Coiste na n-Iarchimí, (the Irish Republican Army ex-prisoners network) and the Limitations of Hybrid Peacebuilding in Ireland

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Introduction

For over 30 years, the conflict in Northern Ireland seemed for many to be beyond resolution. Known as 'the Troubles', it was considered a classic example of the intractability of ethno-political conflicts such as in Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, and South Africa, and the peace process that emerged from it gave great hope that other conflicts might also be transformed by learning from the Irish experience.[1]

Yet although successful levels of conflict transformation have taken place, there remains an uneasy peace between the two main ethno-political groups, the Irish Catholic, Nationalist, Republican community (CNR) and the British Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist community (PUL), and a final resolution to this ethno-political conflict seems as far away as ever. This study outlines some of the successes and limitations of the hybrid model peace process in Northern Ireland and looks at the role of IRA ex-prisoner grassroots peacebuilding and its potential to push the peace process beyond its current limitations.

Through interviews with IRA ex-prisoners and observation of their peacebuilding work, this study finds that IRA ex-prisoners are engaged in significant amounts of grassroots peacebuilding work which could prove valuable in moving Northern Ireland beyond an unstable conflict *settlement* and bringing about a final, more enduring conflict *resolution*.

Interviews took place face-to-face in West Belfast during February and March of 2020. Initially, Coiste's coordinator provided contact details for potential interviewees and also selected interviewees and set up times and locations for interviews to take place. Some interviewees were identified and

contacted by the researcher independently of Coiste's management structure, whilst others were recommended by interviewees. All interviewees were male IRA ex-prisoners (unsuccessful efforts were made to contact female IRA ex-prisoners) who remain active Republicans through membership of Sinn Fein, the political party closely associated with the IRA, are involved in the Coiste network and have been involved in their outreach work. All interviewees spent time in HMP Maze, otherwise known as Long Kesh or the H Blocks by Republicans. The interviewees were convicted of a range of offences including the killing or attempted killing of police or army personnel, bombing, membership of the IRA, and intelligence gathering. Interviews were initially limited to one hour by Coiste, but almost all ranged from one hour to one and a half hours or more, and some interviewees consented to second and third interviews. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on life story narratives and investigating reasons for and the personal effects of engaging in peacebuilding work. They were transcribed and analysed by the sole researcher responsible for the study.

Concepts of peacebuilding

Peacebuilding initiatives can be classified along a conceptual spectrum which ranges from *liberal* to *local* peacebuilding, with the concept of *hybridity* being an amalgamation of both. Following the end of the Cold War, the international community was challenged with new security issues including intrastate conflict. Spearheading the international efforts to deal with these new challenges the United Nations, guided by the ideas in its Agenda for Peace[2] and Brahami Report,[3] engaged in several conflict interventions in places such as Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Framed by Western ideas of liberal democratic norms, the rule of law, and human rights, all of which provide conditions for capitalist market economies to flourish,[4] these interventions included diplomacy, peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding,[5] but they more often proved unsuited to the job resulting in criticisms of the liberal model. Mac Ginty criticises liberal peacebuilding for its focus on elites to the detriment of grassroots, accusing it of being technocratic and top-down, failing to include the preferences and contextual knowledge of local actors.[6] He also criticises it for being "operationalized in highly standardized formats that leave little space for

alternative approaches" and that it employs "set templates" in applying reforms such as peace negotiations, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), civil service reform, and good governance, leaving interventions in places like in East Timor, Bougainville, Sri Lanka and Mozambique looking more or less the same and unable to respond properly to local needs.[7]

The *local turn* in peacebuilding began in the early 1990s with the work of John Paul Lederach[8] and has been developed further by writers such as Mac Ginty and Richmond.[9] Lederach argued for conflict transformation whereby local people act as the primary authors of peacebuilding in a bid to create sustainability by rebuilding relationships within societies through reconciliation, establishing infrastructures and processes, and increasing human capital. Mac Ginty and Richmond also place emphasis on the local in terms of local agency, context, and dealing with local partners,[10] arguing that locally driven peacebuilding is a form of resistance against dominant (often neo-colonial) discourses and practices of the liberal, top-down peacebuilding model.

The hybrid model is an attempt to merge the basic tenets of the liberal model with the local turn by advocating a mediation "between local and international norms, institutions, law, right, needs and interests," which implies, "that legitimacy and agency rest partly at the local level, meaning both state and society,"[11] and by doing so, generates a positive hybrid peace, "rooted in accommodation, reconciliation, emancipation, autonomy and a sense of liberation."[12] The hybrid approach is now the primary model being employed by international actors across the globe, evidence of a realization within the field of the need for local purchase in peace processes in order for positive forms of peace to take hold. Despite problems with the hybrid model,[13] Northern Ireland is widely seen as one of the most successful recent examples of global peacebuilding,[14] and one that has incorporated both elite and grassroots peacebuilding.

Yet, the success of the hybrid system in Northern Ireland is limited in one very significant regard. For the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (PUL) community, it provided a final settlement to the conflict in the shape of local governmental arrangements which, for them, solidifies Northern Ireland's place in the U.K., but for Republicans, it does not deal with what they believe to be the central cause of the conflict, Britain's continued 'occupation' of the north east of the

island and the sectarian division they believe it has fostered, but that it offers them a peaceful route to independence from Britain, rather than continued 'armed struggle'. The Northern Irish peace process does not deliver for Irish Republicans what Richmond, above, points out is a central tenet of the local turn in peacebuilding, that is, "emancipation, autonomy and a sense of liberation." Furthermore, within the current context of rising Catholic Nationalist, Republican (CNR) political power and Brexit threatening to partially decouple Northern Ireland from Britain as a result of the withdrawal agreement, between the EU and the UK (insert this phrase between 'agreement' and the comma) rising anxieties within the PUL community threaten to further destabilise the already tenuous peace.

Hybrid peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

The Belfast Agreement is often hailed as a central element of the success of peacebuilding in this conflict, establishing new political institutions within Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between the Republic of Ireland and the British government. As a result of negotiations by the political elites, there is a devolved administration, based on Arend Lijphart's consociational model of democracy,[15] with mandatory cross-community voting on certain major decisions and a power-sharing executive, whose ministerial posts are allocated amongst the parties using a form of party list proportional representation, the d'Hont method.[16]

For the IRA, it represented the sort of alternative to its armed struggle that it had been looking for, ending the possibility of a return to Unionist domination in a local parliament, as well as having the guarantee of a formal role for the Republic of Ireland in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland, and the normalization of policing and security (SSR), which saw the withdrawal of the British army from the streets, the disbandment of the hated Ulster Defense Regiment,[17] and the rebranding of the Royal Ulster Constabulary as the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it enshrined in law the right of all citizens to be recognised as being Irish or British, as well as a commitment by the British government to withdraw from Ireland, if majorities of the people in the north and south were to vote for it. In October 2003, the IRA undertook the final act of decommissioning its arsenal, and in July 2005 it announced the

formal end to its campaign.

DDR formed an important part of the Agreement with all remaining paramilitary prisoners from organisations who were on ceasefire, about 500 individuals, being released from prison. This measure was considered necessary for those armed groups to bring their members and supporters along in the peace process.

The establishment of the political institutions and the absence of the serious violence that crippled the society for decades, allowed for an increase in the kinds grassroots peacebuilding work that had been ongoing even during the armed conflict period, as well as more substantive work afterwards. Myriad state organisations, NGOs, and voluntary groups had been working to establish cross-community dialogue and cooperation during the violent period, and after the Agreement and the subsequent large injection of funding, a range of civil society groups got involved in peacebuilding at grassroots level. Money from the British and Irish governments, the European Union's Peace Program, and from the International Fund for Ireland, has been allocated to projects including infrastructure building, regeneration, employment initiatives, education, training, mediation, and restorative justice programs, which have transformed many of those areas of deprivation most affected by the conflict, particularly inner-city, working-class Nationalist and Loyalist areas of Belfast and out-lying towns and areas along the border. Jarman points out that a lot of these programmes focused on the softer end of peacebuilding work, which includes building relationships and establishing trust between both individuals and communities, including between former combatants.[18]

The deficiencies of the hybrid model in Northern Ireland

Despite these positives, Northern Ireland is only enjoying a *relative* peace, rather than a *permanent solution*. Small, but potentially deadly armed groups remain active, and the region has suffered regular ethnopolitical unrest. Although there has been some softening of the boundaries between them,[19] the two communities remain deeply divided in many ways, which holds the potential for future, increased conflict. At the end of the violent conflict, 17 of the 39 towns in Northern Ireland were highly segregated, although they did contain a high percentage of the total population of the region,[20] and although

some level of residential integration has occurred between middle class Catholics and Protestants, over 90% of social housing remains highly segregated.[21] In a 2017 survey, it was found that many people still prefer to send their children to own-religion schools, and that this had actually increased by 2019.[22] Furthermore, a survey in 2016 found that over half of those living along the numerous 'peace walls' that separate many Catholic and Protestant interface areas did not want the walls removed, with 78% believing that sectarian violence would occur as a result.[23]

Since the signing of the Agreement, there has been regular outbreaks of sectarian violence on interfaces over issues such as political/cultural parades and commemorations. In December 2012 there was a week of rioting across Northern Ireland by members of the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (PUL) community following a decision by Belfast City Council to reduce the number of days the British Union Jack would be flown from City Hall. The issue of contentious annual parades by the PUL-based Orange Order is never far away as CNR communities react to these parades skirting or even entering their areas. So, despite the Belfast Agreement's success in providing a route out of violent conflict, there are limitations to its ability to move beyond, what Burton calls, conflict *settlement* to conflict *resolution*, i.e. a permanent solution to the problem.[24] This settlement has merely resulted in the end of armed conflict. It has not provided a route out of the deep sectarian divisions that persist, and which will continue to threaten the peace that has been achieved do date.

Herein lies a fundamental flaw in the Belfast Agreement and which renders it unable to deliver a lasting peace - it was a settlement, not a resolution. This remains particularly so for Irish Republicans, who have not given up their goal of a fully independent Ireland. For them, the Agreement was only ever a steppingstone that enabled them to move onto the next stage of their struggle. Ryan[25] points to four problems with the Agreement. Firstly, it did not confirm the final constitutional status of Northern Ireland, which remains in limbo, as the CNR community, growing in size and political strength and confidence, continues to push for constitutional change. Secondly, being a consociational arrangement, it inherits well-known flaws in the model: that it deepens cultural divisions by encoding them into its structures; establishes complex arrangements that can easily become paralysed; and concentrates too much on political elites, not properly engaging the grassroots. Thirdly, its failure to help

those at the grassroots level to move beyond sectarianism, and lastly, it does not have the mechanisms to neutralise rejectionists and spoilers[26] who would threaten its success. Ryan also points to evidence to suggest that consociationalism in Northern Ireland has caused greater polarization, rather than less, the latter being what one might expect in the new conditions created by the ending of violent conflict. Following the signing of the Agreement, the more moderate SDLP and Ulster Unionist Party were overtaken in their respective camps by Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party.[27]

IRA ex-prisoners and local peacebuilding

There are two broad areas of IRA ex-prisoner peacebuilding activity, that which focuses on shoring up their own constituency base in support of the peace process and that which focuses on outreach with former enemies. The former is important in helping to secure the peace that has been ensured to date, and the latter is where IRA ex-prisoners could be providing an alternative peacebuilding approach which is working to overcome the limitations of the hybrid model and the peace process as a whole.

Working within - ex-prisoner self-help

According to Shirlow et al., ex-prisoners have three specific conflict transformation roles to play within their communities.[28] They (a) are involved in the transformation of attitudes and the infrastructural reconstruction of those communities and in the relationships between both communities (b) seek to influence policy for these areas but also to affect policy as it reflects on the welfare of former prisoners; (c) are more broadly involved in the creation of community narratives linked to current post-ceasefires political processes. The Coiste network, through a host of different activities, fulfills all of these roles to some degree.

With hundreds of IRA ex-prisoners having been released and dispersing throughout the island, many of them having served sentences in the 15-20 year range, Republicans realized that they needed to increase the resources available to them in order to help (insert between 'to' and 'with') with resettlement back into society, so they took advantage of the many new funding opportunities to

develop their prisoner support infrastructure.

IRA ex-prisoners formed *Coiste na n-Iarchimí* (Ex-prisoners' Committee) in 1998 in order to bring together and coordinate a group of fourteen IRA ex-prisoner groups from different geographical areas on matters such as funding and access to resources. There were not enough support structures for IRA prisoners leaving gaol except for voluntary services closely aligned to Sinn Fein offices, but which did not have the capacity to deal with the large numbers of prisoners being released under the early release scheme of the Agreement. The UK government's prisoners resettlement agencies, the Northern Ireland Agency for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), who do not distinguish between political and non-political ex-prisoners, are not acceptable to Republicans.[29] Republican prisoners had to interact with PBNI whilst in prison in order to coordinate with family and friends when organising visits. However, there were tensions between both agencies and ex-prisoners following release from prison.[30] Initial EU funding was secured that allowed for the employment of one full-time officer in each of the Coiste network's fourteen offices. Funding expanded under the EU's Peace I and Peace II programmes, and at one stage Coiste directly employed around 70 people across its network throughout the island of Ireland, including Monaghan, Kerry, Sligo, Letterkenny, Derry City, South Derry, its various Belfast offices, Dundalk, South Armagh, and Dublin.[31]

Newly released prisoners needed to know how to seek financial assistance, claim unemployment benefits, secure accommodation, identify job opportunities and apply for them, and how to secure their general well-being. Information from those in the various regional offices with knowledge and experience of how to do these things was sent to the Coiste head office in Belfast, and then it was distributed to all of the other regional offices to be shared amongst the entire IRA ex-prisoner community. In this way common approaches to these issues evolved within the Coiste network. Ex-prisoners trained as counsellors to provide emotional support for other ex-prisoners, and others became qualified trainers to help prepare their comrades for employment. Coiste offices also provide advice and support to those ex-prisoners who want to access courses and higher education.

According to the organisation, the majority of the offices in its network are not currently fully funded, and the vast majority of staff are now voluntary. Of

five staff in Coiste's head office in Belfast, only one is funded under the EU Peace IV programme. They say they are currently in rent arrears and can only continue to operate the office due to the understanding of their landlord. The Peace IV funding allows for the wages of the full-time officer, plus an additional 10% of her wage for office costs, which, they say does not cover the full costs of running the office. Funding is supplemented by income from a political tourism project that they operate in West Belfast, in which they show tourists around the area, giving them a political history of the place and the conflict, and which has, by chance, become an important outreach activity in their peacebuilding work.

Coiste also campaigns on behalf of political ex-prisoners who face many obstacles in their lives because of their prison records. This residual criminalisation results in many obstacles to successful resettlement. Despite there being strong anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland dealing with employment practices, that very legislation, specifically Section 2 (4) of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, explicitly permits refusal to employ those who support political violence:

> In this Order any reference to a person's political opinion does not include an opinion which consists of or includes approval or acceptance of the use of violence for political ends, connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland, including the use of violence for the purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear.[32]

Ex-prisoners also face problems in other areas, such as accessing mortgages/ loans, adopting children, international travel visas, pensions, and applying for PSV/HGV licenses, which are necessary for those who wish to drive public service vehicles or heavy goods vehicles. For example, at a Coiste event relating to these issues,[33] observed as part of this study, an ex-prisoner shared his experience of his two children being denied entry to the USA because of his conviction for IRA related offenses. More recently, it was announced that the British Government's Victims Payment scheme, which is designed to provide 'Troubles pensions' for people injured as a result of the conflict will exclude ex-prisoners.[34] The Coiste network is campaigning to have ex-prisoners who suffered as a result of the conflict included in the scheme. Coiste continues to

campaign with statutory agencies and through the courts to remove these obstacles for ex-prisoners.

Many prisoners, particularly those who had served long sentences, needed even basic advice about what to do to be able to simply function in society. For example, one interviewee reported being given a £21 unemployment benefit payment on his release in 1993, after serving a 16-year sentence, and although he had family to support him, others who left under the same circumstances did not have family support. Prisoners needed to know how to seek financial assistance, how to sign on for unemployment benefits, how to secure accommodation, how to look for work, how to apply for jobs, and then to secure their general well-being. One ex-prisoner who had served almost 20 years, reported needing help just to use a public telephone.[35] Outreach/support officers met prisoners outside prisons on their release. Ex-prisoners within the network trained as counsellors, and a counselling service was established to provide emotional and mental health support to those finding readjustment to their new life difficult and who may be falling into addiction. Other ex-prisoners gained qualifications as employment trainers to assist others preparing for employment. Coiste also offered help and support for those ex-prisoners who wanted to access courses in further and higher education.

In West Belfast, where the Coiste office is situated, one activist, whilst looking out of the Coiste office window, noticed some of the many political tourists who converge on the area throughout the year wandering seemingly aimlessly around the area. He suggested organising a tour company from the office to give such tourists guided political tours of the area, showing them various landmarks linked to events of the Troubles. The company, Coiste Irish Political Tours, now provides employment opportunities for upwards of fifteen IRA and UVF ex-prisoners.

Working without - IRA ex-prisoners outreach

Even before the end of the armed campaigns, Republicans were engaged in various initiatives which they recognised as forms of outreach. For example, one ex-prisoner, who served a life sentence, spoke of how before he was released from prison, it was decided that he would join Sinn Fein's Prisoner of War Department, a group within the political party dedicated to IRA prisoners'

issues, and get involved in a campaign to get release dates for other life sentence prisoners. As he explained:

> "I got out on the 21st of December '88 and I joined SF POW [Inn Fein's Prisoner of War] department the next day. I done my first press conference campaigning for lifers. And when the journalist asked the question, "Who are you campaigning for?",
> "I'm campaigning for lifers",
> "But which lifers are you campaigning for? Just Republican lifers or are you campaigning for Loyalist lifers as well?"
> So that was the first time, when your identity was challenged as a Republican, and you were saying, "Well, I can't be sectarian. I can't be hypocritical. So I have to campaign for all lifers, Loyalist and Republican, including the Loyalist who had been sentenced to 15 life sentences for killing my grandfather. So this is when you start to realise, it's a bit more complicated than what you thought. So when I did public meetings, especially in England, there would have been someone representing the Loyalist political prisoners and me presenting the Republicans, and that's when you realised we had more in common. So that's when this cross-community [work] starts, you know what I mean?"[36]

As a crucial peacebuilding role within the Republican community, Coiste supports the peace process by helping to shore up support from the ex-prisoner community and their families for the new political direction being taken by the Republican leadership, and in doing so mitigates against possible drift by ex-prisoners and others towards groups still committed to political violence. For instance, it is possible that a significant level of deprivation within the ex-prisoner community could give rise to some drifting towards active militant Republican splinter groups. The peace process must be seen to be improving the living conditions of those long-deprived communities for it to retain support. Coiste, through their efforts, fulfill this role. Coiste also offers opportunities for political and community engagement for ex-prisoners, and in doing so, provides them with a means to pursue their political objectives, as well as rebuilding the social and community networks that can help them construct successful lives after gaol.

The Coiste network also engages in significant amounts of peacebuilding work through outreach with former enemies in both the British state forces and Loyalist paramilitaries, and the PUL community in general. Given that ex-prisoners in general suffered significantly through their engagement with British forces and the penal system, this represented a very difficult situation for many activists. All of those interviewed for this research reported being subjected to brutality at the hands of the security forces and prisoner staff, with some having had friends and relatives killed, but as one leading ex-prisoner said, it was done "because it was the right thing to do."[37]

Some of this work has been done as part of initiatives facilitated by third-party agencies, such as the Prison to Peace initiative, a consortium of groups administered by the Community Foundation Northern Ireland charity, which included ex-prisoner groups from across the political spectrum. Through this initiative, ex-prisoners helped developed a learning resource for Local and Global Citizenship education for the Northern Ireland school curriculum. Based on the narratives of a number of ex-prisoners covering the themes of becoming involved in conflict, understanding the prison experience, and contributing to conflict transformation and community development, it saw ex-prisoners working to dissuade young people from engaging in any form of political violence, but also, through exposing young people to narratives they would not otherwise hear, increased understanding of the Other, and, therefore, worked to reduce sectarianism. Outside of Prison to Peace, Coiste continues this sort of outreach work voluntarily, more often with Loyalists or former police or British army.

Much of Coiste's outreach work is initiated by themselves. As a means of stopping and preventing the regular instances of interface violence between CNR and PUL residential areas in Belfast, in the late 1990s IRA ex-prisoners engaged with Loyalist paramilitary groups and organized a mobile phone network that allowed members of each group to coordinate on both sides of the interfaces to pull rioting youths back from the front lines. An IRA ex-prisoner who acted as a coordinator of the mobile phone network in West Belfast told of how he and other Republicans were able to build enduring relationships with Loyalist paramilitaries and others within the PUL community through this kind of work. He distributed around 30 phones to Republican activists, who were also given the phone numbers of Loyalists. In the event of interface trouble, both

sides were able to coordinate a response to bring it to an end.

As part of the shift away from political violence to non-violent political struggle, members of Coiste want to continue to engage in the Republican political objective of achieving Irish unity, and in doing so, the group offers ex-prisoners a vehicle to continue their political activism. This also helps to mitigate against any possible drift towards those Republican groups opposed to the peace process and who remain committed to political violence. Launched at a three-day workshop in October 2002, Coiste's EU funded 'Processes of Nation Building' project was aimed at Republican ex-prisoners "reaching out through dialogue to civic society."[38] As a continuation of Coiste's political education work, the initiative saw ex-prisoners engage with the Protestant community in the north and south, Unionists in the north, churches, political parties, the trade union movement, and the business community. Outlining the purposes of the initiative of Coiste Michael Culbert said it was:

> "to humanise us and our aims and objectives. Our aims and objectives were very much tied up in killing people, in other people's image ⋯ We had come to the conclusion that reform [of the state] would not be given, so, therefore, we had to go for revolution, in the broad terms, and that's why, basically, the tactics were to bomb and shoot the British state out of here, and that would include the irregular forces which they used also against our communities. So, that was that, until we came to a situation where there was an easier way."

But the Nation Building project had a more pointed goal. While the Republican leadership in Sinn Fein argued the case of a united Ireland on a national stage by engaging at an elite level with political and business leaders in the Protestant and Unionist community, the Nation Building project saw ex-prisoners engaging with Loyalists to reassure them that in the event of a united Ireland, there would be no reason to consider a return to violence. Built into the Belfast Agreement is a mechanism for referenda on the issue of Irish unity. If the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland believes there is the potential for a 'yes' vote for leaving the UK, they have the power to call such a poll:

> "⋯ [The referendum is] going to happen, so what we have to do is

prepare for it. And we've been preparing for it this last ten or twelve years, maybe fifteen years. Through Coiste. We're their outriders. We're out there doing it, and hopefully [middle-class Protestants] will believe the Sinn Fein message that economically, socially, health, education-wise, things will be in a much better structure ……. What we have to do is to work very intensely with people who would have been Loyalist activists. That's why we always work with the UDA, or the UVF, to convince them. Because they've a proven record they'd kill [and might do so again in the event of a vote for a united Ireland]. You know? The grey suits and grey-haired men, they might fund them, but these guys… you got to get the actors trusting you. And I think they do trust us. They know it's over. They know that we would ever treat them as the Nationalists were treated in the north of Ireland. ….. We're being quite successful in what we're doing in convincing people that the future would be OK."[39]

When the funding for the Nation Building project ran out, Coiste committed to continuing this kind of outreach on a long-term basis. This work with Loyalists has resulted in relationships so deep and trusting they would have been considered unthinkable in the past.

For example, Loyalists have not been able to develop the infrastructures that Republicans have been able to. This is in part as a result of their position within the PUL community. Loyalists have a much more working-class base than Republicans and have not been able to develop their electoral political base. Furthermore, their standing within the Protestant, Unionist community is quite low. They are more often considered criminals, racketeers, and drug dealers. The ex-prisoner infrastructure, as a result, was comparatively underdeveloped throughout the conflict, and it remains so. Republican outreach has seen them offering assistance to these former enemies, and this has seen lasting relationships being built. Ryan argues *interdependence* is a means of peacebuilding.[40] Take, for example, Coiste's political tourism project. Coiste's tour guides lead tours while giving the Republican narrative of the conflict. It was decided that the initiative should be developed by offering the tourists a more balanced view of the conflict, so Coiste approached Loyalist activists from the UVF ex-prisoners in West Belfast and offered to include them in the project. Now, Coiste's tour guides bring the tourists to a gate in the 'peace wall' that

divides the Nationalist Springfield Road and the Loyalist Shankill Road and pass them over to UVF ex-prisoner tour guides who give a tour around the Shankill area, offering their narrative. The Loyalist ex-prisoners are engaged by the Coiste office to lead tours, providing them with much needed employment. One of the Coiste tour guides explained his participation:

"I bring the tourists along the Falls Road up through Clonard Monastery and finish at the gate at Lanark Way. Now, the guy I hand the tourists over to, his father blew up McGurk's Bar.[41] So, his father killed my grandfather, and he's the person when I get to Lanark Way, I shake hands with. ⋯ He went through the prison the same time as his father, and he works for conflict resolution on the Shankill side of the wall, and I work on my side. So those are the connections, those are the journeys both of us have been on. And that's where we're at now in trying to say what he did and what I did must never, never be repeated. And that's why you're trying to do these projects, to basically lead by example, and that to me is the important part."[42]

Furthermore, this level of trust between the IRA ex-prisoners and the Loyalist ex-prisoners is evidenced in the employment training courses offered by Tar Anall, an IRA ex-prisoner support office based in West Belfast, which is part of the Coiste network. One sector in which ex-prisoners can find employment is the security industry, but the UK now requires people to be trained and registered before being able to take up employment in it. Tar Anall offers training courses and test facilitation through the British Institute of Innkeeping Awarding Body (BIIAB), a professional organisation that provides training and testing standards for potential employees in various industry sectors. IRA ex-prisoners teach the courses and facilitate the tests. Initially, this was done for their own constituency, but upwards of 200 Loyalists ex-prisoners and their family members have attended the courses. In order to apply to do the exams, applicants must provide documentation Tar Anall, who then pass that information to BIIAB. So, Loyalist ex-prisoners from the UVF and the UDA present personal documentation such as passports, driving licenses, bank statements, which confirm their home addresses, to IRA ex-prisoners. During the conflict, this was high grade intelligence information which would have been

used to target people for assassination. As the coordinator of Tar Anall explained:

> "If you want to find employment as a Loyalist ex-prisoner you're faced with the same problems as a Republican ex-prisoner. So, they would come to us and say, "Can you facilitate training around this." ….. we've done it for hundreds of them. But also we must let people who are coming to us know who they're coming to. This is a Republican premises. Most of us who work here come from Republican backgrounds or are Republican ex-prisoners or are still active within the Republican movement in some shape or form regarding the party [Sinn Fein] or community activism. So, they come with that understanding. But we understand who they are. And there's a very respectful approach because we outline what we expect from everybody on the training course. And they're very OK with it, when they get their heads around where they are."[43]

Coiste continue their outreach work with the UVF ex-prisoners organisation, the Ex-prisoners Interpretive Centre (EPIC), the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), and Veterans for Peace whose members are Ex-British military. Representatives from these organisations have given talks to various groups in the north of Ireland in a bid to increase understanding and reduce prejudice. In one event held in 2017, Coiste hosted British army veterans, including a former SAS member, at an event in West Belfast with the Mairéad Farrell Republican Youth Committee, a group named after an IRA volunteer shot dead by the SAS in Gibraltar in 1988. Michael Culbert who chaired the event, said at the time that the meeting "afforded young people the opportunity to hear the stories of people who were our enemies, and it also provides us with the opportunity to see the people behind the uniform."[44]

Conflict results in the dehumanisation of enemies. Over numerous interviews conducted as a part of this research, ex-prisoners made the point that the outreach work has resulted in new relationships between themselves and former enemies, which at times have become enduring friendships. In doing so they are demonstrating new forms of leadership within their own community in their push to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

"You see in a war, you dehumanise your enemy. I talked about doing it, "We're not shooting such-and-such dead. We're shooting a uniform." It's dead easy to shoot a uniform. Mates of mine say to me, "You're mad, you've had Loyalists up at your house." and I go, "Yeah". See my house, it was crowded in security. I've had my house shot at as well. My windows shot through. We had iron bars on the door. We had a gate on the stairs. We had all that. See when I got so far into it [peacebuilding work], I took it all down and said, "We need to live this change." It's no use me talking to these guys and then barricading myself in when I'm home. But mates of mine were saying, "They could kill you anytime." And I go, "Yeah, they could. I don't think they will. They'll find it easier to do this time." I don't check under my car anymore. I come out in the mornings, and I don't look about, so I'm a soft target. We need to change. We all need to change."[45]

Conclusion

It is clear that the hybrid peacebuilding model in Northern Ireland has resulted in a significant level of conflict transformation, but it is unclear if the political institutions set up under the Belfast Agreement can ultimately deliver a sustainable peace. The situation on the ground is now drastically different for many, with the signing of the Agreement, the new political institutions, the end of the IRA campaign, and the withdrawal of the British Army from the streets, yet despite the resultant economic and infrastructural development that has transformed the lives of many of those who suffered most from the conflict, and some softening in the relationships between the two main communities, the society remains deeply divided and suffers regular outbursts of sectarian tensions at elite and grassroots levels, a situation that may get significantly worse in the event of Republicans succeeding in winning a future referendum on a united Ireland, which could happen in the foreseeable future, particularly in the event of a disastrous Brexit.

The conflict must move from this limbo of being in *settlement* to moving to a final phase of *resolution* and to do so, the deep political divisions, the pains inflicted by the violent conflict, and the issues of identity that divide the PUL and CNR communities need to be overcome. The options for this happening are clear: either the CNR community are convinced that their best interests are

served by remaining in the UK, and they choose to buy in to the UK, or find space therein in terms of their identity, or conversely, that the PUL community are convinced that their best interests are served by accepting constitutional change and joining with the rest of the people on the island of Ireland in building a new nation together. This is the challenge for PUL and CNR political activists. In the interim, there is a need for continued grassroots peacebuilding work focused on reconciliation and community building to prevent the situation from degrading back into a state of violent conflict.

This study shows that IRA ex-prisoners are pursuing a peacebuilding strategy to contribute to bringing this about as part of the wider Republican project of uniting Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. They understand the need for a permanent resolution, have a clear idea of what that resolution looks like, and they have a non-violent strategy to try to realise it. The hybrid model has enabled Republicans to move from armed conflict to parliamentary and community politics and to pursue their objectives nonviolently, and they have, to that extent, embraced it, but the resultant elite political structures remain unacceptable to them in the long term because of the continued involvement of the British government and the continued partition of the island.

Where Republicans will continue to find difficulties is in the underlying divergence of political and cultural narratives that exist between themselves and the PUL community. Republicans hold that the IRA's military campaign was morally and politically justified. This is a position that many within the PUL community cannot reconcile with, making it a significant obstacle for Coiste's peacebuilding endeavours, and therein lies a serious problem for Sinn Fein and the ex-prisoners of Coiste. Any move away from their position on the legitimacy of their armed struggle risks strengthening the hand of those Republican groups still committed to political violence. It is a difficult balancing act for them: if they continue to honour the armed struggle, they alienate the PUL community, but if they cease doing so, they risk losing ground to active splinter groups. This makes Coiste's grassroots work all the more important.

The Coiste network has also made a considerable contribution to peacebuilding by its work providing support, advice, and representation to the IRA ex-prisoner community and its work within the CNR community. It has worked to maintain cohesion within their ranks and to combat sectarianism

within the broader CNR community. Its outreach work with the PUL community has demonstrably produced results, particularly with regards to its interface violence de-escalation work and the Loyalist ex-prisoner community through its training and employment schemes. However, there are limits to what they can achieve outside of broader political changes taking place in Northern Ireland.

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Abstract

Coiste na n-Iarchimí, (the Irish Republican Army ex-prisoners network) and the Limitations of Hybrid Peacebuilding in Ireland

Damien Okado-Gough

This paper points to the limitations of the hybrid peacebuilding model in providing sustainable solutions to ethnic conflict situations and, using the case study of Northern Ireland, outlines those limitations, and asks if the peacebuilding work of Irish Republican Army ex-prisoners as part of the broader Republican project to create a unified Ireland, independent from Britain, can help overcome those limitations. Focusing on the IRA ex-prisoner network, *Coiste na n-Iarchimí*, it asks if this work can make further contributions to the peace process by helping northern Irish society move beyond its imperfect settlement towards a permanent resolution to the conflict in Ireland. It concludes that hybrid peacebuilding has been largely successful in reducing levels of physical violence by facilitating a conflict *settlement*, but that it falls short in bringing about a permanent *resolution* which can only come about by overcoming the issues of conflicting identities between the two communities there, an issue which IRA ex-prisoners are working to address through their peacebuilding activities.

Key words: Northern Ireland, Irish Republicanism, hybrid peacebuilding, local turn peacebuilding, political ex-prisoners, ethnic conflict, conflict transformation, conflict resolution, reconciliation.