison did wish to express that she did however have very fond memories of her Dad marching. She still attends the parades and loves to meet up with people she hasn't seen in a while.





The panel discussion

Both Catherine Cooke and Catherine Pollock encouraged the audience to watch the short documentary called 'For the Love of Bands'. They both agreed that the bands are a great opportunity for the young people to learn about and to play musical instruments and that they also keep young people off the streets. Alison said that the bands are great intergenerational space where tradition is passed on.

Allison stated that: "There is no positive leadership within Unionism. There are too many negative voices being heard." She is also concerned that there are too many preconceptions about 'band culture'. Allison said there obviously is a certain element to it, but not all.

Allison believes that: "more positive spin was needed around Unionism". She stated: "Protestant people don't want to engage with anything Irish as it has been politicised". She said there is a history of Irish dancing in Protestant communities; however, due to the perceptions of the PUL communities, it has been lost.

Allison stated that: "Irishness is seen as a threat to Britishness and I'm sorry that this has happened." She then said: "the main challenge is positive leadership. I am fed up with men shouting 'No'."

Allison went on to state that she is not bothered about the Windsor Framework as she is more concerned that her daughter is waiting on an ASD assessment for the past 2 years, due to the stalemate and no functioning government department.

Catherine Cooke said she has issues with the D'Hondt selection of a unionist mayor and that she's also concerned that there are only eight unionist councillors on Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC) out of a total of 40.

Allison was in agreement with Catherine on these issues and feels that decision not to allocate money to the King's coronation celebrations was also a bad idea. There is a worry that the PUL community won't be heard at civic level.

Catherine Pollock was also in agreement.

Catherine Cooke stated that a lot of things from Good Friday Agreement still haven't happened. People are still segregated in housing. She went on to say: "We will know if it's working if Catholics start living in Tullyally and Protestants are living in Creggan".

However she stated: "I can't see that ever happening".

She said that she sees republicans as being very confident, but it's not like that for her community. She went on to acknowledge that a lot of people present in the room have put in a lot of work to get where we are.

Catherine Pollock said that she's concerned that: "We aren't talking enough locally, but rather globally".

Allison was in agreement and stated that we do need to be more engaging and more diverse. We need to get the young people more involved instead of "wheeling out the usual suspects, we need to find out what they want for their future."

Catherine Cooke acknowledged that Sinn Fein used to have an Engagement Officer (Martina Anderson) and that this allowed for and facilitated conversations. Maybe this is something to think about again.

Allison said that we've moved past the peace building stage and that tougher conversations need to be had around a united Ireland or new Ireland. She doesn't feel that the PUL communities are ready for this and that things will have to move slowly, but it will be extremely difficult.

Catherine Cooke then stated: "You may want a united Ireland, but I definitely don't. We may never have a united Ireland, but rather 'a united isles'."



Audience contributions

A member of the audience then stated: "I want a united Ireland, but the whole island needs to change and the more the PUL community ignore this, then the less they'll have if it does actually happen".

Allison is concerned about being seen and heard in a united Ireland and also wondered if Michelle O'Neill will be a First Minister for all as she says she will.

Catherine Pollock then acknowledged that Michelle has made big gestures with handshakes and attending the Queen of England's funeral.

Another audience member acknowledged that it was great to see an all-women panel, but she was hoping that not everything should be focused on economics etc, but also on climate issues. Allison Wallace stated that young people today are very clued in on climate change.

Catherine Cooke noted she was in Limerick recently and was in conversation with a gentleman who stated that the South of Ireland is experiencing the same issues as the North with drugs, poverty, and homelessness - so political leadership is required across the island.

Catherine then went on to say that she was delighted to see so many young females elected to Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC), including her daughter. She also stated that: "Northern Ireland is a place for everyone and as much as I am engaging here, I am not convinced that a united Ireland is for me".

An audience member then said that, in 2013, the city was in a very good place, but he feels it has since moved back, especially around the decision of the mayoral selection issues and also not awarding the PUL communities money for King Charles' coronation parties. He also asked if young people were softening around the idea of united Ireland.

Allison Wallace said she felt sad for young people as they are constantly being told that their culture and identity are being eroded and that this is being pedalled out across working class Protestant communities. She said it is creating a vacuum and that the "hardest to reach, will be the hardest to convince".

Catherine Cooke said that Covid had played a major part in driving people back into their communities and also the rioting over the Irish sea border. She stated that there is not enough grassroots leadership. She said that maybe the bands forum could have a role to play there.

A member of the audience then commended the ladies for attending. The gentleman said that he has always been proud of Derry's talks around parading and Catherine Cooke agreed with this.

Another member of the audience then welcomed and thanked the ladies and reassured them that Derry is also their city. He shared Catherine's

hopes of Protestants and Catholics living in same estates and extended an invite to watch a match at Celtic Park as he hopes that Irish culture and sports can be enjoyed by all.

In their closing statements, both Catherine Cooke and Allison Wallace encouraged people to reach out and speak to others, find opportunities to listen. "We need more of this".

CONCLUSION

The event was very informative and the three women spoke eloquently of the concerns and of the diversity of opinions and traditions that exist within unionism.

Speaking afterward the Chairperson of the event, Catherine Pollock said that she hoped those who attended would begin to understand the "diversity of feeling, traditions and culture among the unionist communities."

The conversation ranged across how people can engage and move forward in civic and political conversations, on the environment, a Citizens' Assembly on education, the marching bands and much more.

Catherine Cooke hoped that what they said would provide food for thought: "I came in feeling very nervous but leave feeling very good." Alison Wallace said: "People listened and were very respectful." She described it as a very positive experience.

We need more of these events, of these conversations. Irish republicans and nationalists must listen carefully and attentively to what our Protestant/Unionists neighbours are saying in all of their diversity as part of planning for a future that is inclusive and shared and democratic.



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