

# Peace Process challenge for Irish Nationalism

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30 September 2010

It was just a slogan on a t-shirt. I saw it in the window of a little shop in the sleepy village of Bayfield on the shores of Lake Huron almost 20 years ago when I lived in Canada. I've quoted it many times since: 'Everyone is entitled to my own opinion'.

My son Ross was about 12 at the time and he was an expert on everything. He had his mind made up and that was that. As far as he was concerned he'd been there, seen it; so I bought him the t-shirt. Today, I think I should have got one for everyone in this country. We all have opinions, very strong opinions in most cases, and we refuse to be persuaded otherwise. Everyone else is entitled to our opinion. If there has to be change, we believe, then it has to be to our way, our view, our culture.

Those from the nationalist tradition will recognise such obstinacy. There was a time when the entire apparatus of Northern Ireland was consumed with denying not only the influence of a huge proportion of its citizens and the existence of another cultural tradition but even the proximity of a state that was almost a reverse image in terms of what it enshrined and denied. That was a time when the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland could urge people to only employ Protestants and say of Catholics that he 'wouldn't have one about the place'.

We've come a long way, but we have a longer way to go. More than 12 years after the Good Friday Agreement, most of us have still not accepted that respect for difference is crucial to living together. We still behave as if any concession to the culture and values of the 'other side' somehow diminishes what we hold dear. At best we ignore what they do; most times we dismiss and disparage. On one side it is Ulster Scots and Loyalist culture; on the other it is the Irish language and Gaelic games. Yet I believe there is a crucial difference.

In the global context – as reflected in the mass media – the culture espoused by and identified with nationalism has legitimacy. Indeed, in the past couple of decades it has ascendancy on the stage of world cultures through showcases such as Riverdance and the huge success of other Irish entertainers. No such recognition is afforded to expressions of Loyalist culture. Indeed, it is portrayed as a recalcitrant throwback to a cargo-cult Britishness found nowhere else – not even in Britain. Loyalist culture is viewed by nationalists as an alien imposition whose sole purpose is to proclaim Protestant supremacy and provoke reaction. The reflex responses are to ignore it or protest about it in disparaging terms that muddy the waters.

It was the initial reaction that I came up against when I became editor of the Ulster Herald series of newspapers a decade ago. In my first year, the Twelfth celebrations for West Tyrone were in Omagh. About 6,000 people were expected to take part with dozens of marching bands and ranks of Orangemen parading through the heart of the town. I was told that our newspapers – founded in the early 1900s to serve nationalist readers – did not cover the Twelfth, beyond a brief news report that it had happened. I thought otherwise, believing any event which brought thousands marching through a relatively small town was news and, as such, should be fully reported for our readers.

When I was informed that everyone on staff had plans to be somewhere else on the holiday, I decided to cover the event myself and hire in a freelance photographer. I had to establish precedent by reporting fully on the event and each year afterwards, I assigned staff to cover the Twelfth. It raised ruffles, of course, not least when the following year we heralded that year's Twelfth in a major interview with the District Grand Master of the Orange with his picture in full regalia on the front page. Of course, we put difficult questions to him and he replied candidly to each. It was good journalism, but I fielded quite a number of angry phone calls that day from people who told me that there was no place for 'this kind of thing' in a Catholic newspaper. I informed each caller that I was not the editor of a Catholic newspaper and, quite frankly, I did not care what church our readers attended, or even whether

they attended none. I believe I got the reputation among some of our more traditional subscribers of being 'difficult'.

The practice, you see, had been for the Herald to cover local events deemed to be of interest to Catholic nationalists and leave the rest for the Tyrone Constitution. My predecessors, I'm told, even had weekly exchanges of copy in a collaboration to ensure that they maintained this newspaper apartheid. Because all public expenditure was scrupulously monitored to ensure 'fairness', the newspapers were bolstered job ads and public notices at the taxpayers expense. That is why County Tyrone, with a population of about 160,000, has no fewer than ten 'paid for' weekly newspapers, plus those from outside the county that sell there and some freesheets.

That makes no commercial sense and this apartheid society cannot be sustained. Therefore, even for business reasons, the challenge for Irish nationalism and the media that reflect it is to embrace a culture that it has found provocative in the past and in the present. I believe that to do so, we must learn more about the Ulster Scots culture beyond our current dismissal of it all as contrived and packaged to make Orangeism acceptable to the world beyond. That was the motivation for my own exploration of the phenomenon of Loyalist marching bands in my book *Blood and Thunder – Inside an Ulster Protestant Band*.

When I embarked on research for my book, I really didn't know a Miller Brown flute from a piccolo or even how to tell a good parade from a bus queue. So my year as an embedded observer with the Castlederg Young Loyalists Flute Band provided a steep learning curve, not just about marching bands, their music, historical importance and the sheer scale of their activities, but also about my own attitudes to the most vibrant form of Ulster Protestant culture. Like most people from a Catholic nationalist background – and many others – I assumed that the bands were rolled out by the Orange lodges for the summer to play loud, predictable music with the primary aims of asserting Protestant supremacy and provoking their neighbours

across the 'community divide' which they insisted on transgressing. More than thirty years of working as a professional journalist had barely dented this view.

Yet, like many others, I was fascinated by the spectacle and sound of the bands I encountered from a distance that wasn't very respectful. Who could not be thrilled into curiosity by their combination of exuberance in displays of baton-wielding acrobatics and thunderous music, and the uniformed discipline in the ranks of drummers, fluters and flag-bearing colour parties?

So on a freezing January night at the start of 2009, I stepped nervously into the Bridgetown No Surrender Orange hall in Castlederg for the band's first practice of the year. I had a warm reception from participants who are immensely proud of what they do. So I insinuated myself quietly and embarked on a year of highlights, each of which marked another phase of the learning process I chart in the book. From a February concert performance during a pageant based on the music of the two World Wars, I was well primed for a year of band parades that took me to every corner of Northern Ireland and over the border to Donegal and my native Monaghan where Ulster Protestant culture is still cherished in parades of marching bands. In between there was a packed schedule of parades and the scramble to ensure a good turn-out, arrange transport and times and meet the considerable expenses. There was the diligence in practising and perfecting the music and the drill of marching as the tight wee unit that is familiar to many supporters of band parades.

In researching the book, I learned for instance that Blood and Thunder bands:

- Brought popular youth culture to traditional flute bands in the 1970s;
- Play a range of airs that encompasses shared traditional Irish music to hymns, movie themes and popular tunes;
- Provide year-round involvement in cultural and music pursuits for thousands of young band members;
- Compete through a parade season that lasts for nine calendar months, and then go indoors for a packed programme of winter concerts;

- Teach and value discipline and orderly parading, as well as musical ability;
- Provide a social outlet that inspires confidence and pride in a tradition that stretches back centuries.

These lessons are particularly important today. The boys and young men who participate in the Blood and Thunder bands represent the very first generation of Ulster Protestant males who are not required, or expected, to defend their community and its place here in a corner of Ireland. From the Muster Rolls of the Plantation, through yeomanry and militias, Volunteers, Special Constabulary, UDR and RIR, young Ulster Protestants have answered the call to take up arms and follow fife and drum. The martial spirit and the tradition this has created in Ulster over 400 years are written into the DNA of these boys and men.

Yet before all this, I was as complicit in this cultural stand-off as everyone else whose view of a shared future is predicated on others assuming our views, our beliefs and our traditions. Though we talk guardedly of a cross-community identity, we are usually too embarrassed to address real cultural issues with someone from the 'other side'. Instead, we pepper our conversation with faltering exchanges built on preconceived certainties and skirt around subjects we find uncomfortable or on which we assume the other will be. Perhaps the time has come for us to take a plunge into the hidden depths of our shared pool of identity. For the foundations of future community strength cannot be built on the obliteration by disparagement of another cultural identity, but on openly acknowledging its existence and perhaps even sharing in its celebration. By shedding assumptions about things we dare not explore, we could learn to respect and enjoy what previously has provoked.

When I set out to explore the culture and activities of what are commonly known as 'Kick the Pope' bands, I brought with me all the baggage of my background, Catholic, nationalist and a journalist with all the scepticism accumulated over a career of more than thirty years. I assumed I knew what I would find behind the wall of sound that provides the soundtrack to our summer. I expected the hard edge of loyalism, political passion built on fervent belief in Protestant supremacy, paramilitary

liaisons perhaps and, of course, sectarian and senseless provocation directed at the 'other side' to which I belonged. I assumed that these bands sprang into their brief summer existence merely to provide the swagger of sectarian processions through places they were not welcome. What I found surprised me in a way that undermined my certainties. From the Castlederg Young Loyalists Flute Band, I learned a crucial lesson that provocation can only win through the perceptions of those who receive it; it fails miserably when confronted by an open mind.

I suppose I had set out in search of bigots, but what I found instead was a bunch of mostly young men and boys doing something they loved. I found a culture steeped in pride and tradition, evolving constantly with the passion and energy of youth. I witnessed unbridled enthusiasm for learning new skills of music and incorporating that into treasured old memories of their Protestant past in this corner of Ireland. I discovered a clear dedication to parade discipline and an overwhelming pride in their community identity that is proven constantly in competition.

From my outsider stance, I even developed an affectionate attachment to the young band members as I observed their enthusiasm to be the very best they could be and the special social environment that lightens up the context in which these young men and women come together for a gruelling schedule of practice and performance. At no time was I exposed to a sectarian agenda or purpose. Indeed, even in parading through a disputed area of their own town, they were clearly anxious to avoid causing offence. I saw nervousness where others less familiar with these boys might have seen provocation. Rather than setting out to offend others, they do it to entertain themselves.

Time and again, I saw this band and its role as corresponding to a GAA club in my own cultural background. For beyond the obvious skill of music-making – not to mention playing a flute and marching in step at the same time – these young men are absorbing a special pride of place and cultural identity, practising traditional recreational skills, and in doing so, remembering other young men from families and

homes just like theirs who provide a picture of their past. I soon discovered that the heroes of the bands were invariably those who followed fife and drum to fight and perish on the battlefield of the Somme, rather than the victor of the rival crowned contenders who met at the Boyne. As others before them donned uniforms and took up arms, this generation dons uniforms and takes up flutes and drums in a thunderous musical celebration of who they are.

Many of them are extremely accomplished at what they do to express pride in their Ulster Protestant identity. Just ask any of the non-local visitors who line the route for the Relief of Derry parade. These tourists are openly thrilled and excited to find a traditional Irish event that corresponds to nothing else in a world where most parades are an international hybrid of the Fourth of July and the Rio Carnival.

It seems strangely liberating to step away from the misconceptions built on a prejudice I did not acknowledge; to understand the visceral thrill I got from the big sound and spectacle of Blood and Thunder bands; to explore and talk openly of our collective need to not only defer to difference but embrace it. For in our enforced isolation, we have nurtured two traditions that deserve to share this place with pride. We should understand that and celebrate the existence of another vibrant and complementary culture that makes us all the richer.