

Reconciliation is not an event. Five years after the signing of the Belfast Agreement and nine years since the first ceasefires, nobody in Northern Ireland can be under any illusions about that. In politics, reconciliation is a long slow process which is marked by many events, some of which point to a new and better future and others of which remind us of the length of the journey still to be travelled. One of the paradoxical elements of a peace process is that the very same gap in the systematic violence between organised groups and parties also allows previously unidentified themes and issues to come to the surface.

This year, many of the problems were new twists on old problems. Slow but insidious intimidation of vulnerable minorities continued in many parts of Northern Ireland, especially in East and South Antrim. If the stand-off at Holy Cross School was the primary media image of tension in 2001-2, then the crisis which blew up in East Belfast around Short Strand was its headline equivalent in 2002-3. Once again, groups of vulnerable people fled almost nightly riots, paramilitaries reappeared on the streets and there were widespread accusations of ethnic cleansing and deliberate antagonism. Army vehicles were again on the streets and the government fell back on emergency security measures – higher ‘peace walls’, CCTV cameras and saturation policing - to keep any order. Ongoing political division continued to feed off and feed into events like these. The collapse of the Assembly and Executive in October, amidst accusations of an organised spying at Stormont, underlined the fragility of political consensus,

and there were widespread fears of a political vacuum. Decommissioning, or the lack of it, continued to polarise political opinion. Meanwhile, the census returns for 2001 underlined the ongoing interdependence of Catholic and Protestant across all six counties and the increasing importance of new minority ethnic groups in specific towns and cities.

The journey to reconciliation leaves the Community Relations Council (‘CRC’ or ‘the Council’) with plenty of work to do. On the headline issues, the Council has continued to seek practical ways to reduce violence, increase the quality of life and enable meaningful dialogue for people caught up in the most difficult of circumstances. Across Belfast, the Council supported interface communication projects, whether through direct face to face projects such as Springfield Inter-Community Development Project or Belfast Interface Project or by supporting communication between key individuals and

groups by mobile phones. Throughout the year, huge local effort went into finding locally acceptable solutions and plans. On the Short Strand/Inner East interface, the council supported local groups working in partnership with core-funded groups like Mediation Northern Ireland, TIDES and BIP to take huge strides in dialogue. In their turn, the partnership drew on considerable volunteer effort to provide a degree of contact and reassurance.

If things are to change in the long run, however, emergency support must be backed up by sustained and planned action at many levels. CRC participated actively on the Community Action Group called together by Minister of State Des Browne to find active solutions to the many problems of interface and inner city areas. Additional to work on the environment and with young people, there was particular emphasis on the weakness of the community infrastructure of many deprived protestant or loyalist

Showing Sectarianism the Red Card
*Duncan Morrow (CRC) (right) with
Michael Boyd, the Irish Football Association's
Community Relations Officer (centre) and
Michael Collins, Portadown F.C.*



Chief Executive's Report continued

8 areas. The Council also consulted widely on the development of Good Relations in statutory bodies and agencies, developing pilot projects and testing ideas for turning good relations from theory into practice. In all of this work, the Council hopes to make an active and useful contribution to the statutory work of the Equality Commission. The Creating Common Ground Consortium continues to engage with quality of life issues in the most deprived housing estates in Northern Ireland while creating an active network of leading statutory and voluntary organisations. Together with many agencies, the Council developed an active partnership with the North Belfast Community Action Unit, exchanging expertise and advice. In the course of 2002-2003, upwards of £750,000 was committed by CRC for community relations activity in North Belfast over the next three years. On top of all this, the Council was delighted to be an active partner in Belfast City Council's Good Relations Steering Group, convened by the Lord Mayor with both elected and community representatives from all parties.

Of course, Belfast is not Northern Ireland. Core funded groups worked with many District Councils including Newry and Mourne, Coleraine, Ballymena, Dungannon, Omagh, Fermanagh, Cookstown and Strabane. During 2002-03, the Council has actively sought to increase the relevance of our programmes to everyone in Northern Ireland, culminating with the opening of our new centre in Dungannon. The centre offers us the opportunity of much more immediate contact with mid Ulster and the south west, as well as providing a space for seminars, conferences and meetings. This is an exciting development for the Council, which we hope to build on in future years. The opening of 'the Junction' by a consortium of local community relations groups and Derry City Council offers a similar opportunity for raising community relations issues in the north west.

More importantly, thousands of people have benefited from community relations activity across Northern Ireland through the CRC's key grant schemes. Community Relations Core Funding continues to underpin much of

the active inter-community activity in all the District Council areas of Northern Ireland, providing experienced partners for local projects. By July 2002, requests for support under the Council's PEACE II measure had outstripped available funds by a factor of more than 3:1. Reports that inter-community activity is unpopular in Northern Ireland have been grossly exaggerated. In December, the Council was able to announce a full programme of work under PEACE II including projects with sporting organisations, community groups, mediation projects, churches, youth work, minority ethnic groups and cultural organisations in places as diverse as Newry, Tandragee, Cookstown, Enniskillen, Larne and Derry/Londonderry. At a policy level, the Council has actively promoted the peace element of the PEACE II fund through the Distinctiveness Working Group of the Special EU Programmes Board.

During 2002-3 the Council took over responsibility for the administration of the Victims and Survivors Core Fund, offering support and assistance for many



groups across Northern Ireland. Against a very tight deadline, the Council successfully advertised the schemes, recruited core staff, organised applications and met to take enormously difficult decisions. With a budget of approximately £9m over the next three years, the Council had to choose from applications amounting to approximately £25m. It is a huge privilege to be engaged in this work, and we look forward to a growing and developing relationship with all those who work in this important and challenging area for all of Northern Ireland.

In the midst of all the large amounts of money distributed for staff and programmes, the Council's smaller grants, amounting to less than £750,000 in total, are often overlooked. But the value of small amounts of money targeted at key activity cannot be exaggerated, nor replaced by District Councils. Small grants supplement larger programmes, engage new and

important audiences and allow events and activities to happen which would otherwise collapse. Not only did small grants underpin interface communication and cultural diversity but they also encouraged groups as widely spread as the Independent Orange Order (Ballymoney), NI Pakistani Cultural Association (Belfast), Ardoyne Youth Club (Belfast), Waterside Development Trust (L'Derry), John Hewitt Society (Larne), Seskinore Young Farmer's Club (Omagh) and Antrim Community Forum (Antrim) to name but a few.

Alongside this, the Council itself went through enormous change. In October 2002, I was pleased to take up the post of Chief Executive. Six new members of the Council were appointed in January 2003 following public advertisement and the internal structures of the Council were completely revised and renewed. In all of this, both staff and Council, under the chairmanship of Eamonn McCartan, have

engaged with enthusiasm, dedication and vision. At the end of the year I am pleased to report that the Council has further developed itself as a centre of good practice and theory, transparency and openness for community relations work in Northern Ireland.

The announcement of a comprehensive review of Community Relations policy and practice (*A Shared Future*) by Des Browne in January 2003 offered the Council the opportunity to participate in widespread reflection on the future of community relations work. In the long journey towards reconciliation, there can be few more important consultations in Northern Ireland. We look forward to its conclusions and hope for renewed commitment to the goals and purposes of community relations as a result.

Duncan Morrow
September 2003