

**Flags and Protests: Exploring the views, perceptions  
and experiences of people directly and indirectly  
affected by the flag protests**

**INTERCOMM & Dr. Jonny Byrne  
December 2013**

## Foreword

INTERCOMM commissioned a well-respected, local academic to undertake the following piece of research after the vote at Belfast City Hall to fly the Union Flag on designated days and the subsequent unprecedented protests. The purpose of INTERCOMM commissioning this research was to provide a body of knowledge that related to the flag protests in Belfast and to the growing narrative around a sense of frustration and alienation from within sections of the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community; and a perception that their identity was being eroded.

Over the last six months INTERCOMM with the University of Ulster have engaged with those affected directly and indirectly by the flag protests. Through our community engagement, we were struck by the increased level of uncertainty around what was motivating people to go out onto the streets, along with the growing anger felt within the community about the flag decision. In light of these issues, we undertook a research project that would consider these and other concerns. This research has provided people with an opportunity to talk about the difficult and sensitive issues in a safe and constructive format. The outcome has been the first comprehensive analysis of the flag protests that has identified some of the key issues underpinning people's role and participation in the protests.

INTERCOMM views this report as the beginning of a wider process of engagement, and look forward to building on the emerging findings. This publication is the first instalment of INTERCOMM's evolving research agenda, which seeks to investigate deeply held opinions on current and sensitive community and political matters that must be grasped if progress towards a new society is to be realised.

## **Acknowledgements**

INTERCOMM would like to acknowledge all of the research participants who generously gave time to share their experiences and insights of the flag protests. We would also like to acknowledge the important support from our funding partners for the 2028 Peace Programme – the Atlantic Philanthropies (NI) and the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister.

INTERCOMM would like to acknowledge the efforts of our staff members Michael Atcheson and Winston Irvine who led on this research and without who's work this research would not have been possible.

And finally, INTERCOMM would like to thank Dr Jonny Byrne (University of Ulster) for all his efforts and endeavours in compiling this defining publication.

## Content

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Women's experiences</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. The views of the Churches</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>4. Young people's stories</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>5. The Policing perspective</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>34</b>

## **1. Introduction**

On Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2012, Belfast City Council voted to fly the Union Flag only on designated days; i.e. eighteen days each year. Nationalists and Republican's within the council had initially wanted to cease the flying of the Union Flag, but in the end voted on a compromise put forward by the Alliance Party that it would fly on the eighteen designated days. In the following days and weeks the city experienced public disorder, mass parades and protests, and travel disruption, all of which had huge financial and political costs. Initially, flag protests took place on a nightly basis outside Belfast City Hall. These were soon replaced by weekly protests on a Saturday at 1pm at the gates of City Hall, with the protestors coming from Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist communities. In addition to these protests, other people participated in white line pickets and blocked roads for short periods of time throughout other areas of Northern Ireland.

### **1.1 The flag protests**

As we moved into the spring and summer of 2013, protests outside of Belfast city began to occur less frequently, while the numbers at the weekly protest outside City Hall diminished. In the immediate days and weeks after the change in the flag policy, events associated with the flags dispute could be characterised in the following ways:

1. On a number of evenings there were co-ordinated street protests which often resulted in roads being blocked for a short period of time;
2. Peaceful protests involving large sections of the community;
3. The picketing of Alliance Party offices;
4. Attacks made against property associated with the Alliance Party;
5. Threats made against Alliance Party members;
6. Saturday marches to Belfast City Hall and subsequent protest;
7. Street disturbances and rioting between protestors and the PSNI;
8. Severe criticisms of the policing of the protests from the Nationalist community;
9. A deterioration in the relationship between Loyalists and the PSNI;
10. Confusion around what constituted peaceful and legal protests; and
11. Injured police officers and significant numbers of arrests.

In response to these incidents, the PSNI put in place a specific policing operation, referred to as 'Operation Dulcet'. This is investigating a range of offences including serious rioting; hijacking of vehicles; attacks on politician's offices; threats made against politicians; obstructive sitting; un-notified processions; and social media

offences. The Deputy Chief Constable (2013) recently said that over 520 people had been charged or reported for public order offences from the start of the flag protest in December last year and including this summer's parading season.

## **1.2 Research Rationale**

The purpose of the project was to conduct a small scoping study to ascertain the views, opinions and interpretations of those directly and indirectly effected by the flag protests. Although the media have reported the protestors anger at the decision on the Union Flag at Belfast City Hall, there is a new narrative emerging that suggests that this anger and fury is more connected to a strong sense of loss; disengagement with the political elite; and a view that Loyalist culture and sense of identity is being stripped away than the change in flag policy at the City Hall. Therefore, this research will seek to identify, explore and consider a number of areas:

- a. The rationale and justification employed by those protesting and a review of the underlying issues manifested within the protests;
2. The critical issues, dilemmas and debates resulting from the Belfast City Council decision to adopt a designated days policy in terms of the flying of the Union Flag; and
3. An understanding of the wider issues facing members of the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist communities in terms of the peace and political processes.

## **1.3 Methodology**

The research involved two methodologies: focus groups and the observation of events such as parades and protests. INTERCOMM reached out to a number of community and voluntary groups in North Belfast to determine whether they would engage with the research. The following groups participated:

- Two focus groups with female flag protestors
- One focus group with representatives from the Churches
- One focus group with young people from the Loyalist community

The focus groups were guided by a series of informal questions based around themes focusing on the flag protests. These included:

- People's understanding and opinions around the Union Flag issue/dispute;

- Whether the protests strengthened or weakened Loyalist identity and culture;
- Views of Nationalist and Republican politician's responses to the flag issue;
- Views of mainstream unionism's response to the flag issue;
- Views with regard to feelings of 'loss' within the loyalist/Unionist community;
- Positive aspects of Unionist and Loyalist culture;
- Views and understanding of the peace process; and
- Exploring the future and challenges to Loyalism and Unionism within Northern Ireland.

Upon the completion of the focus groups it became apparent that there were a number of issues directly related to the PSNI and the policing of the protests. Therefore, it was considered appropriate to conduct a further interview with the PSNI to ascertain their views, experiences and challenges around policing the flag protests.

In addition to these focus groups, the study also involved the researcher attending over forty parades and protests at City Hall and beyond. The researcher observed the role of protestors and the police at these events and on numerous occasions spoke with protestors to ascertain their views of the protests. These observations assisted in the compiling of the report and provided alternative insights into the area of interest.

#### **1.4 Research report**

The remainder of this report documents the main findings from the discussions through a series of themes. Initially, the views of the women focus groups are presented, followed by the Churches, young people and the PSNI. The report concludes with a critical interpretation of the flag protests, and considers the future for the protests, and Loyalism more generally. It is important to acknowledge from the outset that this is a small scoping study, but it does present a first hand account of those directly and indirectly effected by these protests. For the first time, we have an opportunity to consider the views and reflections of those directly involved in the protests, and explore the implications from their perspective.

## 2. Women's stories

The following chapter outlines a number of key themes that emerged from several discussions with women that had been, and continue to participate in 'flag protests' in Belfast. They protest on a weekly basis at the gates of Belfast City Hall, as well as participate in white line pickets close to their homes. All of the women are from North Belfast. A number of discussions took place with the women while they participated in the protests, and also in community centres in their respective neighbourhoods. In addition to these discussions, the researcher also observed a number of public protests over the past ten months.

### 2.1 The Flag

From the outset the participants were keen to stress that the protests were much more than an acknowledgement of 'anger' about the decision to remove the flag from City Hall. The protests were about telling those in power and wider society that the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist people were not going to let their sense of identity, which they defined as 'Britishness', be airbrushed from the 'new' Northern Ireland:

*These protests are about us remembering who we are, and telling people that we will not forget how we achieved our place in this country...and we are not going away until the flag is back in its rightful place*

In essence, respondents identified the protests as an opportunity to highlight their Protestant tradition and articulate and acknowledge what they believed people historically fought for. For them, it was about the preservation of the rights of the Protestant people. As reflected by one respondent:

*If those people hundreds of years ago hadn't done what had to be done, where would we be now. Likewise, we are not going to sit by and let others trample on the memory our Protestant fathers and remove the flag they fought for*

Obviously there was a great deal of anger and frustration from participants in terms of the decision to change the flag flying policy at Belfast City Council. They maintained that Nationalists and Republicans wanted to eradicate all remnants of Protestantism from the city:

*It is not about protecting our culture; it is more about people that don't want you to have a culture*



When further probed on how the flag represented their culture, the participants indicated that the Union Flag made them feel proud, emotional and confident as a community. It also gave them a sense of security and allowed them to maintain the view that they had a place in the 'new' Northern Ireland. However, since the decision had been taken to 'remove it', they had begun to question their role and place in the society being reconfigured through devolution and power sharing:

*These protests are a response to the anger and fear that now exists within our communities. The removal of the flag is an illustration of where our society is going, a place that doesn't accommodate a Unionist tradition*

The respondents were unequivocal in their position that the protests were legitimate and a perfectly rationale response to the change in the flag policy at Belfast City Hall. They had felt extremely 'let down' by their political representatives, and maintained that the protests facilitated them in raising public awareness of the issue. They also ensured that they felt that they were actively responding and making a positive difference to their community.

## **2.2 Policing of protests**

The policing and management of the protest proved to be one of most contentious conversations with participants. Overall respondents were extremely negative of the policing of the flag protests. The general perspective from protestors was that the PSNI were '*heavy-handed, used excessive force and actually heightened tensions*'. The first point mentioned by respondents centred on the perceived lack of consistency with the PSNI approach to the protests. The participants felt that in the first six weeks of the protests the PSNI had been accommodating and supportive of their attempts to exercise their right to peaceful protests:

*At the start you didn't really see the police, they managed the traffic and let us get on with things*

However, the respondents noted that after a short period the type and style of policing changed significantly. They felt that the PSNI had become aggressive and antagonistic towards the protestors in light of Nationalist and Republican criticisms of the protests. This appeared to reinforce the view that there was an agenda to eradicate Unionist and Loyalist culture:

*They took the flag down, and then they used the police to silence us...this was all about getting rid of the Loyalists and what they represented*

The participants noted that when the police became more active and involved in the protests their attitude and approach dramatically changed. A number of protestors noted that the types of officers changed along with their appearance. They felt that after a few weeks a decision was taken to replace neighbourhood officers with officers more suitable for policing public order situations (i.e. Tactical Support Groups or TSGs). They noted a change in how these officers were dressed and their overall demeanour when interacting with protesters:

*One time we were talking with the neighbourhood police, and the TSGs came over and pushed us off the road and said, 'you don't listen to anyone but us'*

Several respondents indicated that they had made initial enquiries about lodging complaints about police behaviour. Others recalled how they had tried to voice their concerns about the style of policing and attitude of specific officers with senior officers but had felt that their views had been ignored:

*When we went to complain and tried to take the number of different officers, they just laughed in our faces*

Discussions also centred on how the policing of the protests had impacted on the relationship between the Unionist and Loyalist communities and the PSNI more generally. There was a general acceptance from all of the participants that meaningful engagement in some areas had become a rarity and that people had simply stopped working and talking with the PSNI:

*I used to work with the police, you know got involved in different programmes and helped where I could...see now, I wouldn't give them the time of day*

There was a great deal of anger and resentment shown by the respondents towards the PSNI. There were two central areas of concern. The first area of concern was attributed to the perceived notion that they were overly zealous and aggressive, abusive, and viewed as policing Loyalists differently to Republicans. The second explanation centred on respondent's perceived loss of identity and connection with policing institutions, which came to the fore during the flag protests. Many had strong affiliations with the police, but now felt 'let down' by the current service and perceived them as being complicit with those responsible for taking the Union Flag down from Belfast City hall.

### 2.3 Sense of loss

It was clear from participants that there was a 'strong sense of loss' in terms of the removal of the Union Flag. Respondents acknowledged that it was often difficult to articulate this loss. Indeed, as they found it more difficult to explain to the media and wider civil society the deep hurt that they felt, the more frustrated they became. When asked why it was so challenging to express this sense of loss, respondents noted the following:

- a. A biased media who consistently focused on the negative and failed to report on the 'hurt' felt within Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist communities;
- b. The disconnect between the public and the political classes which meant that their voices were not being heard in local government or the NI Assembly; and
- c. A Republican propaganda campaign, which portrayed the flag protestors as nothing more than unemployed sectarian idiots that could not read or write.

The respondent's saw the protests as their only method of expressing their hurt and disbelief with the removal of the flag, although they also acknowledged that it was often difficult to transfer this behaviour into words:

*People just see us standing there in the rain and think we are bigots, but all we are doing is trying to tell people how much that decision means to us...It's really hard trying to explain the hurt, anger and isolation that we feel*

Although the change in flag policy was the catalyst for the street protests and large numbers of Unionist and Loyalists taking to the streets, it was not the only frustration held by the protestors. According to participants there had been a number of events over the last decade, which from their perspective highlighted the unbalanced peace and political processes:

*For the last ten years it's been about Republicanism...change the police, stop the parades, tell us where we can play music...what's going to be next?*

Furthermore, respondents felt that over the last decade it was becoming more difficult to express their identity, celebrate their culture, and acknowledge their past. They talked about a Republican veto towards notions of commemoration, and a view that the 'new' Northern Ireland was a place that excluded ideals of Unionism and Loyalism. It was a challenge to convey how this loss is effecting the Loyalist community. They maintained that the equality agenda was in fact a Republican agenda and that the last decade had seen a steady stripping away of everything that

was important to their community: *'they pick, pick, pick and pick away at our culture until all we are left with is scraps'*.

The protests were essentially a public rallying call from Loyalism, maintaining that they would no longer stand by while they perceived that their culture and identity was being stripped away. Although the protests were focused on the removal of the flag, they were about so much more, with those participating maintaining that they were fighting for their very existence as a community. As one respondent noted:

*We are supposed to be the next generation, we have come through the Troubles and we are meant to be heading in a new direction...there is only one direction, and that's under the Tricolour*

For respondents the idea of parity of esteem was simply a myth being peddled by Sinn Féin, and an opportunity for them to pursue a Republican agenda which was more about reducing and ultimately eradicating any sense of Loyalism and Unionism.

#### **2.4 Where are the men?**

In an interesting development, several of the female participants were openly critical of men within their communities for not doing more to support them during the protests. A number of respondents recalled how the white line protests in their neighbourhoods involved mostly women and that local men had refused to participate. As one participant noted, *'women are more passionate... they are more committed to the protests'*. Several went further and concluded:

*Some women have felt let down by the men in their community. They have stood on the line, taking abuse from the other community and the police, and the men just hover in the background*

The participants noted that in the past men would have been more supportive, and active in terms of responding to perceived injustices within the community. However, since the protests began in early December it had been obvious to the respondents that the impetus for action had come from women in the community:

*It's been the women from the start. They have organised the protests and stood in the street in the rain and snow and kept this issue alive. The men have been absent. Maybe it's not 'macho' enough for them*

Although there was a degree of frustration with the lack of male support for the protests the respondents acknowledged that the women were more than capable of continuing with their campaign in the form of the flag protests.

## 2.5 The personal impact

Conversations soon shifted to consider the personal implications of participating in the flag protests. The respondents discussed at length the challenges they had faced along with affects on their families and friends. A number of general themes emerged which have been outlined below:

- a. *Vilified* – Several of the participants were extremely critical of the clergy, sections of the media, and some Unionist politicians in relation to their views of the flag protestors. There was a sense that these groups were quick to criticise them and demonise their actions and behaviours;
- b. *Criminalised* – It was noted from respondents that large numbers of people had took the decision to abandon the protests for fear of getting a criminal record. There was confusion as to what was legal and illegal behaviour around protesting, and many felt that the increased police presence at protests would result in more people facing arrest and prosecution;
- c. *Risk to employment* – According to the majority of participants there were a number of reported incidents in which flag protestors had been identified through the media by their employers and had subsequently received subtle criticism for their participation in the protests. This had made some fearful of losing their job;
- d. *Increased pessimism* - There was a general consensus from respondents that they had become even more apathetic and despondent about the position and place of Unionism and Loyalism in the new 'Northern Ireland'; and
- e. *Loss of confidence* – As the protests had continued through the year and civil society and the political institutions became more critical of the protestors, they began to 'lose faith' in the PSNI, politicians and the direction of the peace and political processes.

One respondent whose son was serving with the British Army in Afghanistan captured these effects most concisely by concluding that six months into the protests she felt that they had:

*Stripped away my dignity, first by taking the flag down, and then the way they treated me for protesting against it*

When asked if there were any positives that could be derived from their participation in the protests, the respondents all agreed that it had increased community bonds and created a sense of camaraderie within the protestors.

## **2.6 Violence**

Discussions centred on the relationship (if any) between the flag protests and violence. According to several respondents '*violence is often a reaction from the 'other' community to the commemoration of our culture and identity*'. They acknowledged that the violence at City Hall on the night the decision was taken to change the flag flying policy was unacceptable and had to be condemned. It was also noted that violence simply deflected from the underlying issues and often meant that the message around Loyalist and Unionist 'sense of loss' was ignored:

*The media just pick up on the violence and we lose the opportunity to highlight our issues...the media prefer when there is trouble*

Apart from the initial violence in the days after the decision had been taken to remove the flag, the respondents felt that the protests had been well organised and peaceful. They believed that there was a tendency for the media to portray the protests in a negative light and demonise those participating in them and focus on any minor incidents of violence as opposed to the majority that were peaceful.

## **2.7 Relationships**

The participants were asked about their relationships with local politicians and whether they felt supported by them during the protests. In terms of the relationship between the community and the political elite the view from respondents was one of anger, frustration and apathy. The general impression was that there was no meaningful relationship and/or attachment between working class Loyalists and Unionist politicians, and this had been further exacerbated since the protests began. Furthermore, they drew comparisons between their lack of representation and connection to Unionist politicians and the perceived high levels of engagement between Nationalist/Republican residents and their local politicians. As one respondent noted:

*They don't come out and support us, yet Sinn Féin stand with local residents and push for their demands in the Council or Assembly*

Another view was that individual politicians were afraid of becoming embroiled in the issues because of the implications for their parties in the devolved administrations:

*They can come and stand at the protests and criticise Sinn Féin, but the next day they are doing deals with them and sharing power...that's just hypocritical*

However, there were some participants that maintained that their Unionist politicians had been consistent in regards to their attendance at the beginning of the protests. These were usually local councillors and not MLAs or MPs. Although, it was also noted, that as the months progressed the amount of visible political support diminished.

There was also a suggestion from participants that relationships and levels of engagement with the Nationalist and Republican community had suffered since the beginning of the protests. Several of them had been involved in 'cross community' programmes prior to these events, and had established strong links with their Nationalist neighbours. However, since the protests had begun, they had ceased to meet, and were reluctant to commit to similar programmes. They felt frustrated with the lack of understanding from their neighbours and maintained a 'shared future' was more about promoting a Republican identity at the expense of Loyalist culture:

*The idea of a shared future is one, which doesn't include Unionists and Loyalists. It is more about protecting their (Republican) identity and one that will only see us (Loyalists) continue to lose out*

Participants felt that 'cross community' work and programmes aimed at building relationships across communities were meaningless and without merit. This was emphasised in relation to the view that Nationalists and Republicans were not willing to both recognise and acknowledge the Unionist history, identity and culture in the so-called 'new' Northern Ireland.

## **2.8 Summary**

This brief analysis has considered the views of female flag protestors, many of who have been attending daily and weekly protests since the beginning of December. The discussions have revealed the sense of isolation, abandonment and anger that exists within this constituency. Interestingly, several respondents maintained that the continuation of the protests would increasingly galvanise their community. As one respondent noted:

*If Sinn Féin think that this will break us and kill off our sense of culture then they are wrong. In fact it is going to have the opposite effect.*

The respondents were adamant that the immediate future would be bleak and that 'we are going to have to fight for it'. Furthermore, there was criticism of the government's insistence on pursuing a 'shared future' agenda when they felt that in practice, shared space was dominated by a Nationalist/Republican position. As several participants noted, 'shared space should be shared equally', yet there was no consideration of Loyalism and what its place should be in the 'new' Northern Ireland.



### 3. The Churches

In addition to the flag protestors, it was felt that it was both important and necessary to ascertain the views and experiences of the clergy and those associated with the Churches in Belfast. Discussions took place with twelve individuals from various backgrounds from across the city on topics that included: their understanding of the flag protests; the challenges around articulating the reported 'sense of loss'; and the impact on local relationships and the role of the political institutions. The following sections draw on the conversations through the presentation of emerging themes.

#### 3.1 Understanding the issue

The initial conversations centred on the respondents' views and interpretations of the flag protests. From the outset, the majority indicated that the public framed the protests in a number of different ways. According to some participants the protests were seen as a rational response to the change in flag policy from a section of the community that felt vulnerable, alienated, and left behind. The narrative being that over the last decade the Loyalist community had grown particularly apathetic to the peace and political processes. They had felt detached and ignored and viewed the flag decision as evidence of their diminishing place in the society:

*Like it or not there are people out there who feel no ownership of the transformation process, and the issue of the flag was the straw that broke the camel's back*

Therefore, the protests were simply a manifestation of underlying anger, with the flag decision simply proving to be the catalyst for community action. The question of whether the current flag protests were a real manifestation of a particular form of disempowerment, or was the 'sense of loss' that protests talked about actually imagined, was posed to the rest of the participants. There were those that maintained that the protests were being orchestrated by criminal elements and were simply individuals engaging in anti-social and reckless behaviour under the guise of some form of patriotism:

*These protests aren't about culture and identity...they are small groups of people that enjoy having an identity and causing mayhem*

There was agreement that the protests and protestors were viewed very differently across society. For some the protests were about the flag, while for others the protests were the visible outputs of a community's anger at the trajectory of the peace and political processes.

It was also interesting to note that there was disagreement from respondents as to what extent there was support for the protests beyond the constituency of the protestors. According to one respondent:

*These are not just a bunch of crazy people trying to cause disruption and just don't realise the conflict is over...there are a lot of people from the Unionist community that agree with these protests but might not shout it from the roof tops.*

However, others felt that the protests only became an issue for wider society when they personally effected people, i.e. through traffic disruptions. Generally, it was felt that the wider public were ambivalent to issues surrounding the protests and chose not to understand the protestors' reasons for participating in white line pickets and protests every Saturday at 1pm at Belfast City Hall.

### **3.2 The 'sense of loss'**

The respondents were asked to consider what the protestors meant by the term 'sense of loss' in relation to the change in the flag policy. There was agreement that the protestors had found it challenging to articulate what this meant or convey their anger and frustrations to the wider public. When asked to expand on this point, respondents noted what they felt the 'sense of loss' was about:

*These people feel that their identity and what they represent is being stripped away, piece by piece, and they can do absolutely nothing about it*

Essentially, the protests were people's opportunity to reflect the anger, hurt and pain that was being felt in terms of their view that their existence was being undermined by a Republican agenda. There was recognition that many of the protesters had difficulty in conveying what the 'sense of loss' entailed and had grown frustrated at the media's portrayal of the protestors:

*Speaking to some there is the real perception that they are being left behind, and the media are ignoring their arguments*

It was also felt from several respondents that the protestor's sense of loss should be viewed within the wider analysis of the peace and political processes. For many, there had never been a peace dividend, in terms of practical and tangible outputs, which could be attributed to the ending of the conflict. The argument was that Loyalist working class communities had not benefitted from the peace and political processes in terms of environmental regeneration, increased employment, and health and social wellbeing. The flag protests were simply a disenfranchised section

attempting to draw attention to the catalogue of issues impacting on their community.

There was some sympathy from participants for those protesting peacefully with the acknowledgement that their sense of injustice was 'real' but that they had lost the public and moral argument. Other respondents were extremely critical of the protests, noting that the protestor's arguments were being lost in the incidents of violence, traffic disruption and public disorder. While noting that not all of the protestors had engaged in these activities, it was felt that the negative incidents had dominated wider public's views of the protests.

### **3.3 Fragmentation of relationships**

A theme that dominated many of the conversations was the impact of the protests on relationships both within and between communities. Within Loyalism, it was evident that some sections had chosen not to participate in the protests at City Hall and subsequent white line protests. This had raised tensions within the wider community with people being associated as being for or against the protests:

*You had people being really criticised in their areas for not standing at the protests and some had their commitment to Loyalism questioned*

It was also noted that although the early protests had been well attended, it was clear that significant support in terms of numbers on the streets had decreased substantially. There was a sense that this would cause further dismay for protestors and further destabilise community relationships as many of the protests consisted of people from the same streets and neighbourhoods:

*In places this has divided the community. It has essentially fractured Loyalism*

The ramifications of this were that it was increasingly difficult to ascertain who spoke the flag protestors, and in more general terms, Loyalism.

The respondents also noted that the protests had weakened relationships between the Loyalist community, local government and the PSNI. Several respondents had noted that the narrative within these communities was framed around negative police tactics, and that the police were overly aggressive and critical of the protests. There was an acknowledgement that there had been some confusion around what was lawful and what was unlawful protesting, and this had led some of the protestors to question the integrity of the PSNI. It was also discussed that the relationships between the Loyalist community and the council and other public sector bodies had been damaged in light of the change in flag policy, with protestors

assuming that they were under the influence of a Republican agenda to remove all forms of Loyalist symbolism from the city.

### **3.4 Disconnected communities**

There was a sense from participants that what the flag protests had really shone a light on was the disconnection between particular communities and their political representatives. From the outset it was obvious to many that the politicians had lost complete control of the protests, and were unable to either control or appease the protestors. The protestors did not seem to identify or relate to their Unionist politicians, and at times, attributed blame to them:

*You could see very quickly that the protestors blamed 'big house' Unionism for their plight...they felt that Unionists had given in to Republicans and were unwilling to support the Loyalist people*

Although the peace process had delivered stable government and an end to the armed conflict, the protestors maintained that it was the politicians that had benefited and had not transferred the positives to the communities, which had elected them.

Participants also noted that the disconnection was not just with politicians, but also with the Churches and middle-class Unionism. Several noted that class had become a significant issue, and that the protests had generated new debates about the relationship between Loyalism and Unionism:

*For some the protests were a working class thing...if you protest you are a Loyalist, and if you stay at home, but say 'that's awful' about the flag then you're a Unionist*

In terms of the role of the Churches, it was suggested that they had a considerable role with regards to engaging with everyone associated with the protests. Many participants indicated that they had been meeting with large numbers of people associated with the protests through their normal day-to-day working. The Church was significant as it could have those difficult and challenging conversations, but also allow those engaged in the protest and feel that sense of loss, to talk and exercise some of their anger and frustration.

### **3.5 Symbols in the 'new' Northern Ireland**

As previously noted the protests were viewed as the Loyalist community communicating to the wider public that they felt their culture, history and identity was under threat. Participants said that the protestors maintained that the peace

and political processes were one sided and for the most part revolved around addressing Republican and Nationalist needs, at the expense of Loyalists and Unionists:

*For them the peace process hasn't delivered very much, it has been about giving things up, with policing being a very good example*

Many saw the change in flag policy as the 'straw that broke the camels back'. Over the last fifteen years they had watched the transformation of society, but for Loyalism this seemed to incorporate more of Republicanism than seemed appropriate. From their perspective, the 'new' Northern Ireland was about accommodating Republicanism, evidenced through: policing and the change of name and 50:50 recruitment; the use of the Irish language; designated days for flags; and and restrictions on parades:

*The symbols are really important. They are a tangible illustration that you exist...and for many within the Loyalist community, they don't see assurances that they have a place in this new society*

This perceived 'lack of place' was identified as an underlying cause for the reaction to the change in flag policy at Belfast City Hall. The politicians, especially those within the Unionist community were viewed as having completely misread the sense of anger, hurt and frustration that existed within the Loyalist community. Rightly, or wrongly, the protestors maintained that Republicans were eradicating their symbols and identity, under the auspice of equality.

### **3.6 Nationalism and Republicanism**

The conversations also included the role of Nationalists and Republicans within the context of the decision to change the flag policy and then the subsequent protests. Respondents felt that it was important that the 'other' community both understood and recognised the hurt caused by the decision. Furthermore, they had to realise that large sections of the Unionist and Loyalist community felt that their wider culture, history and identity were under threat in the 'new' Northern Ireland:

*Nationalists and Republicans need to realise that sharing means accepting the other communities' symbols and past*

Several respondents maintained that Republican's were engaged in a campaign and strategy of one-upmanship with success being measured by the reduction and removal of Unionist symbols. There was minimal evidence to suggest that they would support or promote the Unionist and Loyalist culture and history. When asked

whether they felt Nationalist political parties had a role in alleviating some of the pressure emanating from the protests, one respondent noted:

*Sinn Féin cannot afford to make Northern Ireland work*

There was a sense that Sinn Féin has become ambivalent to the hurts within Loyalism and the fears that exist. They pointed to the growing narrative around a border poll and push for a United Ireland. Furthermore, this does nothing to appease the concerns of Loyalists and simply feeds their anger and mistrust of Sinn Féin and their position in government.

### **3.7 What is Loyalism?**

The discussions also ventured onto the term 'Loyalism', and what it actually meant to define oneself as 'Loyalist'. What followed was an interesting debate around the complexities of the term, along with how it was interpreted very differently across society, often depending on one's social, economic, political and community background. Several of the key points to emerge from the discussions included:

*People struggle with it as a term*

*Loyalism is the violent side of Unionism*

*Class defines the differences between Loyalism and Unionism*

*Loyalism is fragmenting all over the place...East don't speak to North Belfast*

There was a real sense that people find it difficult to articulate what is meant by Loyalism, especially those that claim to be a Loyalist. There was an agreement that historically the word was associated with paramilitary activity and more recently had become demonised as a term because of criminals claiming to be Loyalists. Essentially, it was seen as term, which incorporated a number of things:

*You are loyal to the crown and your Britishness...and you history and identity and the people that made it possible for you to be here now*

It was noted on a number of occasions that the media often portrayed Loyalism in a very negative light. The problem was that when someone claiming to be a Loyalist was involved in illegal activity then all Loyalists were associated with the individual and the act. In the context of the flag protests, several respondents maintained that there were some individuals within Loyalism manipulating the situation in an attempt to make political gains. As one respondent noted:

*Who is telling Loyalism what to do? Is it a political party because at the end of the day we don't know? Polarisation means votes.*

Several respondents also talked about the more militant element of Loyalism and felt that the current political environment had the potential to expand this grouping. They felt that the protests and the growing alienation within Loyalism from mainstream Unionism, and the political institutions, more broadly, could see the expansion of militant Loyalism. However, there was also agreement that Loyalism had to begin to redefine itself and explain to the wider public what it represented and how it had a role in the 'new' Northern Ireland. Respondents talked about:

*The need to create a new confidence and a new identity around Loyalism, one that was not demonised, and one that people could easily understand what it represented*

Overall, the discussions placed a focus on what it meant to be a Loyalist in 2013, and revealed that Loyalism as a concept had deep meaning and history and was finding it challenging to be relevant and accepted in society.

### **3.8 Absence of leadership**

The discussions around Loyalism led to a further debate about the apparent lack of leadership both political and civic among the protestors. There was agreement that those protesting were apathetic to the politics and Stormont, and were extremely critical of the mainstream Unionist parties:

*They don't see any benefits from supporting Stormont...actually they feel let down by their own politicians and blame them for current predicaments*

Many of the participants viewed the nightly protests as very local and unorganised events. There did not appear to be any strategy or plan to redress the change in flag policy at City Hall. In addition to this, there was no one key representative who could articulate the concerns, fears and anger of the protests, and this was to the detriment of their campaign.

Finally, participants talked about the mixed messages and signals the protestors were receiving from political Unionism. Initially the parties supported the protests through public statements and their presence on the ground. However, within weeks this public support had evaporated, yet the protesters had been told from the outset that it was their right to protest and was a viable way of illustrating their anger. After a number of weeks the protestors became very isolated, criticised and in some quarters vilified. This simply reinforced their perception that the political

establishment ignored the needs of the Loyalist community, and this increased apathy with politics in general.

### **3.9 Summary**

Of the key themes to emerge from the discussions, it would appear that the protestor's inability to articulate their anger, fear and sense of loss was of the most importance. There was an acceptance that the wider public were unsure as to the motivations behind the protests, and that the protestors had felt the change in flag policy was one of a series of events which aimed to eradicate their culture, history and presence. On a positive note, the protests had shone a light on the sense of empowerment within some communities, and that the Churches had engaged and continue to engage with people on the issues of the flag and underlying concerns around the erosion of culture, history and identity.



## 4. Young people's views

In August 2013 INTERCOMM brought together ten young people (aged between 17-21) from the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community to discuss the flag protests. All of the participants had been involved in the protests, ranging from taking part in Saturday parades into the city centre and white line pickets in their neighbourhoods. A number of themes emerged from the conversations, which have been outlined below.

### 4.1 The flag

According to the participants the decision to move to designated days was evidence that their culture and history was no longer welcome in Belfast. They had witnessed a series of changes to how they celebrated and commemorated their identity, usually with parades and bonfires. The decision, in their words 'to take down the flag' was symptomatic of a long term Republican agenda to effectively remove their community from the city:

*We are under threat...you have seen it with the bands were we cant even play music in certain places and with the bonfires were we are being told what we can and cannot burn. Now it's the flag, it's all we have to show who we are*

Other young people talked about the relationship between the flag and the military and referred to the strong ties that exist between Loyalist families and the Armed Forces. They viewed the flag decision as a snub to the military, and a further example of how their history was not relevant in today's society.

The move to designated days was also further evidence that the 'shared society' that Republican and Nationalist politicians talked about did not include people from their community. One respondent noted that the '*way things are going we are only going to be able to parade in the Shankill*', therefore it was crucial that the community took a stand against the flag decision. They acknowledged the deep anger and frustration that existed within their community, and were also surprised at the number of young people that had become involved in the flag protests:

*Usually it's hard to get young people interested, but this flags thing has really changed things. Young people seen the flag coming down, they realised that this is real, we are under threat*

As previously articulated, the protests were described as having their basis in a wider range of issues than the specific issue of the Union Flag at Belfast City Hall. The

young people talked about the concessions to Nationalists and Republicans since the ceasefires, and felt that a stand had to be taken:

*I see people out there who are not political in any way whatsoever, but they feel that protesting is the only way that they will get their voices heard*

The young people also felt that the PSNI, politicians and wider public underestimated how much anger existed within their community. There was a sense that people expected the protests to disappear after a few days, but there was a renewed commitment and resolution to see the protests out until the policy had been reversed.

## **4.2 Media**

All of the participants were extremely critical of the reporting of the protests from the media. Several young people felt that the media had a tendency to focus on the negatives associated with the protests and ignore the issue and the anger within the Unionist and Loyalist communities:

*They report on traffic disruption and any arrests, but ignore why we are doing what we are doing. They don't highlight the sense of injustice or the hurt that exists within the community*

Essentially, it was felt that there was a demonisation of Loyalism by those from the media with the protestors often portrayed as criminals and engaging in anti-social behaviour:

*What does Loyalism mean...if you read the media reports we are fascists or paramilitaries...it's a dirty word*

Young people compared the reporting of Loyalism with that of Republicanism and felt that the media were more understanding and sympathetic with the latter rather than the former. The participants also felt that there was an underreporting of incidents where protestors had come under attack from Nationalist residents or had experienced oppressive policing.

## **4.3 Political Unionism**

Young people were also frustrated and angry at the response to the protests from the mainstream Unionist parties. It was noted that at the beginning of the protests Unionist politicians were on the ground and quick to speak to the media about the flag decision and publically support the protests. However, as one respondent noted:

*The DUP and the UUP turned their backs on the protests very quickly*

This was viewed as having increased the existing disconnection between the Loyalist community and the political parties. There was a lot of anger aimed towards the DUP and the First Minister. Many felt that they had 'sold out', and were ambivalent to the needs and concerns that existed in Loyalist working class communities.

The participants talked about the leaflet that had been produced prior to the decision by Belfast City Council to reduce the number of the days the Union Flag flies, and felt this was an open invitation to protest. Initially, they felt supported this approach and being part of an issue that had seemed to be embraced by the 'Unionist family'. However, that quickly dissipated and according to one person 'the very people that encouraged them onto the streets disowned them'. They could not associate or identify themselves with the main parties, with some showing interest and joining the PUP as an alternative to mainstream Unionism.

The young people consistently referred to the lack of appetite for politics within their section of the community. There was no trust or affinity with their politicians, and the protests were a result of the absence of politics. They believed that these protests were their only method of telling the public and political establishment of their anger.

#### **4.4 Policing**

There was a challenging discussion around the role of the PSNI throughout the protests. There was a general acceptance that the policing of the protests had been badly handled and only served to increase tensions and fears within their community. A number of young people talked about their experiences of the police at the protests, referring to numerous occasions, where they felt the PSNI had been overly aggressive, antagonistic and confrontational. They noted the differences between neighbourhood officers and those from the TSG:

*The protests would be peaceful and then the TSGs would come in and literally bully and push us off the road*

The young people were clear that the methods employed by the PSNI, in addition to their attitude and approach, had a detrimental impact on long-term relationships between the Loyalist community and the police. A number of them talked about not engaging with any form of the PSNI in the future:

*That's it, why bother? In the past we have worked with the police and done workshops and stuff but not anymore. It is pointless trying to work with them, because they don't care*

According to the respondents this sense of animosity to the PSNI was not restricted to the youth, but was a recurrent theme throughout their communities. It was claimed that people were not being forced to disengage from the PSNI, and it was willingly accepted that the police were not welcome in their neighbourhoods. Finally, the respondents talked about the different approaches employed by the PSNI in relation to the policing of Loyalists and Republicans. There was a sense that the PSNI were reluctant to police Republican areas because of a risk to community relationships and also provide groups such as GARC a platform, and therefore weaken mainstream Republicanism. However, the flag protestors were easier to police because there was less risk of political interference from political Unionism.

#### **4.5 Republicans**

There was a consensus from the participants that the current predicament around the flag and the subsequent protests was firmly the result of Sinn Féin's approach to eradicate the Unionist and Loyalist culture from the city. As one young person suggested 'it is about putting the boot into the Protestant culture'. The participants were unequivocal in their condemnation of Republican's approach to 'a shared future':

*There is clearly a Republican agenda, which amounts to a citywide approach to the issue of culture...one where our own does not exist*

There was a perception that since the Belfast Agreement Sinn Féin had been slowly putting in place measures that aimed to reduce the influence and presence of Unionism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland. They were critical of the Agreement with many noting that if given the chance they would have voted 'no' in the referendum.

The young people did not trust Republicans because they had yet to witness anything from them, which would suggest that they acknowledge, respect or promote their culture and history. Many of these perspectives were also based on narratives within their community that had usually been passed down from adults.

#### **4.6 Protesting**

All of the young people had participated in protests and felt that by doing so they were defending their culture from Republican attacks. They believed that the protests were legal and were successful in raising awareness of the issues prevalent

within their community. Interestingly, they also talked about a growing sense of camaraderie and that young people were beginning to ask questions about their history and what it meant to be called a Loyalist:

*Since the protests started young people are becoming more interested in their past and how Loyalism is part of Northern Ireland...they want to understand their culture and be able to speak confidently about it*

The young people did agree with the position that the protestors found it challenging to articulate their sense of loss around the flags issue. The media and wider public had picked up on the flag as being the catalyst for the protests, yet for the young people the protests represented so much more:

*Yes they started because of the flag, but this is about years of hurt and concessions to Republicans. This is us standing up for ourselves and saying 'no more'. Our culture must be protected*

When asked whether they felt isolated, some indicated yes. They felt cast a drift from the wider Unionist community, and completely cut off from the decision-making processes. But they were stubborn and very committed and more importantly believed in what they were doing. They saw the protests as the proverbial line in the sand, and that to stop now would result in further concessions and restrictions to their culture and identity.

#### **4.7 Summary**

The conversations with young people highlighted the deep-seated anger and frustration that exists within that element of Loyalism over the decision to change the flag flying policy at Belfast City Hall. The lively discussions also revealed the commitment and energy they have for the flag protests and how they see them as their only method of raising awareness of their grievances. The issues surrounding their views of policing raised serious concerns, and there is no doubting the lasting negative affects these will have on long-term engagement within and between communities. Finally, the young people's views of the future are worrying. They simply do not see a place for their Loyalist culture in the 'new' Northern Ireland, and doubt whether politics can address imbalance.

## 5. PSNI perspectives

Throughout the discussions with the female flag protestors, clergy and young people a common theme centred on the role of the PSNI and policing more general. In light of the emerging findings it was deemed appropriate to include the PSNI in the research and ascertain their views and experiences of policing at the flag protests. The PSNI welcomed the opportunity to contribute, but noted at the beginning of the discussion that the organisation were restricted in what they could fully discuss in light of the current judicial review around the legality of the flag protests. However, the PSNI were still in a position to offer broad views on the following: how the flags issue had been framed and interpreted; the dynamics within Loyalism; and issues around police practices and complaints.

### 5.1 Understanding the issue

The discussions initially focused on how the flag protests had been interpreted framed and defined by the PSNI and the wider public. From the PSNI perspective it was felt that the issues surrounding the flag protests were complex, and that the actual protests were sporadic, leaderless and unpredictable. However, in terms of how the protests were managed and policed, the wider public had assumed that it was a relatively straightforward process, which was not the case:

*This was a very complex area that involved different pieces of legislation, but was translated by both communities into a very simple policing issue*

From the policing perspective the flags were about issues of trust, politics, cultural identity, internal conflict management, and the unfinished businesses of the peace and political processes. The actual context that surrounding the protests was not initially about law, order and policing, yet, very quickly the flag protests came to be defined as a policing issue:

*In the minds of both communities, the issue of the flag soon became secondary and it was all about the role of the PSNI, and whether we were upholding the rule of law*

The flags protests were viewed as having become framed through a policing lens and the underlying issues were lost both in the reporting of the protests and the subsequent political fallouts. The PSNI became responsible for managing the consequences of political and communal disagreements and were being judged by both communities differently, depending on how their approach to the protests was perceived. As one PSNI officer noted '*the PSNI should not become the sponge to soak up the anger within the Loyalist communities*'.

## 5.2 Loyalism and leadership

One of the challenges for the police and other public bodies throughout the flag disputes was identifying individuals and groups that could speak on behalf of the protestors. However, it was obvious from the outset that the protests were extremely localised, independent and had limited consistency in terms of participants. The police noted the variety in groups and individuals that had taken part in the protests:

*What section of Loyalism do you speak to? You have Loyal Orders, DUP, PUP, UUP, bands forums, independents, and residents all associated at some level*

The difficulty was that the message of the protestors was getting lost in the narrative around the legality of the protests and the protestors did not have a single voice articulating their concerns and grievances.

## 5.3 Police delivery

Several of the issues raised by the protestors in relation to the policing of the protests were put to the PSNI. One of the key criticisms levelled at the organisation was that there was an inconsistency in their approach to the policing of flag protests when compared to previous breaches of public order by Republicans. More specifically, the protestors maintained the view that PSNI were more aggressive and inclined to arrest them, than when they were confronted with Republican protestors involved in similar activities. However the PSNI were very clear, noting that they do not distinguish between different communities and that:

*Operational circumstances change. You cannot provide a binary approach to policing; you have to police the circumstances that are placed in front of you.*

The PSNI also acknowledged the difficult and challenging environment in which they policed but also reflected that 'it was not within their gift to fix' (the flags issue). It was also noted that the police presence at protests and parades was not the sum total of their engagement with the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community. They had daily engagement with community representatives and politicians from both sides, although it was suggested that this engagement was more difficult in parts of the North and East of Belfast than it was elsewhere.

## 5.4 Complaints

The issue of complaints and public criticisms of the policing of the flag protests were raised with the PSNI. From the outset the PSNI maintained that as an organisation they would:

*Not accept or condone poor standards at all*

It was also noted that if members of the public have specific complaints and/or allegations about the PSNI then they must ensure that they are taken to the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland's (PONI) office. As one officer noted:

*It is important if people have a problem with policing that they feel they can have their grievances heard.*

It was interesting to note that in respect of the policing of the flag protests, the PSNI maintained that to date the actual number of cases reported to the PONI had been relatively small.

## 5.5 Disparity in policing

A number of the young people and female protestors were particularly aggrieved with the role and actions of TSGs during the flag protests. They felt that the PSNI used the neighbourhood officers initially, but if they tired of engaging, and wanted to change tact, then they brought in TSG officers to force the situation. However, the PSNI were quick to note that:

*If actual disorder or the threat of disorder becomes a real issue, then the police on the ground have to revert to public order tactics*

In the days after the decision was taken to change the flag flying policy a number of officers had been injured whilst managing public disorder associated with some protests. As the PSNI noted:

*The Human Rights framework lies at the core of our operational decision-making, but it is sometimes difficult to balance the competing rights of marchers and protestors when they are mutually exclusive. The constituency that often gets lost in this debate is that of police officers, of whom some 700 have been hurt in the past year protecting both communities*



It was also noted that the PSNI were aware of the communities perception around how the protests had been policed, but reiterated that they were simply policing the rule of law.

## **5.6 Summary**

Although the conversations with the PSNI were restricted because of the impending decision of the judicial review, they still provided an insight into their experiences of policing the flag protests. The PSNI maintained that the underlying issues that manifested themselves within the flag protests became lost, with the media's focus and public attention centring on the management and policing of the protests. The policing of the protests has been both challenging and resource intensive, and at times the organisation has been left to act as referees for the inability of the political institutions to address the cultural differences that exist across society.

## 6. Conclusions

The scoping exercise into the experiences of those directly and indirectly affected by the flag protests has produced a series of interesting observations and findings. As we approach the first anniversary of the decision to adopt a designated days policy for the flying of the Union Flag the protests continue. Furthermore, social media has been awash with claims that in the coming weeks there will be an upsurge in protests along with renewed attempts to highlight the issue. The reality is that the protests have not succeeded in reversing the policy decision, but in the minds of the protestors they have created a platform, which allows them to focus attention on the needs and concerns of the Loyalist community.

A number of key themes consistently emerged from the conversations with protestors, which have been outlined below:

- **Sense of loss**

There is no doubting that those directly involved in the protests maintain that the decision to 'remove the flag' has angered the Loyalist community and provided further evidence that their ability to commemorate and celebrate their culture and identity is diminishing. Their challenge, which they freely acknowledge, has been articulating the hurt and frustration in a way that the wider public can understand and relate to.

- **The peace dividend**

Although the protests focused on the flag decision, the protests were actually about the wider view that the Loyalist community hadn't gained from the peace and political processes. They felt that the processes to date were about accommodating Nationalism and Republicanism at the expense of Loyalism.

- **Political apathy**

The majority of those engaged in the protests had become disillusioned with politics and were dismissive of politics being able to deliver meaningful and positive transformations for their communities. They maintained that over the last decade the mainstream Unionist parties had ignored the needs and concerns of the Loyalist community.

- **Police disengagement**

One of the consequences of the protests had been a deterioration of the relationship between the Loyalist community and the PSNI. The protestors maintained that the police on occasions had been overly aggressive and were

particularly keen to criminalise the Loyalist community. The impact was wider engagement with the police on other issues had been affected, especially around community safety and local policing plans.

- **A shared future**

The study revealed that many Loyalists did not feel part of the vision for a shared and cohesive future. They saw no evidence to suggest that their culture and history had a significant place in the 'new' Northern Ireland. The ideas behind a shared future as far as they were concerned was more about promoting a Republican agenda and eradicating any remaining remnants of Loyalism.

- **Future protests**

In terms of the protests, those participating in them maintained that they would continue and potentially increase in the weeks and months ahead. They saw no other alternative to getting their message out, and felt that they were standing up for their rights. For them, without protest the future looked bleak and by participating in such activities they felt that they were actively 'fighting for the protection of their identity'.

Aside from the views of the protestors, other conversations revealed the wider societal frustrations around the flag protests. There were views, which highlighted the negative economic, and political costs, along with the significant number of injuries the PSNI suffered whilst attempting to police the protests. Furthermore, although the central issue has been about the flag, much of the narrative has been about 'what is lawful and unlawful protesting?' with a specific focus on the role of the PSNI.

Clearly, there is a fear within the Loyalist community that both the peace process and the vision for a shared future have been weighted heavily against addressing the needs of the Nationalist and Republican communities, to the detriment of Unionists and Loyalists. This perception is reinforced through the belief that restrictions on band music, parades and bonfires are part of a Republican strategy to diminish the role and significance of Loyalism in the 'new' Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the absence of political leadership compounds the siege mentality and reinforces the sense of isolation. In the eyes of many Loyalists, the only way to secure their culture, history and sense of identity is to replicate the past, take to the streets and hope that mass demonstrations will redress the hurt and sense of loss.