



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

*An initiative of
the National Academy of Public Administration,
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,
Princeton University*

Oral History Program

Series: Elections
Interview no.: R 1

Interviewee: Barney O'Hagan

Interviewer: Michael Scharff

Date of Interview: 15 September 2010

Location: Derry City
Northern Ireland

Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA
www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties

SCHARFF: This is Michael Scharff, the date is September 15th, 2010, I'm sitting with Mr. Barney O'Hagan who is a councillor with Sinn Fein. Mr. O'Hagan thanks very much for agreeing to this interview, I appreciate it. If I could just ask you to perhaps introduce yourself and tell us how you first became involved with the political party.

O'HAGAN: *Just to correct something in the introduction, I'm a former councillor. I'm actually not a councillor at this moment in time. How did I become involved with Sinn Fein? As I'm sure you're well aware of the history of the conflict here in the north of Ireland. I'm obviously touching fifty, I was born in 1961 so grew up through the most part of the conflict. So obviously seeing what was happening on the streets, it was a natural progression from youth to be engaged in politics and my engagement in politics actually let me see the inside of a few prisons.*

I was released from one of those in 1998, Portlaoise prison, after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and became more or less full time involved with Sinn Fein at a political level, stood for elections and was returned in my local area as a councillor.

SCHARFF: How long did you spend in prison?

O'HAGAN: *It was a couple of short periods and then the one I was arrested in 1996 and we were sentenced, myself and a few colleagues, we were sentenced to six years, but we were released early after the signing of the Good Friday agreement.*

SCHARFF: You were sentenced—

O'HAGAN: *So it was a very short period.*

SCHARFF: And what was the sentence for?

O'HAGAN: *It was possession of weapons and explosives.*

SCHARFF: So you are released from prison and you get involved with Sinn Fein and soon rise to the position of councillor here in the town.

O'HAGAN: Yes.

SCHARFF: For our listeners paint for me a picture of what Derry looks like in the year 2000, at the turn of the century.

O'HAGAN: *At the turn of the century, in many ways Derry has stayed with the legacy of economic deprivation and from the foundation of the state you could see that. You can go back as far as you'd like in time and you'll see Derry always struggled economically through different periods of history. Then certainly from the foundations of the 6 countries the evidence is there of deliberate decisions by government not to direct investment towards the city, basically because it was a Unionist regime. Certainly they didn't see it as a priority to service a city comprised mainly Nationalist Republicans.*

SCHARFF: How would you characterize your political views today?

O'HAGAN: *Today I'm still very much a Republican, still very much on board with the Sinn Fein project. I'm actually surprised at the progress that has been made politically. The peace process with Sinn Fein was kick-started way back in the 1980s. The*

earliest discussions that culminated in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement with the assistance of others like George Mitchell, President Clinton, the Dublin government, the British government. Just a series of factors that all came together at that particular time allowing it to come together. But I suppose in many ways that was the easy part of the process. There were still a lot of difficulties to overcome and still are. Our ultimate objective is the reunification of this country obviously. We believe now the space has been provided where that can be done in a peaceful environment. We believe there isn't any need to use military options any more. The mechanisms are there that we can achieve our political goals in a peaceful manner.

SCHARFF: The period that we're particularly interested in here for this research is the period from the end of the 2004 elections came to a conclusion to when the 2005 elections were held. It is a year in which a decision is made to remove the police from the polling stations.

O'HAGAN: Okay, yes.

SCHARFF: Help me to understand a bit where that decision came from. If you can identify a particular source or individuals, maybe we can start from there and then go on.

O'HAGAN: *Tied onto your first question about what was Derry like in the year 2000, it was very much a city emerging from the conflict but still very much engaged in political struggle, still is today. Emerging from a military-type conflict where we had armed British troops on the streets, RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) in the streets and Republican forces obviously challenging them militarily.*

Then following the Good Friday Agreement was the transition that disbanded the RUC and started the reformation of a new policing service, the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland). I don't remember much of that stage, as it was and still is all a work in progress. So even up around the time, coming up to 2005 Sinn Fein still hadn't signed up for the new policing structure because there were so many outstanding issues. We believed at that time that all the right conditions were not in place, certainly weren't set on there in a lawful format and statute where we felt we could make the step.

So in many ways we were still trying to all grasp the new dispensation, the new relationships, in particular with the police. Even to this day, even though Sinn Fein is fully onboard with the policing structures, its still not perfect. Still trying, to get more mechanisms of accountability and a greater autonomous sort of police services, certainly in terms of the intelligence services, now we don't want any input from MI5 and that type of stuff. We don't believe there should be any British involvement in any format at all in Ireland. So it is all a work in progress. So that's the context of where our relationship was with the police at the time.

It was a strange sort of attitude. We weren't being deliberately antagonistic in any way. There certainly was no conflict in the street from us. There were certainly no protests in barring a particular issue may have arisen or we may have been trying to achieve a certain point, but the old conflict that was ongoing, the old historic legacy of the RUC had certainly changed.

Violence around the polling stations, I don't think there was ever an attack on the process itself. I mean an attack in any way on electoral officials or trying to interfere with the process, the targets of those riots and disturbances outside those polling stations and around the polling stations was the RUC and local youths and what we were talking about, the hot spots. They knew at a certain

day the polling station was going to close at 10 o'clock at night. At some stage there was going to be a convoy of RUC and British Army coming into the area to escort the ballot boxes out. So that's where the riot would stem from. It was almost like elections meant riot. Close of polls, meant riot.

So all the young people that were around the time of the action would get a riot that night. It was more sort of in a strange way a recreational riot. That probably in fairness, to be honest, was something, of a cycle that carried on from way back in the early '70s when certainly Republicans would engage in what might have been termed at those times of [Indecipherable] actions, and just would have been opposed. Certainly would have been opposed to take part in any elections that weren't set up in a fair and proper manner. There was gerrymandering in the city, when the whole campaign around the 1960s, the civil rights campaign for one man, one vote.

SCHARFF: When you yourself were younger would you have partaken in some of these activities outside the polling stations?

O'HAGAN: *No. [chuckling] That's the only answer I can give to that. But I certainly remember them from my youth without a doubt. But in latter years, particularly—once Sinn Fein became involved in the electoral process then certainly Republicans didn't want riots. It didn't fit the Republican agenda for elections to be disrupted when we were trying to encourage people to come out and vote for you. But that still, at that time when you were dealing with unacceptable service that was our police force that was at that time, namely the RUC, that didn't stop them being a target of the nationalist community because basically the nationalist community, the nationalist Republican community were a target of the RUC and the British Army.*

So when they presented themselves in a manner like that then you can understand why the youth of the area would take advantage of that. I certainly wasn't overly concerned at that time that we were letting Sinn Fein run a bit. I certainly wasn't going to stand in the street and ask young people not to throw stones at British soldiers or RUC men at 10 o'clock at night. As far as I was concerned the election was over. But certainly if it meant any destruction of local property or disrupting the local community then certainly as a community representative or someone with some influence in the community I would have spoken to the youth of the area and asked them to be mindful of their actions in relation to that.

SCHARFF: Is it fair to say that throughout the '70s, the 1980s and really the 1990's that Sinn Fein in many ways sort of tolerated the violence occurring on polling day?

O'HAGAN: *I don't say it is fair to say that they tolerated because it certainly wasn't in Sinn Fein's gift to do anything about it. Sinn Fein is a political party, they're not a policing service. If young people engaged in rioting tonight and I spoke to them, I would challenge them on a political level, point out the errors of their ways in my view, I'm not saying Sinn Fein's opinion. I suppose that would have been the party's line at that time. But I suppose it would also be honest to say it certainly wouldn't have been a concern of ours if local youth were attacking British soldiers. We would find that quite understandable.*

SCHARFF: When does it become a concern of Sinn Fein?

O'HAGAN: *It becomes a concern of Sinn Fein's when any conflict or violence like that is impacting the local community. If, for example, if your property has been damaged or if your safety or your family's safety is in jeopardy as a result of any*

sort of type of conflict or activities on the streets. Then that's unacceptable behavior in any normal society. But I suppose you weren't talking about a normal society at that time. If basically there was an element of local youth at that time that felt they were entitled to resist British troops and RUC coming into their area then politically you wouldn't disagree with them. But you would be telling them that they would have to be mindful of their actions, that by deciding to take a particular action and engage in militant type of activities then with that goes responsibility. You do have to be accountable for your actions and that whatever way you act you can't do it in an irresponsible manner.

SCHARFF: But is there a specific, just to help us to understand the timeline in recent years.

O'HAGAN: Okay.

SCHARFF: Is there a specific year when Sinn Fein says all right, enough is enough with this violence outside the polling stations, it's actually hurting us more than it's helping us as a party, we've got to do something about this?

O'HAGAN: *Any type of activity like that in and around polling stations certainly would have been a concern of Sinn Fein's, it would be a concern of any party in any environment because if you're trying to encourage people to go out and exercise their franchise and vote for you, then if there is any likelihood of that person being caught up in any type of conflict or disturbance, they're going to be reluctant to go near that polling station. So of course it wouldn't be Sinn Fein's agenda or any other political party's agenda. So obviously for that reason Sinn Fein wouldn't have ordered it. Sinn Fein wouldn't obviously have been in a position to stop it. They would certainly used whatever influence you could. Many times people would take guidance from you but if they chose not to, there would be little we could do about that.*

SCHARFF: So the way I understand it, on election day, particularly in the evening, as day is turning to night, as the police presence is inevitably about to arrive, you have a number of different actors on the streets.

O'HAGAN: *Of course.*

SCHARFF: In front of the polling stations, you have community activists, you have mothers perhaps, and you might have clergy. Then you have the political party's representatives be then in an official or unofficial capacity who are out there trying to assess the situation. Paint for me that scene, what that looks like in 2003 and 2004. What is the purpose, what are the roles of your representatives officially or unofficially out there on the street? What purpose do they serve, what are they trying to accomplish?

O'HAGAN: *I suppose what they're trying to accomplish certainly is that no innocent person is hurt and that the political process isn't interfered with because there's basically civilian employees of the electoral office would be carrying the ballot boxes from the election centers. They transport them to the counting center. But what was happening was there would have been a large presence of RUC and the British Army accompanying them. Obviously you would have had our own election workers leaving the polling station, our party's own election workers leaving the polls, the tally people, etcetera.*

If the polling station was a school you'd have school employees there, possibly the head teacher or caretaker there to lock up. Once there you see the British Army presented themselves as a target then the younger guys who were in the

area were just focused on them and were forgetting about the other people maybe on the sidelines. It's not enough to say that you're entitled to resist the RUC and British Army coming onto your area. Like I said before, with any decision to take militant action it goes with the responsibility, in our view that you have a responsibility emanating from that community yourself to ensure that you don't inflict damage and harm to your own people to carry out some other political act that you believe that you are carrying out.

So obviously you'd be trying to talk to the young people politically and get them to think on those lines and not to destroy basically what is a democratic process.

SCHARFF: And the reason the violence still continues despite talking to them is because you're simply, Sinn Fein is simply outnumbered when it comes to the youth or they don't listen to you or—?

O'HAGAN: *They're not grasping the message, some it just goes over their heads. They're not interested in the electoral process. They're not interested in elections. At that time there's nothing by and large political that is motivating their rationale for being there and for throwing rocks and petrol bombs and bricks. It's just all them attacking the police and British Army—that's what was motivating them.*

O'HAGAN: *The elections are just coincidental.*

SCHARFF: But I could imagine. Let's same I'm a youth and I'm out there at the Holy Child Primary School at the Gaza Strip as they would have called it back in the day in Creggan and I'm about to throw a petrol bomb and you're one of the Sinn Fein representatives, or you're, let's say in this case a former IRA representative who Sinn Fein has called up and said hey, you're respected in the community get out there. You approach me. I recognize you from the community and I maybe say okay, my hands are up in the air and I'm turning around and going back home right? Because you're not really there to talk political sense to me, you're basically there to say kid, go home, get off the street now. There may be the political talk but there's also sort of the brute like get out of here, there's no place for this right now, go home.

That seems to be, from what I understand the main purpose. And if that was the case I just wonder, given Sinn Fein's popularity, given their support, given the way in which they're able to mobilize and coordinate on election day as they're famously known for, why not pull up to the Holy Child Primary School and just flood it with people in 2003 and '04 let's say and really, by sheer manpower and force alone, prevent this bunch of youth from doing what they're doing?

I ask that only because I think somebody reading this story would sort of ask that same question. Given their size why couldn't they just kind of put enough people in there to shut it down?

O'HAGAN: *I'm not saying that maybe on a one-to-one under certain circumstances there wouldn't ever have been maybe an example of that. As I say in a particular case, say for example if there was a danger certainly to civilians, if people were basically behaving in what would be more described as an antisocial manner that was causing harm to their own people; I'm not saying under no circumstances what you described might not have happened where maybe a recognized face can go and wag a finger at a few guys and say behave yourself. But to try and rally numbers of men, to perform a policing function, they intimidate people off the street certainly would have been counterproductive. Our view would always have been, particularly for the youth from what we would describe as from our*

areas to politicise them and constructive politics, get them to understand what we're trying to achieve politically.

In my view, and I'm sure the party's view, it would have been counterproductive to maybe lining the streets with sort of physically fit men who were identified as having physically a military background and saying move or else. I think that would have been counterproductive because in a way you would have been performing some type of policeman's role that would have been viewed by the youth—you would have been protecting the British Army and the RUC. They wouldn't have really—they would have missed the thing, what you're saying may have been the objective to protect ballot boxes and election workers. It just wouldn't have worked in my view and it certainly was never considered. It wouldn't have been considered.

SCHARFF: It's really fascinating right because there seems to be this kind of contradiction in a way between not wanting to say too much or wag too many fingers because you would be seen as sort of supporting or protecting the British Army and RUC and their presence there. But at the same time were Sinn Fein's own ability to show the community that they were renouncing violence particularly as we go into 2005. There's a need to keep the violence at bay as well. So there's sort of these two different balls the Party is juggling.

O'HAGAN: *Certainly not because as I said, we condemned the violence around the polling centers, always did and would have used whatever influence we could to prevent that. But I suppose to be blatantly obvious in an approach to an election, as any political party anywhere in the world I would imagine, you're so focused on the election, the election process, registers, trying to get people registered, trying to overcome obstacles that are put in the way of people getting registered and then trying to overcome obstacles that are put in the way for people to actually give their vote, to cast their vote. At that time those types of obstacles were being put in the way in terms of annual registration and making it difficult, particularly for people living in the areas of high social deprivation who just wouldn't readily want to be filling in forms regularly to get themselves on an electoral register. It was certainly, if we'd seen the numbers dropping off the register when they had to adjust that because, it certainly was no priority. If you're in a home, say you're a single mother and you're bringing up children and you've very little income, it's not your biggest priority to go filling in forms and getting them to an electoral office to get on the electoral register. When that had to be done annually that was another problem.*

Then with the implementation of photographic ID, talking about producing passports and producing driving licenses to be able to vote again. Who is going to suffer as a result of that? That's more unlikely that people of known areas of higher social deprivation would have passports because they don't travel, they can't afford to travel, they don't have cars. They don't have driving licenses.

So we were seeing all of these obstacles being put in the way of people actually being able to cast their vote. So obviously what we were trying to do was ensure first and foremost that people were on the register because they can do nothing if they're not on the register. So we would have been doing door-to-door canvases encouraging people to get on the electoral register. We would have been providing the forms, assisting them along the way. And I'll say then it's up to us then to try and win over them politically to vote for us. But if they're not on the register they can't vote for anybody.

Then obviously we'd be trying to ensure that they all would have a relevant form of ID that would allow them to actually cast their vote on the day. So you can imagine, this has happened in area of Derry, in every electoral ward of Derry and that's all been replicated in every one of the six counties in the north. So that's a massive task. So that's where our focus is and where we've been concerned. Obviously a bit of disturbance in our area on the night of elections, it certainly wasn't a priority of ours to ensure that there weren't stones thrown at the British Army or RUC. The British Army in those latter days were out of the equation. But the cycle was still there, elections means riot because elections mean there will be a convoy of what used to be troops and RUC but there still would be a convoy of police coming into the area to escort the ballot boxes and they escort out the police personnel that they were having the problem with.

SCHARFF: Can I go back to 2005 and Sinn Fein's decision to engage—how would you characterize it, to recognize the police at that time? But before that, you mentioned there were a number of obstacles as to why the party had not wanted to engage with the police. Could you maybe help us to understand what were sort of the chief roadblocks and the chief—?

O'HAGAN: *That's a whole complex area on its own. You're talking basically about legislation, about mechanisms of accountability, how the new policing service was going to be held to account, what measures would be put in place to root out the human rights abusers that were in the old RUC, what mechanisms were going to be put in place to ensure they didn't just transfer willy-nilly under the new PSNI. We needed to see all of that in a legislative format and that was all a work in progress at that time as I say.*

SCHARFF: But suffice it to say it came down to—?

O'HAGAN: *Suffice to say that we weren't satisfied with the arrangements at that time, with what was in place at the time. Our senior negotiators and elected representatives were still deeply involved in negotiations. To give you an example of that, the policing powers were devolved only in the last year. This is now 2010. So as I say just to recap we still hadn't signed up to the policing structures. So it wasn't a case of us recognizing the PSNI, maybe that's one way you might describe it.*

But what happened differently in 2005, just to sort of summarize, recap again, the cycle of riots around elections, so if you want to say elections mean riots, that was sort of the psyche and the cycle that was there at the time. I supposed that emanated from the early 1970s, when the electoral process was being opposed. That cycle continued. It continued even when Sinn Fein was engaged in elections but it certainly wasn't being organized or orchestrated by certainly any Republicans politically, it was local youth, local areas responding to British troops and RUC coming out to their area. Because they knew at a certain time of day there was going to be an influx coming. So all they had to do was hang around outside a polling station and these guys were going to present themselves.

So the polling stations themselves were never the target. So that continued, that cycle continued right up until there was, as you say, something nasty. The numbers had grown that were engaging in this type of activity around a few polling stations in particular. I think the previous election and the Holy Child's—I can remember the headmaster talking to me at that time when the decision was taken in 2005.

SCHARFF: This would have been Charlie O'Donnell?

O'HAGAN: *Charlie O'Donnell. When the decision was taken in 2005 to actually withdraw, the Holy Child as a polling station. I spoke to Charlie about that just to get a sense of his feelings on that. But I can remember his opinions and emotions were sort of mixed at the time. One was relief, because it meant that the school would not be damaged any more. The previous one there was considerable amount of damage to the school, windows being broken with the onslaught of stones. But there was a bit of despair and disappointment that this was another facility being removed from the Creggan community. So as I say his emotions were mixed on that.*

So that took us up to 2005. What happened that was different? As I say, given all of the work that we were engaged in the run up to the elections it wasn't a primary focus for us, to remove, the PSNI from the polling stations or resolve the disturbances outside the polling stations. In the back of our minds we maybe thought the policemen, the debate on the policing issue would have been resolved before that and thereby sorting itself out.

So it wasn't something that we were overly focused on. While there would be that concern that there wouldn't be any damage done around the polling station at the close of polls. But what kicked off what happened in 2005 was there was a meeting of Derry City Council and a report given to Derry City Council by the electoral office. I'm sure it was Dennis Stanley who was there who was the Chief Electoral Officer at that time.

They highlighted I think it was about five polling stations in the Derry area that they were considering removing from the list of polling stations and they wanted our views on alternative venues to be used as polling stations outside of those areas. So we were taken by surprise I suppose as everyone was in the city by that announcement. That's when I'm just looking at my notes, my first bullet point where I scribbled down just this morning the chronology of the order from memory that I think things happened.

I can remember speaking for the Party at that meeting and pointing out the fact that it wasn't the polling stations, that was the issue. The problem was the police presence at the polling stations. I was trying to explain that it wasn't the polling station that was under attack or the political process that was under attack from the youth rioting, it was the police. What our view of that then was we needed to separate the two issues. We needed to separate the police from the election process.

We got a, I would say a hostile, reaction from particularly the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party). The unionists at that council meeting didn't say a lot because it didn't affect their areas. But the SDLP were insistent that the police would have to be—this was their position at the time, that the police would have to be present, that you couldn't run a polling station without a police presence. I argued that they were wrong in that view. I encouraged them to actually not to confuse the two issues, that they needed to separate the police and the event, the elections, and don't confuse it. That's not what we were suggesting.

I think they basically more or less took a knee jerk reaction because at that time the SDLP had signed up to the new policing arrangements as was then and we hadn't. We felt there still weren't enough safeguards in place, legislation in place that would allow a new policing dispensation to be successful.

So I think they misunderstood either intentionally or unintentionally and they certainly thought they mustn't have what our objective on the law was. They seemed to think that we had some sinister plan. They thought we'd subvert the electoral process.

SCHARFF: And understandably so I guess on the part of the SDLP to be a little bit hesitant at the idea of removing the police from particularly those officers who would stand next to the ballot boxes because of the alleged fraud that had gone on particularly the years before the voter ID cards were introduced.

O'HAGAN: See, the—.

SCHARFF: They were coming from a position of the police were there to help us make the arrests with impersonations which had been previously a major issue.

O'HAGAN: *That's fair enough. I'm not saying that's right, but that's the view they held. What we were saying was they were wrong holding that view because the police don't have a role to play in elections. Police in any society don't have a role to play in elections. When we're talking about democratic elections, it is the civilian population. It's about the people electing a body to govern that state, that can't be conducted by police, that can't be conducted by a state force that's there at the time. The police can't control an electoral process.*

The people responsible for ensuring that the process is valid and verifiable are the electoral office, the employees of the electoral office. Those people were appointed to administer and conduct the elections. So it is the electoral office officials that man the polling stations. It is their job to verify and validate the process. The only role the police had to play was if the presiding officer deemed that you were trying to subvert that election in any way by maybe committing some fraudulent act. Then the police can't act unless a presiding officer calls the police and asks the police to intervene.

A policeman cannot stand over a ballot box and decide whether you can vote or not. Even if that policeman knows that you're impersonating—it's not his role to intervene. It is up to the presiding officer, one of the election officials to make that decision. The policeman doesn't have the right to make that decision.

SCHARFF: So there is this meeting at the Derry City Council—?

O'HAGAN: *What I'm saying is the SDLP's fixation with impersonation, that they cried after every election was what I say, was a fixation. Because the SDLP refused to accept, and couldn't accept, that people in large numbers voted for Sinn Fein. There was only ever one Party at this time which was proven to have been engaged in electoral fraud, and you know which that Party was.*

SCHARFF: The SDLP.

O'HAGAN: *The SDP, where they were stealing pensioners votes, postal votes. That's fact.*

SCHARFF: Sorry, just to get back to the timeline.

O'HAGAN: *What I'm saying, that fixation around impersonation, it was there but it was because they just refused to accept that someone well dressed and living in Derry, with a good job, articulate, educated, may come in and cast a vote for Sinn Fein. They didn't believe people would do that. They felt they should be*

voting for the SDLP. So they felt that all these thousands of votes were somehow brought about by impersonation.

But anyway, that was the main set. They got themselves fixated with the policing issue because they had already in our view, and we were proved right in the long term, they had signed up for the new policing arrangements as it was then, too soon. There wasn't enough—we hadn't achieved all of the recommendations by Patton at that time. The SDLP argued that we couldn't achieve any more which was proved wrong obviously after a time. But they couldn't get their heads around separating the issues, and take the policing debate out of the equation. We're not going to resolve the policing debate in and around polling stations.

I got a bit longwinded getting to that but that's what we were trying to say, take the policing debate out of it, we're not going to resolve the policing debate, that will be done at another forum. It will be done by our people, it won't be done with us at the Holy Child, at polling stations.

So what we were saying is civilianize I can remember the phraseology I used, and I basically copy-catted the earlier phraseology of take the guns out of politics when we were talking about the demilitarization process, when we were talking about taking the British Army off the street and the IRA had already left the field. So what we were saying was take the guns out of politics. It was the "buzz word" around that time when we were looking for demilitarization. We were looking for the British Army to be totally withdrawn back to base in England. We were looking for their bases to be dismantled and of course the British wanted the IRA to decommission weapons.

It was from that phraseology I just mimicked that and said, let's take the guns out of the elections. In other words remove the armed RUC men. In many ways they're presence at a polling station—when you walk out and there's a guy standing there armed, it's intimidating to some people. It may not intimidate you, it may not intimidate me but maybe some woman going down there on her own.

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *Certainly there was anecdotal evidence repeatedly coming to us that people were put off from going to the polling stations for that reason.*

SCHARFF: Sorry, just to get back to—particularly, this is really fascinating, the nitty-gritty details of who said what and when. So, there is this meeting at the Derry City Council. This is a normal meeting that would have taken place, a normally scheduled meeting, or is this a special session that is called?

O'HAGAN: *What I can't remember if it was that or just at a policy and resources committee meeting where at the time that we were talking about that kind of thing. There would be a number of reports that would be brought to council. Or sometimes, in a case like this there may have been a special council meeting called. But it was certainly debated at the council.*

SCHARFF: So there is this meeting and Dennis Stanley comes from Belfast. The agenda of the meeting is discussing the electoral offices.

O'HAGAN: *They are indicating that they are considering closing five—from memory now, and I'm sure the minute will be there of the Derry City Council if you contact—actually I have to go on the Council website myself to see because Council minutes are on the website but I'm not sure if they're there from then. They may*

well be; there's no reason why they shouldn't. But I'm sure you'll be able to access them somewhere.

They were suggesting, implying, that they were considering closing five polling stations.

SCHARFF: And these five would have been probably the hot spots?

O'HAGAN: *That's what they described them as. I think there were five, it may have been four, it may have been six. But the number five is rattling in my head for some reason. They actually wanted us to suggest alternative venues outside of the area. So again, as I said, our position on that was that we couldn't accept that; we couldn't agree to it. It was a way of demonizing and criminalizing this whole community in Derry, certain areas of Derry were being told that they weren't capable of conducting or hosting elections. For us that just wasn't—we weren't going to accept that.*

For the SDLP's part they were going to go along with it. They were of the view that there would have to be a police presence, full stop, and that that meant then that the polling station would have to be moved out of Creggan, they were happy to go along with that. Politically you can understand why. You can understand, I think, why the electoral office wasn't too concerned either. It was no secret that we would have got the highest percentage of votes in those areas. That again was easy to see when you do a tally of the ballot boxes. The ballot boxes are numbered at the counting center so you know, there's a tracking process. You know the number of the ballot boxes—are you familiar with the electoral process? You'd have your tally-man at the counting center and you just do a dip, sample sum of what votes are coming out of what box. Then you have a good idea of any particular geographical area that that, say for arguments sake that box 56 we know is the votes from a certain area in Derry.

SCHARFF: Right.

O'HAGAN: *So if you're doing a dip. sample out of that box, just be watching them be counted and you're conducting that process and you know you're getting 70% of the votes that are in that box are cast for Sinn Fein. You know there's a large volume of support in that particular area. That's how political parties work, they all do it.*

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *So everyone would have been aware that the areas that they were highlighting were areas where we were getting, at that time in particular, the bulk of our support were the areas where the polls were suffering from the higher social deprivation. So you can understand why we would have objected. It was just in principle and also electorally we would have suffered also.*

SCHARFF: Absolutely.

O'HAGAN: *The whole principle of demonizing and discriminating against those communities by removing a polling station from that area, you were harming that community. Then electorally we knew, we also knew we would suffer.*

SCHARFF: So Dennis Stanley gets up and he presents these recommendations, written recommendations, that detail the idea of closing this number, approximately five polling stations. Then you get up and give sort of a speech in front of the members who were assembled there as well?

- O'HAGAN: Yes.
- SCHARFF: And you essentially say what you've been saying to me. You have concerns as a party.
- O'HAGAN: Yes.
- SCHARFF: What happens when you sit down then?
- O'HAGAN: *Well obviously all the councillors have an opportunity to speak. Like I said, at that time when we made those suggestions, there was a lot of tut-tuting, that just can't happen, what we were suggesting, take the police out of the polling stations because I think the other parties were confused, deliberately misinterpreting what we were saying. They were out there linking it with the policing debate because their argument was the police are the legitimate police and they have a right to be there. We said that's not what we're arguing.*
- SCHARFF: Were the police, was Ricky Russell present at that meeting?
- O'HAGAN: *At that meeting police wouldn't have been acceptable. A Council meeting would not have happened with a police representative there.*
- SCHARFF: And Sinn Fein wouldn't have attended a meeting if the police had been there at the time?
- O'HAGAN: No.
- SCHARFF: Because history is that—
- O'HAGAN: *There was no contact, that's right.*
- SCHARFF: So what happens after this meeting is over? Where do we go from here?
- O'HAGAN: *There was a to and fro in the local media because we obviously highlighted it. The meeting was obviously reported in the local media and outside the meeting reporters would have interviewed you, the written media, the local radio, there was a local TV station. Again we would reiterate our position, to civilianize the process. As I said, I was basically really thinking on the hoof at that meeting because we weren't expecting—are they really talking about closing these polls? We weren't sure until he said it.*
- SCHARFF: Okay.
- O'HAGAN: *It was obvious to me that we needed—it was obvious to the Sinn Fein councillors that the problem wasn't the elections, and it wasn't the polling stations. The problem was the police. Separate the two. So what we were saying was civilianize the process. Give the electoral process to the community. What I proposed on behalf of the Party was that we could identify prominent community leaders, and I had them in my head, people like Charlie O'Donnell, Tony O'Dougherty, Shamus Heney, people that didn't have a political affiliation to any party but would be respected and I was sure agreeable to all sides. That they could escort the ballot boxes out of the polling stations and there wouldn't be any need for a police presence.*

The electoral staff would be present at all times, the local presiding officer and his staff would be there at all times to verify the process and to validate the process such that it was they, even if it was the police that would have custody of the boxes in essence, except they had been doing it in an armored police car.

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *So what we were saying was they could be on site and we would encourage the community to support this process and we were confident that spreading the message around the community that we were conducting this election, the word would go around like wildfire, that the local community wouldn't have tolerated any nonsense from any individual or group of individuals around the polling stations when those boxes were getting moved.*

SCHARFF: And so these viewpoints sort of play out to the media. There's this sort of back and forth between the parties.

O'HAGAN: *That's right.*

SCHARFF: Where do we go from here?

O'HAGAN: *The decision was then ratified by the electoral office to remove those designated five what they termed the hot spots from the list of polling stations. So we immediately, because I know there was an appeal put in on behalf of the party in my name to appeal the decision. We asked for a meeting with Dennis Stanley, the chief electoral officer. There was a time agreed and myself, Mr. McLaughlin who would have been an MLA at the time and who would have been our candidate in the Westminster election that was to be conducted on the same day, Gary Fleming who was our Director of Elections at the same time and another councillor as a party delegation. We traveled to Belfast to meet Dennis Stanley.*

It would have been Mitchel who would have lead the discussion being the senior party member present and it was basically they outlined our objections to the removal of these polling stations from the delegated list and asked them that the decision be rescinded. Again outlining the principles that we believed could work. It was, how to say, a very frustrating meeting because there was no compromise or give or exploration of the proposal at all by Dennis Stanley. He didn't even try and talk about it with us. It was just hard and fast. Police had to be present.

He seemed to be coming at it from the policing debate point of view because his whole argument and rationale was there's no no-go areas for the police, the police have a right to be there, they are legitimate. I said, we're not arguing that with you. We might disagree with that but we're not arguing with that with you. The point we're making is they don't need to be there in a polling station. Interestingly of them we actually teased that out further with them. We were making that argument that they didn't need to be there I think I asked him the question were they present at every polling station across the north and they admitted they weren't.

I said, "Well what ones are they present at?" As it turned out they were only present in Nationalist and Republican areas. So I said, who escorts the ballot boxes from our polling stations where there is no police presence, [Indecipherable] he said the election officials maybe in a taxi. In some cases there was a local flexibus hired that toured the polling stations to collect the boxes. I was amazed at this admission. I didn't realize, I was delighted, because that's the way elections should be conducted.

I said why can that not happen in Derry? He refused to accept that you could entrust Nationalists and Republican communities to host an election without an armed police guard, an armed police presence. So he wasn't moving off his position, it was quite clear. So the meeting ended with no satisfaction I suppose on our part. Coming back from that then I decided; I can't remember if I talked to the community leaders about the proposal before we went to meet Denis Stanley or afterwards, but certain I spoke to Charlie O'Donnell from memory. I can't remember whether it was Tony O'Doherty or Shamus Heany. I spoke to some of the other identifiable community leaders in Creggan and asked them how they felt about it first and foremost about the polling stations being removed from Creggan and they agreed that it was a negative thing to happen and it wouldn't be good for the area image-wise and otherwise and they advised it wasn't good for the area in terms of people just being given the opportunity to cast their votes. But in terms of trying to attract services there, it was right around the time we were trying to access funding to build the Healthy Living center that I'm sure you may have seen up there, that lovely new building. This was before all of that.

But it would have been a retrograde step for Creggan to be cast in that light that it couldn't be trusted to host an election, to host a polling station to conduct an election. So you can understand I think why they were so quick to agree with our view. It wasn't to say that yes, they were taking the Sinn Fein—they understood the politics of it with a small "p" in those terms.

So they said they would be prepared to do it. I said, "We'll give you the space, we'll step back." They said no, this proposal needs to be coming from you, that you aren't a tool of Sinn Fein because you can understand that if that was suspected then there was little likelihood of it succeeding.

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: Of course that was the space they wanted to work on too.

SCHARFF: They had to be seen as independent community members.

O'HAGAN: *Of course. But I wanted to know that we had them on board. So that piece of—so it was put in place, that they were up for it. I then asked the town clerk at the time they convened a meeting with Dennis Stanley from the electoral office, with the local community leaders that I referred to earlier and with a Sinn Fein representative and an SDLP representative who would have been the concerned parties in the area at the time. He does that.*

As I say at the meeting was the town clerk, the city solicitor; I can't remember if it was the town clerk himself at the meeting. The city solicitor certainly was there, Dennis Stanley was there. I was there for Sinn Fein. The local SDLP person, Jim Clifford who had spoken publicly at the meeting against the proposal was there but at this stage they had stopped opposing the proposal. The community leaders were there and there was another lady there and I don't know who she was.

SCHARFF: From the electoral office?

O'HAGAN: *I don't think she was from the electoral office, I think she was from the Northern Ireland office.*

SCHARFF: You wouldn't have had Patricia Murphy, from the electoral office?

- O'HAGAN: *No, she was the local*
- SCHARFF: Or June Butler, who was Dennis Stanley's assistant? She was the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, June Butler?
- O'HAGAN: *It may have been June Butler, because that name is ringing a bell somewhere, it may have been her.*
- SCHARFF: Because I understand she traveled quite frequently here during this period.
- O'HAGAN: *I can't remember if Patricia Murphy was there. She may well have been, I can't remember. But there was a woman there that I didn't know. That name, when you say, I wonder whether she was from the NIO or something. She wasn't part of the Council. She certainly wasn't from our party or the SDLP, trust me.*
- But interestingly at that meeting again I outlined the proposal from our point of view. By that stage the community leaders had met with the local police commander. The police had told the local community leaders certainly, we think it's a great idea. We don't want to be there. So they were on board.*
- SCHARFF: So the community leaders got the police on board or did the police initiate the conversation or did the political parties go to the police through a third party to suggest?
- O'HAGAN: *No certainly not. It was the community leaders on their own initiative I think contacted the police. I think it was Charlie O'Donnell and one of the Creggan priest, [the Creggan priest, possibly Father [McKenner?] or Father [Graham?].*
- SCHARFF: Before we go into the details of this meeting, I think it is really fascinating. In your meeting with Charlie and Tony and the other community activists up in Creggan, would there have been an exchange to say everything that you outlined previously in that conversation? But might you have also suggested okay Charlie and Tony, look, in order for this idea to come to fruition, not only do we need to get the electoral office to change their view but we need the support of the police here. So listen, we're not going to be seen publicly talking with the police, but you as community activists, go?
- O'HAGAN: *I can't say it didn't happen, but hand on heart I can't say it did either because I'm talking from recollections. It certainly wouldn't have been a minuted meeting because there wasn't a meeting with the community leaders as a group and myself. They would have been one-to-one discussions, I would have went and spoke to them individually and asked would they be up for this, and they would have combined themselves once I was sure they were up for it. One knew I was talking to the other. I suppose that's logical enough that I may have suggested that they would need to get the police on board.*
- SCHARFF: So we get to this meeting now. This is the second meeting that we're having with yourself and as you were saying before Dennis Stanley, Jim Clifford from SDLP was the local member.
- O'HAGAN: *The first meeting was a meeting between Sinn Fein and the electoral office. Well, the first meeting was the Council meeting.*
- SCHARFF: Do you remember what month roughly that may have taken place?

O'HAGAN: *The one?*

SCHARFF: The first meeting with the Council when Dennis Stanley outlined these five polling stations?

O'HAGAN: *The date for the last meeting was about, I actually looked at an old diary today. It was about four weeks before the election when the decision was overturned. I was just looking at this old press release. I'm commenting that we had a meeting the day before. So it was about, it was around April was the initial meeting. So it was possibly around January '05 or possibly even late '04 that the first meeting was with Derry City Council where they actually indicated they were considering closing, that was the time schedule. It was about six months' run-up to the May elections. But it was resolved and we got that agreement about four weeks before the 5th of May elections. I can't be exact on the dates but it's around that.*

SCHARFF: I'm sorry I took you off your track. You were about to go into the details of this second meeting—.

O'HAGAN: *The last meeting.*

SCHARFF: That was taking place. So there's this first meeting with Dennis Stanley and they outline the proposal. Then there is a meeting in Belfast. Then there is another meeting back here.

O'HAGAN: *It's probably safe to assume that we suggested, or that I suggested that the community leaders would have to get the police on board as well as the electoral office on board. To sell the thing. Because we obviously understood if the police commander locally deemed that there was any risk or threat to electoral officials they would have been reluctant to sit back. What we suggested, as we talked about things you remember things. That's what it was. I asked Dennis Stanley at the earlier meeting when they conceded, acknowledged that there wasn't a police presence at all polling stations, I asked him well what happens if there is an incident and the local presiding officer on polling day needs the assistance of the police? He said he would have the local sergeant or the local police and commander's mobile telephone number, he would have the phone number.*

I said that's very interesting, why can that not be done in Derry? Why can we not provide the local presiding officer at each polling station with a contact number for a designated police officer or coordinating sergeant or whatever to locations not too far away in the event that they thought that they themselves were at some risk or they needed police assistance. To stop any sort of perversion of the actual electoral process. In that way could that not happen. In our view there was no reason that that couldn't happen.

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *If that's what works and happens elsewhere. Who is saying that that can't happen in the nationalist republican area?*

SCHARFF: What do you feel was, why was Dennis Stanley so opposed? Not only from a personal standpoint but was he taking heat from someone else who would have been upset with this decision or who would have not wanted to see this?

O'HAGAN: *I suspect it was his own political views. I suspect Dennis Stanley was from a unionist background and he was fixated with the police being acceptable and being the rule of law. He came across more determined to argue that the police*

runs in every area of the six counties and runs [Indecipherable], runs Creggan and there's nothing that people can do about it. He didn't seem in any way wanting to grasp the reality of the situation on the ground and he seemed to be of a view that the nationalist and republican communities couldn't be trusted to hold a fair election, that they couldn't be trusted to conduct a polling station unless there were armed policemen there.

SCHARFF: And in response to that argument you said to him, look, we've got our guys, we've got our community activists, our clergy. We have people, we can police our own elections, there's no need for the police.

O'HAGAN: *What we were saying was that civilianize the process. Obviously the electoral officials in the polling stations would be verifying and validating the process, ensuring everything procedurally was happening in the way that they should. What we were saying was at the end of polling day, when the trouble occurs, when the ballot boxes are being escorted from the polling stations by police, that's when the trouble occurs and it occurs because it is the police that the young guys are throwing stones at. They're not throwing stones at ballot boxes or electoral office officials. What we were saying was we could nominate respected community leaders in that area to carry out that function of escort, to escort electoral officials from the polling stations to the counting center.*

We were confident that we could rally the community to support that proposal and that we could actually give an assurance that once it became known in the community that this was happening that the safety of everyone concerned would be guaranteed. We were confident that would happen.

As it transpired that's exactly what happened. At the end of polling, it all was agreed, there was a large turnout of people from the local community, mainly women I think it was, when the ballot boxes were being carried out by the election officials accompanied by the community leaders. There was spontaneous applause. It was never seen before. We didn't envision that type of thing happening, but what we envisaged was the sensibility of our argument to give ownership of the electoral process to the community.

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *To give the communities ownership of it and they will protect their right to conduct a fair and free election. They're not going to tolerate anybody interfering with that. It's their votes and they'll protect their own votes, they'll protect their own process. But the electoral office officials, they're the people that are there to ensure and verify that everything procedurally is happening as it should.*

SCHARFF: So just to—

O'HAGAN: *We were saying that that could be replicated in any of the other trouble spots, the polling stations.*

SCHARFF: So there's this meeting from the Derry City Council—then there is the meeting in Belfast with Dennis Stanley. Then a third meeting takes place again back at the Derry City Council offices.

O'HAGAN: *First meeting was at Derry City in the Council chamber when we were informed that they were considering removing it. They ratified that position and did remove them. We appealed that decision, went to Belfast as a party deputation to meet with them and put our proposal to the Dennis Stanley and his officials to no avail.*

I then spoke on a on-to-one basis to the earlier mentioned community leaders and asked them would they promulgate this idea and they said they would.

They met with the local police commander and he understood the sense of all they'd be better off and agreed to it. I then asked the town clerk to convene a meeting. I informed the town clerk of what we were trying to achieve and where things were at and asked him to convene a meeting with all of the interested parties. I supposed without excluding the police, there was no police representation at that meeting. That being the Dennis Stanley and the election office, the local political parties, the local community leaders and the city solicitor was there.

At that meeting I reiterated the Sinn Fein proposal/ Dennis Stanley was speaking and I think I was able to add that [the police was supporting the idea But he was still very reluctant to go along with it. Just had the same stubborn attitude the whole time. As I said there was that lady present, did you say June Butler?

SCHARFF: Yes.

O'HAGAN: *I think that that is who it was, okay. I don't remember her speaking but I remember just her gestures, I knew she was on board was the opinion I was getting. As I say I was getting frustrated. I think I outlined the whole proposal twice and I couldn't understand why Dennis Stanley was being so obstinate and so dogmatic to oppose the thing. I think the city solicitor was even frustrated with it because he actually ended up reiterating the proposal too. What is the problem here we're all trying to grasp.*

So that meeting ended without anything being agreed. It was the next day the decision was announced that the polling stations were reconstituted as polling stations and would be used on Election Day. It wasn't officially announced in any way from memory of the agreement that was put in place but the Sinn Fein proposal was agreed and that's what we were going under.

SCHARFF: I'm sorry, the next day, who announced that the polling stations would remain in place?

O'HAGAN: *The electoral office. They made an announcement. They said that—I can't remember how it was done but the decision was overturned the next day. They rescinded the decision to close the polling stations.*

SCHARFF: So what was, this meeting that took place was in the evening?

O'HAGAN: *I can't remember, but that was in the town clerk's office, it wasn't a full council meeting this one. This last meeting was in the town clerks office with those people I mentioned being present. There would have been two or three there from the community, the community leaders. There was myself. There was an SDLP councillor. There was Dennis Stanley and I believe it was June Butler. I can remember definitely the city solicitor being present, I can't remember if the town clerk was present, Tony McGurk. He may well have been, I just can't remember. I can't remember if Patricia Murphy, the local electoral officer was present, I just can't remember.*

SCHARFF: But what actually—what would have happened then because Dennis Stanley left the meeting still opposing the idea. He's the chief electoral officer, he's calling the shots. So something happened between when the meeting ended and the next morning when this decision—.

O'HAGAN: *I think someone talked to Dennis Stanley and convinced him of the wisdom of the proposal. I suspect it was June Butler had a part to play in that. I wasn't sure who she was and I can remember thinking she must be from the NIO (Northern Ireland Office). I knew she was some sort of civil servant. I wasn't sure that she actually was a direct employee of the electoral office. But by body language and gesture of a nodding, an agreement. I suspected she was on board and had a more progressive attitude than Dennis Stanley did.*

SCHARFF: That's interesting, it's interesting to have this tape because I guess the story that I had heard separately from others was that Dennis Stanley pretty much remained opposed to the idea throughout the entire time. Since at the end of the day this was the—the issue of the police wasn't for the electoral office to decide, it was actually a decision for the police to take themselves. It was Ricky Russell who essentially announced the decision that the police would no longer be there to the dismay of Dennis Stanley and essentially he sort of lost out in this battle of wills. But that the decision was actually taken by the police and not the electoral office.

O'HAGAN: *It would be for the police to take the decision whether or not they were going to make officers available. But if the electoral office were of the view that they needed the presence of police then the police couldn't turn them down. I don't believe the police in themselves could turn that request down. I'm sure they'd be entitled to ask and they'd say well look, I don't really think you need us. That may be what happened. Dennis Stanley was refusing to conduct an election or allow a polling station to function in Derry without the presence of the police.*

We submitted our proposal. When the community leaders relayed that proposal to the local police commander, the police said, I agree, we don't think we need to be there was my reading, they agreed with it, they were on board. So I'm sure when we relayed at that meeting, I'm almost sure it was at that meeting in the town clerk's office that we would say to Dennis Stanley the police said they don't need to be there. That was probably the first he knew of that. It may well have been, he didn't indicate any deference to that. He didn't indicate whether he was already aware of that or not.

But there were obviously discussions after that meeting with someone else. I just wondered who changed Dennis Stanley's mind because it certainly wasn't us at that meeting. Maybe what was said at that meeting was enough to confront someone else and they intervened with Dennis Stanley because we certainly didn't have the power to force Dennis Stanley to change his mind. It had to be at some other level. I thought it may have been at the NIO level. I'm sure there were discussions held about it and I'm sure the police were asked about it. I'm sure Dennis Stanley and the police may have had a conversation. I may be wrong on that, maybe someone else had a conversation with him.

Certainly not Sinn Fein or our officials maybe in the NIO or something. I don't know, it's all speculative on my part. But the piece of work we put in place evidently was enough to bring pressure to bear on Dennis Stanley to rescind the decision to close the polling stations and it also set in place a new mechanism of conducting elections in Derry and it did civilianize and it did take away the guns from the polling stations.

I'm acutely aware that the presiding officers in each of those polling stations would have had a contact number and there would have been possibly a police presence quite nearby somewhere.

SCHARFF: In the air?

O'HAGAN: *In the air I'm sure as well. I just don't remember helicopters hovering overhead or anything like that. Probably just not in an overt manner but I'm sure they were probably not too far away.*

SCHARFF: So all the way—.

O'HAGAN: *But I don't think any of the actual local people that would have during the years, would have been employed by the electoral office. The actors, presiding officers on those polling stations, they knew themselves—. Again, not to implicate any particular electoral official, conversations that I would have with those people would say you're dead right? Because they used to say to me, one person in particular used to say to me—not just one but others—was at the close of poll they could be ready to be out of there in minutes and that wasn't creating any shortcuts in the process or anything. This guy was at the job for many years. He could have the boxes finely sealed, have whatever verification process he had to do with counter foils and put them on the seal or what. He could do that bang, bang, bang. He was efficient at his job. He knew what he was doing. He had all his ducks lined up in a row. At close of poll bang, bang, bang. He was ready to go but had to hang around for the police escort.*

SCHARFF: So I just—.

O'HAGAN: *So this and the times, in particular, schools like the Holy Child, he could be sitting there for hours waiting for the police while the crowd was growing outside. I suppose the kettle was starting to boil.*

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *Oh, they're not here yet. There was a crowd, young guys walking on the street, what's going on. The cops are going to have to be coming some time. It was going on, it was nonsensical.*

SCHARFF: Another angle of this story though, told from the perspective of the electoral office is that Sinn Fein were really not willing players in this game and that there were meetings—there was at least one meeting that was arranged at the city council between Ricky Russell and Patricia Murphy and some of the other electoral officers and I believe the SDLP was in attendance.

O'HAGAN: Okay.

SCHARFF: It was a meeting to discuss how we could do things on Election Day and Sinn Fein refuses to show up according to the electoral office and really nothing can get done because they're not even sure if they have the buy in from Sinn Fein. That's the recollection of the electoral office.

O'HAGAN: *I don't remember that, I don't remember that at all. The meeting that I asked the town clerk to convene it was the one I outlined to you. I'm not sure what other meeting happened. They may—whether there may have been a conversation and I don't remember it, I don't remember being asked or it being mentioned that the police would be there, that Ricky Russell would be there because we certainly would have said we wouldn't of went. We wouldn't have went in that room and had a meeting with the PSNI at that time or PSNI official.*

But I don't remember that being an issue, I'm certain of it. It's something that I'm sure it would stick out in my mind.

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *But whether other people had a meeting and then because there was a police presence we wouldn't be there.*

SCHARFF: That may be it.

O'HAGAN: *I can't tell you if that happened.*

SCHARFF: Sorry, I keep taking you off your timeline. So this decision is announced this next morning by the electoral office that they're rescinding their initial decision and that the five or so polling places will remain open.

O'HAGAN: Yes.

SCHARFF: Sinn Fein puts out a press release.

O'HAGAN: Yes.

SCHARFF: Supporting—.

O'HAGAN: *Welcoming.*

SCHARFF: Welcoming this decision. Then what happens after that?

O'HAGAN: *That was basically it.*

SCHARFF: This is about four weeks before the election.

O'HAGAN: *We get on with our work. At that time we really felt that we had a strong chance of unseating the SDLP candidate in the Westminster election. The SDLP candidate was Mark Durbin. The SDLP have held that seat since it came into being in the very early '70s, late '60s. So that was an election where we felt we had a real chance of unseating the SDLP, of overtaking them in the city as the largest nationalist party, nationalist republic party. So that's where our focus, our attention was on.*

Even in the Council elections, while we were focused on them of course and taking them very, very serious, but if you were going to rank order, a priority, you'd be saying that seat, we want Mr. McLaughlin elected as the MP, I'm sorry Council candidate we'll discuss you later on. That's the local representative's. All our main energies were focused on that. The two elections were happening on the one day, you see.

SCHARFF: But you had, the language you used earlier, you had made this—you said “we can give you a guarantee.”

O'HAGAN: *I knew you were going to come to that.*

SCHARFF: That there won't be any events—.

O'HAGAN: *Well obviously.*

-
- SCHARFF: So there must be some planning now in these final four weeks. Maybe I can ask this first and I'm conscious I'm taking too much of your time. Maybe I can first ask, what are the potential pitfalls that you faced now as a Party.
- O'HAGAN: Yes.
- SCHARFF: You've made this guarantee. What could go wrong and what would that mean if it did go wrong?
- O'HAGAN: *As I said, our main focus was on the elections themselves, getting, maximizing the Sinn Fein vote. For the actual election day itself and the new dispensation that we'd found ourselves in, was exciting because it was the first time this was tried and I certainly, and the Party certain realized that given that we were the main proposers of this idea and we were fairly confident that it would be successful, and we certainly didn't want it going wrong either. So we were fortunate in a way of getting the message out there because it was a time when we had an enormous amount of people congregated around the Party as election workers, canvassing in the community. You were knocking on doors day in and day out.*
- So we deliberately and proactively put the message out there in the community of the new dispensation. Obviously we released the press release. But we let the community know what was going to be happening and we encouraged people to support that process and the supported possibly by their presence on the street where the ballot boxes were being moved to ensure that if any troublemakers were going to make an attempt to gather together and disrupt the process, that they would certain feel unwelcome and they would know it just wouldn't be tolerated.*
- SCHARFF: Would you have had—you would have had meetings with the Party officials to sort of map out if you will the strategy that you just described? Who was going to be where and—.
- O'HAGAN: *As I said—.*
- SCHARFF: Who were we calling to make sure they were on the street.
- O'HAGAN: *It wasn't in anyway that strategic at all. The whole thing, as I said, wasn't a strategy formulated by Sinn Fein leading up to the elections that were going to get the police out of the polling stations. It never crossed our minds. It wasn't on our radar. It wasn't an issue for us. We were convinced enough that the policing issue, the policing question would resolve itself further down the road. Our focus was on basically maximizing the Sinn Fein vote.*
- SCHARFF: Did you have any doubts that the plan wouldn't work?
- O'HAGAN: *No. But obviously I knew how fragile the whole process was because all it took was a couple of thugs, a couple of idiots to decide that they were going to throw a few bottles or a few stones. Someone could have got hurt and if someone was hurt, say an election officer was hit with a stone or anything. Then all of that work could have been out the window.*
- SCHARFF: But you gave this guarantee so how do you now ensure that the random thug can't get his moment of opportunity?

O'HAGAN: *I'm not saying that that type of person exists in Creggan or any other community, but there's always the fear that some idiot, maybe someone staggering home from a pub with a few drinks too many would do something. There's always just a worry and a concern. But we were confident that if members of the local community would take the effort to come onto the street just to defend their own community leaders, in the process, in their role as offering themselves up to escort the ballot boxes out, that they were going to go out and stand alongside those community leaders.*

We were confident that we could rally that support and garner that support. As I say it was easy to do because if we were to meet in an evening, plan an evening's canvassing, then obviously we were advising all our election workers of the change in circumstances around polling day and reminding them to let people on their doorsteps know that. To let them know because there was confusion in the area. People were asking, where are we voting this time, they're taking away our polling station. Obviously it was a two-edged sword we were letting them know. Your polling station has been reconstituted, but this is the new way it will happen and it would be nice of you to be there to support that idea. So it was easy to do from that perspective.

SCHARFF: Can I ask as we work our way towards the conclusion if there is anything in this story, as we understand it to be that in my questioning I haven't identified a critical link or a critical piece of the story that I should not miss including when I write this up?

O'HAGAN: *Say it again?*

SCHARFF: Perhaps we've discussed everything but are there any critical—I know you have some notes here and I don't want to miss anything you think should be included in the story if there is an important piece that we haven't yet touched on.

O'HAGAN: *I put down, I was just trying to recollect the events this morning, just writing down a few bullet points to make sure and the chronology as I thought it happened, what we dealt with, how it was raised. We dealt with the Sinn Fein position. We felt that once you would break that cycle of violence outside the polling station where people would associate close of poll with riot, we believed you only had to do that once and the cycle was broken. We believed that that would be that forever more. That psyche of election means riot would be gone.*

We covered that. We covered that we were the only party that actually did object to it. I think that's basically it. I suppose the final thing was, you can imagine, we were pretty chuffed when the decision was taken to reverse the closure and the decision was agreed to go with our proposal, that obviously we wanted to get that message out there. Also coming from a political perspective, if there were going to be any political kudos going along with that, then yeah, vote for Sinn Fein, why not?

Obviously we drafted a press release and I have a few copies here for you you can take with you. The first one you'll see is a pencil draft. It was just interesting, I hadn't kept these for any particular reason, I just looked in my computer to see if they were still there and they were. One I actually do mention the community leaders in it, basically thanking them for their part in it. I got one of our, because I was very busy at that time with meetings that I asked one of our party colleagues in the area, I can't remember if I emailed it to him or gave him a copy, but asked him to show it to some of the community leaders. I think I asked him to show it to Tony O'Doherty, to see if they would be happy with it, basically because we

named them. I remember them getting back to me and saying they would prefer if we didn't run with that press release.

I can see where they're coming from, they probably just didn't want to be in any way—.

SCHARFF: Associated.

O'HAGAN: *Not that they'd be worried about being associated but I suppose they didn't want it to be misinterpreted or misunderstood that this was some sort of Sinn Fein project.*

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *This one then that I still had on my computer was the one that we must have gone and actually went and had released because it is the same statement as that one without the names. So you can take those because again in terms of the press release it will just step you through the process.*

SCHARFF: Thank you very much. So basically the decision, I mean, Dennis Stanley reverses his decision. So the decision to put the polling stations back in place and the decision to remove the police is made at the same moment.

O'HAGAN: *No, the decision—.*

SCHARFF: This is just a point of clarification.

O'HAGAN: *From memory I think Charlie O'Donnell and some of the priests went and met with the police and I think, I just can't remember who it was, most likely it was, most likely it was Ricky Russell, but they were agreeable.*

SCHARFF: Got you.

O'HAGAN: *They were agreeable with the proposal. It is quite likely that a meeting may have happened after our meeting with some of those other parties and not us. But the only reason why we would have absented ourselves would have been the presence of the police.*

SCHARFF: Were you, and this is my final question, were you, the Party or individually, asked to keep the decision that the police were not going to be there quiet? Because from what I understand speaking with a number of individuals from different backgrounds, most people were not aware that the police weren't planning to show up that night and that was a strategic decision to minimize the chance that anything might happen.

O'HAGAN: *Say that again.*

SCHARFF: Certainly, were you ever approached or was the Party ever approached to ask you to please keep this decision quiet, that the police weren't going to be there because from the way I understand it most of the individuals didn't know the police weren't planning on showing up that night. So you actually had some youths who still gathered out and 10 o'clock came and they're saying where's the police, where's the police?

O'HAGAN: *No.*

SCHARFF: It was part of the security arrangement to sort of do this covertly with the courier companies and the various other—.

O'HAGAN: *No, and it would have been counterproductive to do that. We proactively let it be known that the police wouldn't be there. That was to send the message that there was no point in gathering there to riot. Who were you going to throw stones at? Your own people? No, because let me look at that press release and that will tell you actually--.*

SCHARFF: Sure, sure.

O'HAGAN: *No, we stipulated—we don't say that the police have been removed. What we are saying here, it says it, it negated the necessity for PSNI escort.*

SCHARFF: Perfect.

O'HAGAN: *It would have been counterproductive for us to let it be thought that the same arrangements were going to be in place because then you would have had the usual gathering and expectation of a riot. We got the message out there. There was no point in gathering for a riot because it's not going to happen. There's not going to be a convoy of police. What we did do was we encouraged, as I say, the community to come out there and basically provide that moral support to the community leaders that had volunteered to act in that way and also to reassure the electoral office staff that were in there and the staff of the school.*

I think everybody was pleasantly surprised. But, as I say, that polling station with the efficiency of the guy working in there who again was one of these people who had been doing the job for years at the close of polls. He bang, bang, bang had the job all done and they were all packed up and ready to go fairly quickly.

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'HAGAN: *So it all happened fairly quickly and the people were all outside there. There was a wider representation of the community that was outside the polling station this time to greet the ballot boxes and they gave spontaneous applause to those who were involved when they came out. It was a complete change around. Just actually on that date I was on duty on behalf of the Party at the next polling station down which would have been maybe half a mile away. There wasn't really any hostility or disturbance there because they're usually on up the estate. Obviously I was in contact by phone and was aware of how well everything was going.*

Again, the presiding officer at that time in that particular polling station it took forever to wrap up proceedings. Polls closed at 10 o'clock and I think we were still there around 12. He was a guy who was dead slow on stuff. Being from a particular Party I couldn't interfere and tell him to hurry it up. I was worried that somewhere someone would make it appear that what is going—an old bottle or something thrown there and again would have taken the positive imagery from what had just happened two maybe hundred yards, maybe half a mile away. I know all were concerned that this was going to get on and get on all night

Of course the cynic in me is asking, is this guy doing this deliberately? Does he want something to happen or is he just an incompetent so-and-so, it's taking him forever. So this was just one of the asides because I'd been getting the phone calls from our guys. You out of there yet? No, we're still here. It was a great [Indecipherable] in the year. Obviously we couldn't interfere in the process. Just

looking through the windows, he was dead slow and stop, that's the only way I could describe him. You wanted to go in and give him a good shake, "Will you hurry up?"

That was just a wee funny aside. It was a great sign of relief when eventually he stopped his work and they closed up. We were just on the edge of Creggan also. All reports coming from everywhere was that everything went successfully. I'm not sure if there's ever been any recorded incident outside polling stations since. Because, as I said, the initial proposal was just replicated, it continued that way and there's never been an issue.

SHARFF: Thanks very much.

O'HAGAN: *It wasn't any great strategic plan. It was just as events happened. It was just a response to events and it was just a simple solution from our viewpoint. What I suppose was a simple problem that people in their own heads and exaggerated away out of all proportion. Once we separated the two issues the policing thing wasn't resolved so once we separated that from elections we had peaceful elections and had left the policing debate to be conducted.*

SHARFF: Thanks very much, this has been really wonderful and informative. I appreciate your time.

O'HAGAN: *You're most welcome.*