

IF YOU SEE THE FLASH...

A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE FLAGS PROTESTS

TEXT ANDREW MOLLOY

Unionism has dominated the political paradigm in Northern Ireland since partition. All six prime ministers of Northern Ireland, from the formation of the Government of Northern Ireland in 1921 to the transfer of direct rule in 1972, were unionists. Throughout the 'Troubles' which followed, the view could be taken that Irish nationalists, left out in the cold and resorting to violence and unpleasant tactics, were the polar opposite of unionists who achieved their goals through politics; maintaining so called 'moral' dominance of the North.

“The only neutral spaces in Belfast are fatuous, facile and culturally vacuous”

This is what made the Belfast Agreement so extraordinary. It was the acceptance of wrong-doing on both sides; one resorting to organised callous acts of violence, the other resorting to insidious political undermining and social repression (and more than a few callous acts of violence). Now everyone could step up to the political table and have their say. To prove it John and David stood on stage with Bono in the shiny Waterfront Hall, fists raised like triumphant prizefighters who had agreed to stop knocking seven shades out of each other and throw in their respective towels. Everyone's a winner.

Well...that was the idea we

were sold anyway.

In the book 'The Propaganda of Peace' Greg McLaughlin and Stephen Baker suggest that some other thought was forming on that Good Friday back in '98. That thought was 'NI is open for business, let's make some money.' The previous dichotic nature of the province was about to be further complicated by the addition of a third faction in the 'war': a faction which rather than manifesting itself in flags and murals is evidenced by the spread of chain-stores and dead-eyed coffee shops across the Province - capitalism.

As a Belfast based architect and urbanist I often find myself having conversations about 'shared space.' At a recent workshop at PLACE, the built environment centre for Northern Ireland, someone proffered that there are no shared spaces in Belfast besides Castlecourt and Victoria Square, and that made me want to weep. The only neutral spaces in Belfast are fatuous,

facile and culturally vacuous. The tactics of the third faction is to erase culture and get us shopping. Baker and McLaughlin suggested that it was only so long before the other two factions started kicking back, and boy have they started kicking.

For me, the vote that limits the flying of the flag from Belfast City Hall was an indicator of the express intentions of the Belfast Agreement coming into effect; Unionism no longer dominates

the political scene but neither is it dominated. I found the anger and vitriol from loyalists confusing at first, but given time I now think I understand it. The leveling of the political playing field requires nationalism to take a step

up and unionism a step down. This can lead to perception that 'Irishness' is being given more

validity than 'Britishness' when all that is occurring is the awkward tentative steps toward equality. Combine this with the business and tourism sector's general disdain for the lower-working class communities on the periphery of Belfast and it seems obvious that people would snap eventually.

The whole episode clearly shows how we as human beings are constantly putting the cart before the horse; confusing cultural identifiers with culture itself. The location and times a flag is flown should have no effect on your own identity, and any attempt to hoist this identity into the physical world shows a lack of respect for others and does your own culture a grave disservice. The thought that the people on the streets claimed to be representing me as an Ulster Protestant drove a wedge between myself and the culture to which I was born.

Even more alarming are the pseudo-political discussions now taking place ignoring the folly of the official 'Unionist Forum', the vaguely fascist rhetoric of the 'Ulster People's Forum', is profoundly disturbing. A lot of politicians are starting to feel uncomfortable up in that big white house and a new generation of political activists, who appear to have learned nothing from the journeys of Paisley and McGuinness, are starting to shout very loudly indeed. New battle lines are being drawn, the cartography of which no one can be certain. Northern Irish politics appears to be self-destructing; if you see the flash, duck and cover.

“The tactics of the third faction is to erase culture and get us shopping”



Duck & cover