



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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SCHARFF: This is Michael Scharff. The date is September 8th, 2010, and I'm sitting with Tony O'Doherty at the Central Drive Community Center. Mr. O'Doherty is a community activist, and he is also the Chairperson of the local community group here on the Creggan Estate.

Mr. O'Doherty, thank you very much for agreeing to the meeting.

O'DOHERTY: *No problem, Michael, my pleasure.*

SCHARFF: If we could just start off perhaps with you introducing yourself and perhaps explaining how you got into community activism?

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, I like many people, might never have been involved in community activism had it not been for The Troubles. My own background, I played professional football here in Ireland for a variety of clubs. I actually played in international level for Northern Ireland with people like George Best, Pat Jennings, Derek Dugan, you know, some soccer followers will recognize those names.*

But roundabout 1970, I began to question what was the point in taking part in the sport, when the area that I grew up in and where I still socialize, which is here, where I still work, was basically in ruins. So, myself and a few other people got together and formed the first little club here for young men. We had an amazing football league. We had over 600 participants in this field behind you, which you now see as a state-of-the-art AstroTurf fourth generation pitch. When we played on it, it was a grass field with nothing, and we turned into a football pitch. And from there we had a little social club, and we kept that club going, and a little drop-in center, particularly for teenagers, and we've kept that going since about 1970-71, right through to now. And that brings us right up to where we are now. That's the history of how I got involved in community activism.

The subject that you were talking about, Michael, was elections and violence, and we—the one thing, I think it was Mark Twain, I think was credited with saying the only two things in life that are absolutely certain are death and taxes. Well, I could've given him a third one, and that was election night in Derry that there would be violence. It was absolutely nailed on, every election night, the guys, the young men in particular, were waiting on it for weeks in advance; they prepared their stocks of petrol bombs, stones, you name it. And obviously, a lot of it, to a young man, was what we now call recreational rioting. But a lot of it was founded basically in the fact that the police were just not acceptable at that stage.

I showed you outside, Michael, the location of the polling station. I showed there was only two ways in, so no matter what diversionary tactics the police used, we all knew they were going to end up here roundabout half past ten. And the guys would be here in huge numbers, and you know, stones, petrol bombs, quite significant rioting in some stages. We would have been on the streets doing our best to calm that down. We would have been on the streets before it, trying to see if with our local intelligence we could find out where their stocks of petrol bombs, etc. were. Sometimes we were successful; sometimes we were not.

Some of the rioting was very, very bad, and went on for quite a length of time.

SCHARFF: When was the first year that you were on the streets, sort of assisting the community in looking for troublemakers and looking for petrol bombs?

O'DOHERTY: *Difficult saying now what the first year would have been. You can do something with the tape and I'll give you the date. I'll talk to Sean or someone who will*

narrow it down. But we certainly were doing it for quite a number of years. And part of the problem is that the young people that we were talking to, the troublemakers has to go in inverted commas. They were from our community; we understood their attitude to the police. We didn't think it was very educated. We didn't think it was the right thing to do, and we consistently tried to put forward an argument that there was more harm being done to our community than the police in their armored Land Rovers.

We won some of that argument sometimes. But overall, the rioting still persisted.

(INTERRUPTION)

Sean made a good point there, for your reference point, from after the Good Friday Agreement, which was 1998, then we would have been trying to make the elections violence-free if possible, up until about three or four elections ago.

SCHARFF: Was it your responsibility as a community activist, as working for this neighborhood, to do that, or—?

O'DOHERTY: *Well, as a community activist, no one sets you out, as you well know, Michael. No one says this is your job. Your job is what comes to you. And our point was that with the Good Friday Agreement, we didn't want another generation of young men growing up believing that violence was the answer to anything.*

SCHARFF: And when you say “we”, you mean this neighborhood group here that—where we're sitting, or just—?

O'DOHERTY: *I would say that in this particular city, we were speaking for practically the entire community. I have no doubt about that one. We were certainly speaking for all the established political parties, like the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) and Sinn Féin; there's no doubt about that. The SDLP and Sinn Féin people would have been on the streets with us. No, it would have been mainly Sinn Féin people, but SDLP would have been there helping as well. So, we were speaking for the entire community who didn't, who wanted, who'd come through years of violence, seen death and destruction up close, and wanted to move away from it, and had voted to move away from it.*

The problem we had here was that you still had young men who still saw the police as their enemy. And the one occasion that they knew for sure that the police would be in this area was election night. And they spent, as I say, quite considerable time, if they'd put half as much effort and ingenuity in the other parts of their lives as they did in ambushing the police, and we can joke about it now, some of them would have been running about with Ph.D.'s, Masters. I'm absolutely sure.

But as I said, the violence got really bad on some occasions. So, we met, when I say “we”, this initiative mainly came from when some Sinn Féin people approached me and said, look, if we stayed out of this, and made it non-political, and you were able to meet with your counterparts in other parts of the city. In other words, the chairmen of local community groups, how would you folk feel about taking this idea forward to the police.

SCHARFF: Just for our timeline, do you remember approximately what year this was when they first approached you?

O'DOHERTY: *I wouldn't, Michael, to tell you the truth, but we can do it very quickly. You can do it online, because Peter Hain was the Secretary of State. Check when Peter Hain was the Secretary of State and you'll find out very quickly. [Peter Hain was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland after the General Elections of 2005].*

SCHARFF: All right.

O'DOHERTY: *When you get to my age, Michael, the years just fly.*

SCHARFF: They all blend together, right?

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, they do actually.*

SCHARFF: Yes.

O'DOHERTY: *Believe it or not, they do it.*

SCHARFF: Do you think this was before 2000 or after 2000? Can you—could you?

O'DOHERTY: *I would say it was after 2000, yes. But we could put a—we definitely could put a timeframe on it to Peter Hain.*

SCHARFF: Because actually, one of the difficulties that we're having, or one of the questions we still need to try to answer with this research is, exactly where this idea originated that if we—.

O'DOHERTY: *Ricky Russell could almost tell you. I'm sure he, because he would keep notes. He could tell you exactly. Now, he's—I don't if you intended to.*

SCHARFF: I did. He's actually no longer here.

O'DOHERTY: *Correct, But if you can—I'm sure they could get contact for him. And he would have kept notes I'm sure.*

SCHARFF: Sure, sure.

O'DOHERTY: *Well, that's how it came about. There was no—.*

(INTERRUPTION)

So, as I said, that's how it came about; several people approached me from Sinn Féin, put this idea to me. I must be honest; I was skeptical at the start. I thought well, it's not going to work because the police will never go for it. I just can't see it happening. How's it going to work? We were so conditioned with what he had. But we had—I think we had two meetings and—I had two meetings with Sinn Féin on my own, and then I thought let's broaden this out. Let's see where it goes, contacted people like Charlie, who had a very personal interest as well. Charlie would have been here every election night helping us, because his house school was, you know, was a target for the petrol bombs, etc. And there was quiet a lot of damage to the school at times. So, Charlie was here helping us on the streets.

So, I approached Charlie, and then I approached the chairs of all the community groups in the city. And we met, and we kicked it about, and one of the problems with people going to meetings, I'm not a great meeting-goer, as people will tell

you. (1:22) Nor am I sometimes a great democrat. I think when an idea is very obvious, I think it needs doing and then lets see what comes out of it. Some people took a little bit of persuading, but we eventually had a united group that requested a meeting with the police.

SCHARFF: Just to clarify on this subject before we continue to move the story forward, Sinn Féin approached you to say, “Hey look, can you kind of go ahead to the police and pitch this idea?”

O'DOHERTY: *Well, their belief was that if we took the police out of the equation, that the elections would be violence free. I wasn't totally convinced. I have to be honest, I was not totally convinced about that, but nevertheless, we had tried everything else, and sooner or later we were going to have a tragedy. You know, a policeman was going to be killed, a young person up here, or young people up here were going to end up with criminal records, end up in jail, whatever. But there was going to be a tragedy sooner or later, simple as that.*

SCHARFF: And do you think at the same time they were approaching you with this idea, were they also going to other community groups at the other sort of five or six hot spots, if we can call them that, and pitching the similar—?

O'DOHERTY: *If they were, then I'm not aware of it.*

SCHARFF: Interesting.

O'DOHERTY: *If they were, I'm not aware of it. I was, as far as I was concerned, the deal that I was making with them, if you want to call it a deal, was that I would go and pitch this idea and keep politics right out of it. It's not coming from Sinn Féin, I didn't share that with people that it was coming from Sinn Féin. I'm sharing that with you now, Michael. I did not share that with people.*

That's why people think that the idea came from me or from the Creggan group, Because if I had gone and said Sinn Féin, with politics being what they are, it's exactly the same in the States; if a Republican goes with a good idea to a bunch of Democrats, they may not look at the idea, they may simply look at the messenger.

SCHARFF: Sure, sure.

O'DOHERTY: *So, same thing. So, I didn't tell people that.*

SCHARFF: And what was Sinn Féin's interest in all this?

O'DOHERTY: *Well, interest in—and now that they had taken the political path, quite obviously they had an interest in making sure that the elections would take place, and that people would see the elections as being something completely divorced from the previous past of violence.*

SCHARFF: And also perhaps, vote count as well, right?

O'DOHERTY: *Of course.*

SCHARFF: Lower the violence, more people come out to vote.

O'DOHERTY: *Absolutely.*

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'DOHERTY: *But, you know, Sinn Féin were—at that stage, I'm sure they can speak for themselves, but I'm sure they were, they had told people let's have a new, better society. And people obviously would be saying to them on election night, Where's the new, better society? So, I'm assuming that was their thought pattern, you know? But this was never sold to anyone as a Sinn Féin idea. They spoke to me and we carried the idea as Creggan, speaking to Shantallow, speaking to the Bogside, speaking to Hazelbank, Ballymag; those are the four electoral areas in the city. And the chairs of the community groups met and we, you know, again, they were skeptical, as I was, that this would work. But we kicked it about and we thought we have absolutely nothing to lose.*

SCHARFF: And this was probably in—roughly around 2004 or so?

O'DOHERTY: *I think it would be slightly before that, but we'll try to get you a timeline before we leave. We'll try to get you an exact timeline.*

SCHARFF: All right, because we know the—just for the listeners, the violence was quite bad in 2003 and 2004, and then somehow, in some time between 2004 and when the elections in 2005 were held, that was the first time, in 2005, when the police weren't there, so something happened particularly in that year.

O'DOHERTY: *Yes. Well, I'm not so sure that something happened in that year, Michael, as I've already discussed this with you. When we had the meetings with the police, we found Richard Russell, who was the policeman in charge, we found him very open to the idea. I would like to put on the record that some of his other officers weren't so open. But he, I think, from what I knew of him, seemed to be a very professional policeman who did genuinely want to serve the community, and he went for it very, very quickly, didn't need an awful lot of persuasion. I was quite surprised. The meeting we had, as I said, wasn't a very, very long meeting, and we went ahead and, as I say, he went for it.*

Now, we now had the other side of the coin, Michael, We had got an agreement from the police that they would stay out during the day, that they would not come up for the election boxes. But they, in fairness, I have to put this on the record, they did say that if they were called to the area, if there was violence, for example, kicking off and they weren't there, that they would come in. They reserved that right. But they gave us an agreement that they would stay out and it was agreed that civilians would collect the votes.

And the other side of the coin was that we then had to take those streets and persuade our young people all over the city that this wasn't a con, we weren't trying to con them that the police would not be here. They just didn't believe it. I told you that outside here, at the Creggan shops, we had nearly 200-300 gathered, and I have no doubt that they had their stores of, shall we say, ammunition, fairly handy.

But just after 10:00, a car, or people carrier, as we call it here, drove up, a male and a female get out, walk into the building, and a few moments later, walk out with the election boxes, put them in the car, and drive away. And the guys can't believe it, and I said, "No, that's it, guys." "Ha ha, no—that's a bluff!". They didn't believe it, and they hung about for an hour and a half, two hours. But eventually it got through to them. There was absolutely no violence, and we had that replicated right throughout the city.

Now, the police didn't and don't actually have a legal role on Election Day. It was just that here, in the North, it became simply the modus operandi that they protect the election boxes. But it was proved wrong very quickly, I mean, it literally just happened that night. And as I say, the young people stayed about for quite a period of time, believing that we were working some con, that the police were suddenly going to appear, maybe at midnight, and some of them I'm told, because I went to my bed, Michael, some of the local kids hung about until the next morning, absolutely convinced that the police were somehow going to come in and get these election boxes.

And that's how it happened. And like a lot of good ideas, when you look at it now, it so simplistic and so blindingly obvious that you say, "Why didn't we never do it before?" And like, you know, like a lot of good ideas, I think human beings, we just become conditioned.

And I told you the story—I told you a little story, which I think is worth telling, and not for my part in it, but just about the Secretary of State. One of the PA's, or personal assistants, at Stormont, which is our legislative assembly, was a fellow called Paul Sweeney, who's from Derry. And I was giving a radio interview, and I had said to the radio reporter—I am—whatever age I was at the time, I certainly was in my late 50's, that's for sure, and I had said to the radio reporter, "You know, I'm 50" let's say 50, "and this is the first time I've ever seen this. This is democracy in action."

He taped that, and I found out later, I didn't know at the time, he sent it off to the Secretary of State, who was Peter Hain at the time, in the Labour government. And some months later I was asked, I was working and I was asked could I get out of my work, that someone wanted to meet me, it was quite important. I came out of work, went to the Rathmore Centre, where assembled a lot of local business people, everyone. Nearly everyone was in suits, looking really good, all the great and the good. I arrived in a pair of work jeans and steel-toe caps avery boots, which you can see I'm still wearing, to be told that the Secretary of State wanted to meet me. And I thought that was amazing, wants to meet me? What the hell would he want with me?

So, Paul Sweeney approached me and said, "Look, I played the tape of you saying 'democracy in action', and he wants to meet you." So, I told you the lovely little story, he came across to me, the Secretary of State, shook my hand and said, "We have something in common." I said to him, "Well, I have never been Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, so what is it?" And he said, "We both played at Wembley." And I explained to you that I, in a previous life in 1970, which you can see in the record books, I played at Wembley for Northern Ireland against England. And he was telling me that he had played in a charity game the previous week for the MP's (Members of Parliament), the elected representatives, against the press, which is played for charity every year.

But he was so taken with this whole idea of local people, I would hesitate to draw any comparisons with the likes of, in fact, I'd be ashamed to draw comparisons with the likes of Iraq and places like that where people, put their lives on the line, but I suppose in a British or Irish sense, what happened was a little bit—certainly in an Irish sense, it was unique. That's for sure.

I sat with the Secretary of State for half an hour, an hour, I can't remember what we talked about, I'll tell you this much, it was mainly football. It was nearly all about football. He's a big football enthusiast. But it just showed how that little

initiative reached the very highest levels? And we've never ever had any violence on election night since.

SCHARFF: It's an amazing story of how you go from such a small community here to sitting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, an acknowledgement that this is important, that he sees it as an important point to—

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, that part of it is amazing. And it was due to Paul Sweeney who was the PA (personal assistant) at the time.*

(INTERRUPTION)

That's the story, Michael, you couldn't make up a part of it, Peter Hain, it was absolutely incredible. And that seemed to just finish a lovely. You get many knockbacks in community work, as I'm sure you know, many, many knockbacks, and sometimes we wonder is it all worth it. But this was clearly one of those occasions when it was worth it.

And I would likely believe that Peter Hain, in meeting me, was in acknowledgement through me, since he couldn't meet everybody, of all the people who put so much in that. The Charlie O'Donnells, the Charlie Tierneys, The Sean McMonagles, The Barney O'Hagens, the people who put so much effort in that. And I took that as this is his way of acknowledging to a community, and he's done it through one person, which is probably the only way he could do it.

SCHARFF: It's a curious story too in the sense that here's the Secretary of State to Northern Ireland acknowledging what's gone on, taking an interest in this. And I wonder when we get back to the question of well, who gave the green light or who gave the go ahead to take this decision to remove the police at the end of the day, whether it was a decision that really came from—some might even speculate, Westminster?

O'DOHERTY: *I don't know. If it did, I don't know. What I can say to you is this, with a slightly different hat on; I also would do the same type of work for the local football club, Derry City. Derry City had some football games with Linfield. Now, in straight Northern Irish terms which you'll understand, Linfield were for years, an exclusively Protestant team for an exclusively Protestant support. Now, they are not like that now, but nevertheless, they're still very much seen as the standard bearers of Protestantism and football. And they were coming here to the Brandywell, and we're the only football club in the entire football world, we have no police on the grounds; we self-police. And Richard Russell agreed, and his predecessors have since agreed, even when Linfield come, we run the security. No police.*

So, Richard Russell is that kind of policeman, that's what I'm trying to say to you. If there's a story there that some how Sinn Féin knew this would be accepted, then certainly I wasn't aware of it. But I'll tell you now, Michael, I would be very, very, very surprised. I actually believe from Richard Russell's record and how he handles things, I'm absolutely sure he faced resistance from his own policemen over the Linfield thing. He got some very serious criticism for allowing us to self police that from the UP (uniformed police), some very serious criticism, publicly. (3:16)

For your own research, I'm saying to you, he has a track record of being—I suppose a policeman can't be a free thinker, but he was incredibly open minded

and could see things very, very strategically in terms of the community and not just the police. So, I always put it down to, has ability to be open-minded. I don't believe, now you may find something out, but I don't believe there was any behind the scenes conspiracy deal, I don't. I genuinely don't.

SCHARFF: And so, leading up to this decision, you have this meeting where all of the sort of the heads of the community groups get together, decide that let's now approach the police. And so, you approach the police. So, there's a meeting where it's the heads of the community groups and the police. Is this one meeting, or are there successive meetings that take place?

O'DOHERTY: *There was two, I think it was two meetings in total.*

SCHARFF: Okay.

O'DOHERTY: *Two meetings in total.*

SCHARFF: And what's being said at these meetings, are they taking place at the barracks down on Strand Road, or are they taking place up here?

O'DOHERTY: *No. They are taking place mainly in neutral venues. I think one was in the Gilt Hall. And another one might have been in the Council Offices, I think that's where it was, City Council Office.*

SCHARFF: And what's being said at these meetings?

O'DOHERTY: *You see, we couldn't have had those meetings in the barracks. Our credibility within our own community would have been damaged. We wouldn't have went to the barracks. Because I can't come back to my community and stand out there and speak the kids at the shops if they know that I am down in the barracks meeting the police. I can't do that.*

SCHARFF: Because they would see that as conspiring with the police?

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, yes. It would damage our credibility. So, those meetings took place in, the second one, if I remember correctly, definitely took place in the City Council offices. And as I say, Richard Russell seemed very open to the idea, said he would give it a try. With the proviso that if they were needed, they would come in.*

SCHARFF: Was there anyone else there present? It was the community group—heads of the community groups, it was the police. For our research, we love to just get the technical, operational—

O'DOHERTY: *Sure, you had—the police were represented, the community group heads, and we had a fairly senior officer from the City Council, I think it was Tony McGurk, but I don't want to say that for sure, and I think he was acting chief executive at the time. So, that's who was there. The City Council then bought into it. So, you can see that it was now non-political, totally. You had chairs of the various groups, various areas. You had the acting chief executive of, or acting town clerk, I'm not sure, but it was a very senior person in the City Council on board.*

You can see quite clearly that it started with people from Sinn Féin talking to me, and expanded.

SCHARFF: Yes, that's fascinating.

O'DOHERTY: *I go and talk to the other chairs and that second circle has ripples. The City Council, because I discussed it with the local councilors here, Kevin Campbell of Sinn Féin, and Jim Clovert of the SDLP, they take it back to their respective parties. The parties, always they say, this is a fairly good initiative. We need the Council maybe to hear this, to give it a better political—non-political weight. So, they appoint a very senior officer and say, here, this is now your initiative, you go and meet these guys, and run with it. It starts here and branches out.*

So, when we have the meeting with the police, the police are sitting looking at community representatives from all across the city, and a very senior officer of the Council saying that he is speaking with the full authority of Council.

SCHARFF: The way politics works, and forgive my lack of understanding of how the City Council actually works, but you speak with the local Sinn Féin, SDLP members.

O'DOHERTY: Yes.

SCHARFF: They, who sit with the Council.

O'DOHERTY: Yes.

SCHARFF: They go back to the Council.

O'DOHERTY: Yes.

SCHARFF: Now, in order for the head of the Council to, who is present at these meeting with you, and the police, and the community, other community representatives, in order for him to be able to take that decision, would there have to be a vote within the entire City Council? Would this issue have been debated in an open session, for instance?

O'DOHERTY: *Well, I don't believe so. I think it would probably have come up at maybe the Policy Committee, as you well know, it's no different than in America. The real deals are not done in the Senate or wherever.*

SCHARFF: In the coat closet.

O'DOHERTY: *Absolutely, and probably that what it was. The heads of the particular two nationalist parties had probably got together, said to the Chief Executive on our City Council, this is a bloody-good initiative, you know, for our city, see what you can do, and it was done.*

SCHARFF: That's interesting.

O'DOHERTY: *I certainly don't believe that they had any open vote, that's for sure. (9:14)*

SCHARFF: The mayor at the time was Mr. Gerard O'Hara, I believe, Sinn Féin.

O'DOHERTY: Gerry? Yes.

SCHARFF: Was he—would he have had a role in this process, as the mayor?

O'DOHERTY: *No, not directly because that would have made it political. The reason that the Council sent an executive officer is that he is a salaried employee, not elected to represent any particular group. But nevertheless, it's sending a signal.*

SCHARFF: Interesting.

O'DOHERTY: *The mayor was quite clearly very helpful in the background, no question of that, of course. And used whatever clout he had to push this. But we couldn't have brought Gerry directly on board because we were there and said this is us, they ordinary people saying we want to try and stop this. We are not doing this on behalf of Sinn Féin. We are not doing this on behalf of the SDLP. We were doing on behalf of ourselves; that was the key.*

SCHARFF: I would imagine you sort of had to keep this pretty quiet from the community while this was happening?

O'DOHERTY: *Well, Yes, because, first of all, we could have ended up with egg on our face. Let's be realistic, we could have went to the meeting and the police could have said, "No, go away." But it worked out okay in the end.*

SCHARFF: So, when you first sat with Ricky, did you think they were going to buy this idea?

O'DOHERTY: *No, no.*

SCHARFF: And why is that?

O'DOHERTY: *Well, historically, the police here very much did their own thing. And we were just coming out of conflict. It was very early days, and I have no doubt that there would be people within the police who would resent a bunch of civilians coming and trying to change whatever, with a role that they saw that they now had taken on historically. I don't doubt it, and I don't think that would be different in any community.*

But, as I say, Ricky Russell went for it very quickly, and what I found out from our experiences with Ricky Russell in later years, that was the type of policeman he was; he was open to suggestions from the community.

SCHARFF: Do you remember, and again, this is asking you to search back in your memory for dates, but do you remember precisely when that decision was finalized? So, you had these two meetings, and was it at the second meeting that they would have said, "Okay, this is the plan, let's go to it"?

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, it was.*

SCHARFF: And would this have been a month before the election do you think, in 2005? Or would it have been a few months?

O'DOHERTY: *It was fairly close, it was a four to six weeks window. And of course, the police, quite obviously, would have known when they met us, that we had buy in from all the groups, Sinn Féin, the SDLP. We were non-political, but they would have done their homework. They knew that we had buy in. And I would imagine that in particular, they would have needed to know that we had buy in from Sinn Féin, who would have had a lot of activists at that time on the streets. And they knew we had that buy in, without anybody at the meeting having to say it.*

So, I would imagine, and I'm only imagining, you need to talk to Ricky Russell, but I imagine Ricky Russell's sitting around saying, look, okay, I'm talking to these four guys, and I know them, but I know they got the buy in of the local communities, and in particular, the guys who go on the streets. He would have

known that. He would have had some confidence, I would imagine, that this might work.

SCHARFF: And that's really fascinating because—so, this decision's taken at the second meeting. Now, you come back here to the estate, and there are the political parties, have their people in the streets, their former IRA on the streets, who are kind of pushing people away, keeping the kids away on Election Day. There's— from what I understand, there are a lot of actors right here—just for the listeners, I mean, we're looking out here on the street, right in front of the window.

O'DOHERTY: *Quite a lot—we had everything.*

SCHARFF: So, do you now come back after this meeting, after the decision is taken, and do you sort of round up everybody for your own meeting, just for the estate to say, "Look, this is the plan, this is what we agreed to, this is what's going to go down on Election Day"?

O'DOHERTY: *I would have not done that until almost right up to Election Day. Knowing that the reality was that Sinn Féin would have told their people anyway. They are in the loop, obviously, and they would have told their people. Now, the people that, if you like, I would have got, would have been non-political, and they would come out with me no matter what the occasion is. We waited right until—because, there were still question marks, Michael, this much I remember, right up to Election Day, we were still concerned: will the police pull back on this?*

Thinking of things that could have went wrong; will some of the kids start the violence early and give the police the opportunity they enter the area? All that could have happened. So, we were walking on eggshells, right up to the day. Right up to the two elections, which is why I was so relieved on the radio, and why I sounded so relieved, we were walking on eggshells right up until that moment.

We still weren't sure, a lot of things could have went wrong.

SCHARFF: Especially if the kids, or the police, gave them reason, fed them the bait.

O'DOHERTY: Yes.

SCHARFF: Perhaps because they had been tipped off in advance by Sinn Féin that the police weren't necessary going to come unless you give them reason to come? (15:35)

O'DOHERTY: *Well, we had told them that all day. I was here all day talking to them, telling them that. My counterparts and other people like me were out around all areas telling them all day. Everyone was out, all the Sinn Féin people were out, and the SDLP were passing, were telling the kids, "Hey, listen, the police aren't coming today. They are not coming."*

SCHARFF: So, when you—you had this organizational meeting right before the election with your people, who's there at the meeting? Who do you coordinate with? Who do you work with? Who do you need to make sure that—?

O'DOHERTY: *All the people who basically work out of this little center. I didn't care who. I had no interest in their political background, never had, as long as you were prepared to volunteer; all we wanted you to do was to spread the message. That's all we wanted people to do on the night, spread the message.*

SCHARFF: So, just to get into the really technical—did you send out flyers in the weeks before saying, “Hey, everybody who wants to come, come on over”?

O'DOHERTY: *No. No, we knew everybody.*

SCHARFF: You know everybody. So, you're basically picking up your personal mobile, and you're just calling friends, colleagues, counterparts, and saying, “Come on down, come on down”?

O'DOHERTY: *They all turn up anyway on election night. They would normally come here. Because the election's here. So, they come here, and we would drink tea and coffee, and check what's happening in the area. We may get a call, in previous years, “Listen boys, you need to get up to such and such a street, they've got a crate of petrol bombs”, whatever. That type of stuff.*

SCHARFF: But then, there are the actors here, yourself included, but then there are others that are out there as well.

O'DOHERTY: *Sure.*

SCHARFF: And who are those others?

O'DOHERTY: *In terms of what, Michael? What do you mean?*

SCHARFF: Are there other former elder IRA individuals, for instance, who are sort of pushing back the youth and scaring them away?

O'DOHERTY: *Probably, those people are—.*

SCHARFF: Do you work—do you coordinate with them at all? Or are they doing sort of their own separate thing?

O'DOHERTY: *No, no. It's all coordinated through us. (17:36)*

SCHARFF: Yes. And even with the political parties' representatives who are out here? They're—?

O'DOHERTY: *They are quite happy they have somebody. See, the overarching thing in all of this is we all had the one objective; we were desperate to see an end to the mindless violence of election night. No one really cared about labels. There was a mixture of all types of people out there. There were Sinn Féin people. There was SDLP people; there was all types of people. Ordinary folk, youth workers. There was just a mixture of people.*

SCHARFF: I would imagine it was—.

O'DOHERTY: *And we're not an army. We're not a police service. It's not as hierarchical as you think, we don't work like that. This community would never work like that. You have to persuade by reason and all that. It doesn't work by saying, “I'm in charge.” People would say, in charge of what?*

SCHARFF: So when you discover that there is a stockpile of petrol at a house five hundred meters from here, does the persuasion always work? Or did it always work? Were you successful?

O'DOHERTY: *No, of course not. Of course not. But on many occasions we were.*

SCHARFF: What would the kids, what would the youth, what would the adults, whoever it was, what would they say in response? What would you say to them? Maybe, perhaps the best question would be just to give us an example.

O'DOHERTY: *Sometimes, if we found out where they are, we just go and lift them, simple as that. Sometimes we found out maybe they have stuff, but we don't know where it is. We go and try and talk to them and say, "Listen, all you're doing is damaging your own community. The police are gonna be here for five minutes, lifting the election boxes, and away. Ignore them." Sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't, Michael.*

We have many occasions it didn't. We had some serious rioting right here. On other occasions, we managed to keep it fairly low key, but we never had any occasion when we had no rioting. We had rioting—on a scale of 1 to 10, take your pick. Some years it was 2, some years it was 10.

SCHARFF: And you, as a community activist, I think the point you were making before is a great one, that in many ways it's a small community, people know people. So, you have a good idea, and probably still to this very day—

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, there's nobody we don't know.*

SCHARFF: —who those kids are that are going to be out there making trouble.

O'DOHERTY: *Of course.*

SCHARFF: You know where they live, you know where they sleep. You know their parents.

O'DOHERTY: *Of course. (20:06)*

SCHARFF: So, are you taking steps in the weeks and the months leading up to the election day to go talk to the parents, to knock on the doors and say, "Look, the election is next month, make sure Johnny stays home, keep him inside"?

O'DOHERTY: *All of that gets done at various levels, yes. But we find that in this particular community, they grew up very quickly. So, we find, that we're better talking directly to them. But I make a point, Michael; we don't always get the result. The other thing is that you need to look out, where the young people sit, they didn't—they don't see it as causing trouble for the community. They will look, particularly at the Sinn Féin people; they will look at them and say, "Well, you did it for years. I'm just carrying on what you did."*

So, it's a difficult argument and difficult persuasions, but, you know, various levels of success, but we never, ever, ever, had one year with no violence, never. It's just various levels of violence until that year.

SCHARFF: Somebody who's not familiar with the situation here, and the geography and the layout here where there's the hiding spots and shops, might ask the question, well, if you had—and according to Sinn Féin, they would say they had hundreds of Sinn Féin representatives at this very polling site on Election Day, if you had literally hundreds of community activists and polling—or sorry, political party representatives, why couldn't you, by sheer physical force alone, stop the violence from happening?

O'DOHERTY: *Because we all—and again, I can't speak for Sinn Féin, let them speak for themselves, but we voted as a people to end violence.*

SCHARFF: Oh sorry, I mean, on polling day itself, physically—

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, but—no, no, you know, physically do what, Michael? I want you to think about this, it's practically impossible, Michael, it is practically impossible, all in that you're prepared to actually fight. If a kid stands there and I say—and he's got a petrol bomb, and I say don't throw that, and he throws it, well—.*

SCHARFF: What are you going to do?

O'DOHERTY: *What am I going to do? Exactly. And we live in this community, and after election night, when the police are gone, and when the council have come and cleaned the area up, we live here, and these are our kids, and their parents are our friends. So, this was about reason and rationale as much as possible, about nothing else. No one here was prepared to use physical violence, not going to happen.*

And if you look at it, if you had done that, Michael, there's two ways to treat in all of this; you can treat the symptoms, or the cause. If you had hundreds of people pushing back the kids, you're dealing with the symptoms, and you might get away with it for one year. The next year, kids being kids, they'll find another way around it. So, you've only treated the symptoms.

We, I like to believe, treated the cause. The cause was the fact that the police were here, and not only were they here, you knew they were going to be here, you knew roughly what time they were going to be here, you knew they were going to be in armored vehicles. So, night's fun, inverted commas, was guaranteed for all those who wanted it. And those who genuinely didn't hit at the police, they would be there as well; you see, that whole mixture.

So, I like to believe that what happened there was that we treated the cause, went directly for the cause, and it worked. And I'll repeat again, I was not convinced at the start that this would work, but it did.

SCHARFF: Did you know of any mother's groups? That's something that I've heard too, is that they were really vocal mothers who were part of this sort of coalition that were out there on election—

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, there were mothers out there, absolutely. Of course, yes.*

SCHARFF: Were they organized amongst themselves in any way, or were they working through this office here?

O'DOHERTY: *Well, there was a small group of mothers who I think were from the Old Library Trust, who came and stood beside us Community mothers. But we, we would get that in a way, you know, I mean, I keep making this point, Michael, everyone wanted this to stop. Everyone, the adult community by and large wanted this to stop. This was one where you didn't have to sell the idea, we had to sell the idea to the police, yes, not to our community.*

SCHARFF: And before the decision was made, I mean, it seems that every year there were new tactics on your part also tried. At one point, there was a corridor, right? A 300 foot—?

O'DOHERTY: *I'm coming back to the point that we were dealing with the symptoms, not the cause. And that's all you were doing every year, it didn't matter what you come up with, because, let me also say this, this is a well-known fact, any psychologist will tell you, a young person's brain will find a 100 different ways to do something. Whereas, an adult's brain may find five or six. So, that was a game we were going to lose eventually, because, you know, they are so ingenious. That's the whole beauty of it, being young. They don't have any constraints in their minds or their thinking. So, we would have lost that eventually.*

SCHARFF: Yes. I'm conscious of taking too much of your time, so maybe I'll just sort of wind my way to the finish here.

I'm just curious, as you look to the next decade or so, and elections here, it's been peaceful now since 2005 on Election Day. Will that peace hold? And are there, outside of the police staying away, are there other things that could happen, that may happen that would cause there to be violence on Election Day?

O'DOHERTY: *Yes, of course. We would be very foolish to say there isn't. There are people who don't believe in this peace process, and they are entitled to their view, but so far, they also—even if they don't want to take part, have respect of the electoral process. And I would say that's continuing. I would say it would be very, very counterproductive for any group to attack the elections, or the electoral process, because I believe that that would awaken a sleeping giant, the silent majority who just want to go and vote. So, it would be very counterproductive. So, I believe that elections will continue to be violence free.*

SCHARFF: Thanks very much for you time, I appreciate it.

O'DOHERTY: *No problem, Michael. No problem.*