

Written evidence submitted by Dr Aaron Edwards, Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, Dr Sean Brennan, Independent Researcher, Belfast, and Dr Stephen Bloomer, Independent Researcher, Belfast, regarding the effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland inquiry (PNI0015)

Introduction

1. Since the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 loyalist and republican groups have undergone significant change in their strategies, tactics and organisation. However, they have not fully transformed and most retain their paramilitary structures. While some have remained largely cohesive and committed to the peace process, others have split from their parent groups, become more autonomous or fragmented; some have even been rejuvenated and now attract more members than they did 25 years ago.
2. Having been closely involved in working with some of these Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, and know first-hand the practical obstacles that remain in the way of a more comprehensive transition process, we bring unique insights into the successes and failures of transforming groups and wider communities beyond paramilitarism. While there have been various internal and external initiatives undertaken to effect DDR amongst these groups, many have been unsuccessful.
3. Based on our extensive analysis of the security environment generally and the activities of loyalist paramilitaries in particular, we believe that the approach by the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive on the tackling of paramilitarism has failed and requires a fundamental rethink. The remainder of this briefing note gives evidence for this conclusion, offering both key judgements and recommendations.

A Brief History of Paramilitary Activity in Northern Ireland

4. Militant Ulster loyalism can be traced back to the Laggan Army in the 1640s, which was a militia organised by Protestant landowners in Ulster who had fought in the Thirty Years War. However, loyalist paramilitaries did not take on its modern form until the Home Rule crisis in the late 19th Century. What united these loyalists was their extreme loyalty to both the British Crown, if not always to Her Majesty's Government, the Protestant Faith, and a desire to protect their communities by any means necessary.
5. Much of these loyalist militancy was absorbed into the British Army during the First World War and then in the Security Forces of the newly formed Northern Ireland state in 1920. Therefore, it remained dormant until the 1960s when more extreme elements became 're-activated' under the auspices of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). They rejected the modernising rhetoric of the new liberal unionist government at Stormont,

which they perceived as weak in the face of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that had just ended a six-year border offensive. UVF members were also worried about the irredentist ambitions of the government in the Irish Republic.

6. After the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969, the UVF was joined by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a large-scale vigilante-based group that organised across Northern Ireland. Both paramilitary groupings called a ceasefire in October 1994 and engaged in a organic DDR programmes. They did not, however, ceasefire in their coercive control of their own communities and feuding, narco-terrorism and 'paramilitary peacekeeping' became new areas of coercive control in the 'post-ceasefire' period.

A New Political Context

7. The political landscape changed dramatically in the early 2000s. A new power-sharing Executive formed in 2007 through a neoliberal consociational government. In following 'best practice' in liberal peacebuilding, both the DUP and Sinn Féin set about constructing two 'post-ceasefire' political worlds, one Unionist and one Nationalist. Under this new consociational partnership, both the DUP and Sinn Féin endorsed and implemented a type of neoliberal peacebuilding, where the needs of the economy took precedence over the needs of the people, particularly those most affected by direct and structural forms of violence. The academic Conor McCabe termed this process a 'double transition', from socio-sectarian warfare to peace and neoliberalism.
8. By internally managing dissent within their own political worlds, both Sinn Féin and the DUP ensured this neoliberal peace process was seen, particularly to external audiences and investors, as a success. However, the reality the system masked deep internal tensions within their respective communities, particularly on 'grassroots' socioeconomic issues sustaining the British state structural violence that persisted long after the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994. Although this conflict management successfully attracted Foreign Direct Investment it has by no means trickled down into broader society, particularly amongst those communities that suffered the most from the violence, with estimates of 300,000 people out of a population of 1.82 million living in 'absolute poverty'. John Nagle observes that this neoliberal peace process created more of a 'Potemkin' peacebuilding façade rather than transforming the endemic and historic levels of structural violence that had impoverished the polity since Northern Ireland's inception in 1921.
9. Against this post-2007 backdrop of neo-liberal peacebuilding, internal law and order in Northern Ireland has been increasingly ceded to local paramilitary groups at community level. For example, loyalist paramilitary organisations in the Unionist community have developed a form of 'paramilitary peacekeeping', designed to maintain internal order. This form of internal policing is based on an old colonial model used by the British in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It was built around paying a stipend to tribal leaders who then administered rule on behalf of the imperial authorities in London. As Jasmin

Hristov, in her fieldwork in Colombia, and Christine Cheng, in her fieldwork in Liberia, have both demonstrated, this type of neoliberal paramilitary peacekeeping has become an integral tool in international attempts to stabilise 'post-ceasefire' societies attempting to emerge from violent conflicts.

The Growth of "Paramilitary Peacekeeping"

10. So how does paramilitary peacekeeping work within this neoliberal form of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland? In its current guise, the Northern Ireland government's 2016 'Fresh Start' report, normalises paramilitary peacekeeping on the basis that loyalist and republican paramilitary groups observing ceasefires since 1994 and 1997 respectively no longer engage in 'retaliatory cycles of sectarian attacks' but, nevertheless, continue to 'engage in violent activity to intimidate and exercise control in communities where they operate'. However, such is the standing of these paramilitary leaders the police regularly 'engage with the individuals concerned [paramilitary leaders] to ensure peaceful outcomes to parading disputes and other issues, including flags and anti-social behaviour even though they are members of proscribed organisations'.
11. With paramilitary peacekeeping now a core element of neoliberal peacebuilding, funds are paid directly to paramilitary-aligned 'community' groups through a mixture of international organizations and governmental channels. Some of this money is channeled through peace and reconciliation funding streams. Such funds are distributed on the understanding they are intended to help paramilitary members demobilise and reintegrate back into their community, often as community workers developing grassroots social justice programs. While paramilitary peacekeepers thwart internal dissent and undermine any mobilization of grassroots opposition to the DUP and Sinn Féin on rising levels of poverty, ill-health or homelessness, this controversial approach has effectively sustained a form of post-ceasefire paramilitary agency: with some groups now having more members after the demobilisation process than they had at the height of the violence. Since Brexit, however, the retention of these paramilitary peacekeepers, particularly in Unionist communities, has created a securitisation dilemma for their political elites in both Stormont and London.
12. In the Unionist Political World, dependent on 'peace' funding, post-ceasefire loyalist paramilitaries have had to respond to political failures in managing the out-workings of Brexit and, once again, taken to the streets, while denying doing so. Both the DUP in Belfast and Conservative Government in London have condemned the upsurge in loyalist violence. Nonetheless, the continuing existence of loyalist paramilitary peacekeepers continues to pose significant implications for London. Any further violence arising in loyalist areas will inevitably bring increasing pressure on Boris Johnson's government from both Washington and Brussels to implement a more robust security approach to preserve the neo-liberal peace and prevent a collapse in the peace process.

13. Therefore, should loyalist violence escalate further and threaten the integrity of the peace process or the EU Internal Market through, for instance, increased terrorist attacks in the Irish Republic, or a growth in smuggling, then greater international focus will undoubtedly be drawn to the security situation in Northern Ireland. With well-publicized allegations of collusion between British State Intelligence Systems and loyalist paramilitary groups during the Troubles, the United States' intelligence agencies may become increasingly involved in investigating loyalist terrorist attacks. With major US Tech Companies, Apple, PayPal, etc., locating their European Offices in Ireland, any threat to US citizens or commercial interests will necessitate an appropriate response from those US institutions tasked with protecting American interests overseas. Therefore, the successful management of the current security situation in Northern Ireland is now entering a vital phase for UK national interests as a failure to stem 'post-ceasefire' loyalist paramilitary violence could have a direct bearing on any future trade agreements between the UK and the US as well as the becoming Peace Accords that will emerge from a balancing of interests between, NATO, the EU, Ukraine and Russia.

Loyalist Paramilitarism and the Northern Ireland Protocol

14. The United Kingdom (UK) decision to exit the European Union (EU), in June 2016, led to a Withdrawal Agreement (WA) with the EU, which, in turn, saw the construction of an internal border being placed down the Irish Sea between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. With a subsequent upsurge in violence in Northern Ireland following the signing of the WA, the internationally acclaimed peace process appears to be undergoing a test of fire. Ulster loyalists, unhappy with this Irish Sea border, have turned to civil unrest to vent their opposition. The trigger for heightened tensions has come from a number of sources. But Loyalist anger was enflamed at the failure of the Director of Public Prosecutions to sanction senior Sinn Féin politicians who breached pandemic restrictions by attending the funeral of former IRA chief Bobby Storey in June 2020. Also, the UK government's decision to renege on promises to the Unionist community, that no new border would be imposed, increased tensions that now jeopardize the local power sharing structures, recently replenished by an Assembly election on 5 May 2022.

15. However, to get a deeper understanding of what is going on it is important to understand the wider impact of the peace process had on the community in Northern Ireland. An understanding of the context of these conflict dynamics – and how they have changed as a consequence of Brexit – is a vital first step to finding a more workable solution to them. In an interview with *The Economist* in March 2021, Aaron Edwards argued that signs of trouble meant that the political context had shifted and was now breathing new life into old paramilitary structures, thereby making them relevant again. Undoubtedly, the failure to effectively pre-empt what appears to be an upsurge of loyalist 'leaderless violence' creates serious challenges for law enforcement and intelligence agencies. To avert a more coercive security response - or the corralling of divided communities into tired ethno-national cantonments - it may be pertinent to

revert to a more positive and transformative development agenda, one that will direct the institutions of state to de-escalate the situation, non-violently.

Recommendations

16. With historic levels of poverty, ill-health and homelessness in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland, the promotion of a transformative development agenda must be at the forefront of all future positive peacebuilding efforts. Such an approach requires the active participation of both the British and Irish governments, as well as the EU and United States. The aim ought to be the implementation of a positive peacebuilding agenda, one that has the social, health and well-being of all the people of Northern Ireland at its core: to effectively tackle ongoing levels of structural violence, particularly in loyalist communities, with the same determination and vigor by which the state has tackled dissident republican paramilitary groups.
17. We recommend that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee seek to persuade the government to provide Task Force based assistance to marginalized communities so that they can build back better and address endemic poverty, ill-health and social exclusion. Implementing a 'Just Transition' initiative, of 'Community Wealth Building', originating with the Democracy Collaborative in Cleveland, Ohio, this system-changing approach to regenerating marginalized communities can produce a transformative impact. This economically efficient model may also help deliver shared economic prosperity, ethnic equity, and ecological sustainability. It does this by reorganising local institutions and local economies to increase a greater economic flow through those most in need. Delivered through the 'Just Transition' school of ecological recovery, this approach incentivizes local community-owned, positive peacebuilding, approaches to sustaining post-ceasefire community health and well-being.
18. By developing local Community Wealth Building programmes and partnering up with anchor institutions, such as universities, councils, hospitals and housing associations, local people begin to generate well-paid and meaningful employment opportunities, for example, in Early Years Provision, Social Care services, Mental Health and Addiction Support Services, Youth Training and Education, Housing/Building Construction programs, Social Entrepreneurship to locate community services at the point of need. Information Technology training and Environmental Regeneration programmes can grow physical improvements that improve both the built and social environ. In this post-liberal guise, local communities may then better circulate finances and resources within their own communities and sustainably transform issues of poverty, homelessness and social exclusion at the point of need: and from 'the body up'. In this way a positive peace can emerge from the bottom up to sustainably improve the quality of life for all the people in Northern Ireland.
19. History is also informative here. It reveals that the imposition of a coercive security agenda may only serve to enflame tensions further and leave many of the structural

causes of conflict unresolved. As Stella Gervas noted, this coercive security agenda is part of the English 'system of war' that now conflicts with the EU 'system of peace'. For as long as this remains the case, old causes will continue to have new life breathed into them, all the while jeopardizing the hard-won peace in Northern Ireland. For those leaders of the Unionist political world, whether in Belfast or Westminster, who appear to be powerless to stop the upsurge in violence, this test of fire may bring deeper regrets than their mishandling of Brexit.

A Note on the Authors

20. Dr Aaron Edwards is a career academic with over 20 years' experience researching the Northern Ireland conflict and broader international security issues. Dr Edwards is a Subject Matter Expert for Sandhurst on the Northern Ireland conflict, conflict management and counter-terrorism and has delivered high level training courses on behalf of HMG worldwide. He is the author of several critically acclaimed books, including *UVF: Behind the Mask* (2017) and *Agents of Influence: Britain's Secret Intelligence War Against the IRA* (2021), and has given analysis on loyalist paramilitary activity to the British government and Independent Reporting Commission. In 2003-08, he led on two programmes aimed at transitioning paramilitaries away from violence and dealing with the legacy of the violent past in Northern Ireland.
21. Dr Sean Brennan is a peacebuilding practitioner with 30 years' experience working with a range of community organisations and public sector bodies, promoting Conflict Transformation, Community Development, and Community Relations. Dr Brennan was awarded his PhD in Politics and International Studies by Queen's University Belfast in 2017. His thesis explored the challenges of reintegrating loyalist ex-combatants into post-ceasefire Northern Ireland. Dr Brennan is the author of several peer-reviewed journal articles based on his research on how 'second generation' forms of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) can help promote sustainable post-ceasefire social reconstruction.
22. Dr Stephen Bloomer is a career researcher with 30 years' experience across the voluntary and community, public, and private sectors in Northern Ireland. He has extensive experience working on aspects of grassroots peacebuilding and the transition from paramilitarism to politics, ex-combatants and interface issues, and as a programme coordinator of the East Antrim Conflict Transformation Forum (with Dr Edwards), a conflict transformation initiative in 2003-07, endorsed by the UVF and supported by the British and Irish governments. Dr Bloomer was awarded his PhD on sports-based conflict transformation in post-Agreement Northern Ireland from Ulster University in 2018.

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