

The Peace People Experience

Written and compiled by Rob Fairmichael

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- This is the text as published in 1987 (excluding photos, illustrations and cartoons). It includes the bibliographical details written then. One or two errors of fact have been corrected as well as typographical errors.

A number of the people interviewed for this pamphlet have since died, including Peter McLachlan, sadly, in 1999.

This web edition, 2000 CE.

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A Personal Introduction

“Until the lions have their historians tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter” – African proverb

“Flinging mud loses ground” – Irish proverb

What I was seeking to do in writing this pamphlet was:

1. to put on record the bones of the Peace People story, and
2. to see what lessons can be learnt regarding peace and nonviolent action.

But as this African proverb about lions tells us, the truth of a situation depends on the vantage point we have. This is intended as an 'independent' study of the Peace People experience; *Dawn* has, since the beginning of the Peace People in 1976, said both critical and positive things about them (sometimes respectively from different people, sometimes both in the same piece). I personally had worked with both Peace People and former Peace People, partly through the Northern Ireland Peace Forum (of which I was secretary from 1981-83 and continue to represent *Dawn* on). I was never involved in the Peace People myself.

However, because of the difficulty of the subject matter – difficult because of the high emotions and the disparate viewpoints engendered – I wish to say something in this personal introduction about my own approach. It is the least I can do seeing I do not believe in the 'neutrality' of journalism.

I went into my research with the view, garnered from the media, personal contact, and from trying to occasionally cover the Peace People for *Dawn*, that in the past the pace had been forced too much for too many people within the Peace People. It is not that I disagreed with attempts to get to grips with the Emergency Provisions Act or the H Block situation, far from it. In general I would have seen the Peace People as too conservative for my liking. But I also had a certain respect for people on both sides of the 1980 split.

Perhaps you might say, having read this pamphlet, that my views did not markedly alter. That may be so. But I certainly learnt a lot about the Peace People, where money went, the local group experience, and so on, that was totally new to me. If my initial approach seemed to reappear it was through what I learnt from other people, and my reflection on this.

One problem I have had to deal with, touched on by the Irish proverb above about flinging mud, is the extent to which it is possible to portray the story as issues rather than personalities and yet give the truth. I have attempted to give what I see as the truth while dwelling as little as possible on the personalities.

In giving various people along the road guarantees of fair treatment, and in providing a 'verbatim' interview section, I have tried to provide both fair coverage and an attempt to let people speak for themselves. I should point out that I wrote to Betty Williams/Perkins three times but had no response.

It became clear during my research that the local story deserved coverage and I set the goal of providing details on at least 20 local peace groups. I received permission from the Peace People to work through their Company and Trust minutes and I give some detail on this to counteract all the rumours that abound concerning how much money there was and where it went. I also talked to as many people as I could, having lengthy interviews with over 50 people and many more extensive phone conversations, as well as following up various details and much correspondence.

But there is limited space in a pamphlet. What I have done is err on the side of providing information which is new or unknown as opposed to restating in greater detail the basic story of the Peace People at the centre.

The principal funding for publishing this pamphlet – printing et cetera – came from a Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust grant; additional substantial funding came from the Irish Mennonite Community's peace fund, and other costs were borne by *Dawn*. I was not paid for any work I did on it.

My thanks go to all those who helped me, to those who gave me interviews (in some cases up to three successive extensive interviews), and particularly to the Peace People office at Fredheim who bore the brunt of my enquiries, and to Ann and the others there who managed to keep smiling when I kept appearing! My thanks go also to my wife, Carmel, and children on their forbearance in my tackling this project in the couple of years following the birth of twins.

Finally, I would urge people to make use of the 'right of reply' given by Dawn regarding the contents of this pamphlet – please see page 47 [of original pamphlet, not included here –Web Editor]. Time permitting I would be happy to discuss the contents with any people or groups who wanted.

– Rob Fairmichael, Belfast, May 1987.

The Declaration of the Peace People

- We have a simple message for the world from this Movement of Peace - We want to live and love and build a just and peaceful society
- We want for our children, as we want for ourselves, life at home, at work and at play to be a life of joy and peace
- We recognise that to build such a life demands of us dedication hard work and courage
- We recognise that there are many problems in our society which are a source of conflict and violence
- We recognise that every bullet fired and every exploding bomb makes that work more difficult
- We reject the use of the bomb and the bullet and all the techniques of violence
- We dedicate ourselves to working with our neighbours near and far, day in and day out, to building that peaceful society in which the tragedies we have known are a bad memory and a continuing warning

Chapter 1: An Overview

The scene in 1976

To help put the Peace People into context, I wish to first of all give a very brief picture of the scene in 1976 relating to politics and to violence, and secondly a comment on peace and reconciliation groups in the North.

1976 started off disastrously so far as sectarian killings were concerned. 5 Catholics were killed in two incidents in South Armagh, near Whitecross, on 4th January, and the following day 10 Protestant workers were shot dead at Kingsmills, also in South Armagh. Violence, just defined in terms of physical attacks by bombs and bullets, was still at a very high level compared to today though not as horrendous as the level reached in 1972 and 1973.

There was a definite sense of war weariness but not any vision of relief from it. The party political scene was in effective disarray with the refusal of the anti-power sharing unionist parties to offer anything new to the others involved in the Constitutional Convention which ended its life in March of 1976. The 'power-sharing' government had been brought down by the loyalist strike of 1974. There was a political vacuum. Party politics was getting nowhere and neither power-sharing nor anti-power sharing parties had any rabbits to pull out of hats. Meanwhile also the scene was being set for the future H Blocks crisis with the removal by the British government of special category status for people who were convicted of 'terrorist-type' offences.

There had been some widely-publicised peace movements and some not so widely publicised. Perhaps the best known of these, with people wearing 'What price peace' badges, was Witness for Peace. This was associated with Rev. Joe Parker who had lost a son in the 'Bloody Friday' bombings of July 1972 and was partly emotional and partly religiously based. Peace groups such as this got a maximum of 10,000 at rallies or demonstrations but were usually rather smaller.

The peace groups were generally taking a fairly simple stand against physical violence. They might be involved, as was the case with Women Together, in work locally, but their analysis of the situation was not a detailed one. Many of those who were involved were also deeply conservative and wanting the 'peace' that existed prior to the recent troubles – i.e. simply the cessation of the use of guns and bombs without other changes. There were exceptions but speaking broadly the peace groups existed in the centre on an international left/ right spectrum and some members were on the right. Some of those who might be thought of as progressive in the North because of their anti-sectarian stand were decidedly conservative in international peace issues.

Writing in 1979 about peace groups, Mathilde Stevens came to this conclusion;

“They have been handicapped by an individualistic concept of peace which has prevented them from seeing the political and social dimensions of the problem.”¹

This then was the scene in 1976. The political parties were up a cut de sac, sectarian and paramilitary related violence was continuing at a high level, and peace groups were responding more to symptoms than to causes.

The Peace People could be said to have begun when Betty Williams knocked on the first of her neighbours' doors with her petition asking if people wanted peace. She took this action because of an incident between the British army and IRA paramilitaries which killed three children. The expectations from observers might have been that this would be another emotional, peace protest movement like Witness for Peace: it would last a wee while and then disappear (though Witness for Peace itself continued in a small way through to 1985).

No one imagined what would take place, with the world's media clamouring at the Peace People's doors, and Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan being awarded the Norwegian People's Peace Prize of over £200,000, and subsequently the Nobel Peace Prize itself.

The story of the Peace People has in some ways been a strange one. It was strange to have the media clamouring to talk to 'peace' people when the usual situation was the reverse (and the media generally paid no attention). The subsequent divisions and splits, the downturn in the numbers involved, the continued work by those both inside and outside the organisation, all made a story which was different to a significant extent from what had gone before.

¹ Mathilde Stevens – see Further Reading for reference.

Denis Barritt, one of the foremost figures in the peace and reconciliation scene in Northern Ireland for many decades, put it this way to me; *“It has been a most extraordinary contribution to our reconciling efforts. If it had not happened one would scarcely believe that it could take place.”* Indeed so. I would add that if the Peace People story had been written a dozen or more years ago it might have been thought a fanciful piece of fiction, another none-too-accurate novel to whet the appetites of readers looking for a story based in one of Europe's newest and oldest trouble spots.

But what happened was real, and tragic in its beginnings. On the afternoon of 10th August 1976 Anne Maguire and her children were caught up in a part of the little war that exists in Northern Ireland. Two IRA volunteers, escaping from a shooting attack which they had made on a nearby British army base, sped along Finaghy Road North; they were hotly pursued by two British army jeeps. The British soldiers shot at the car and the driver, Danny Lennon, was killed; his companion, John Chillingworth, was seriously wounded and lost a lung.

But what caught the sorrowful imagination of the world was the death of the three Maguire children; two died instantly, a third the next day. The car had gone out of control when its driver was shot dead and it killed the children. Anne Maguire was herself seriously injured; while she made a valiant physical recovery, mentally she was never the same again and she ended her own life a few years later.

What is politically interesting in the reaction to this whole incident was that it focussed entirely on the role of the IRA. Many people became involved in the Peace People exclusively as an anti-IRA protest. Certainly with the exception of the Provos (Sinn Fein) themselves almost all the blame was put on the shoulders of the IRA.

This was very strange when the 'facts' are considered. Even if one accepted the official, army version of the incident (that a passenger in the escaping car was seen to point a rifle at the pursuing patrol, that the soldiers then fired 4 shots, killing Lennon) it took two sides to bring the incident about. If the army had not been there for the Provos to fire at there would have been no incident.

But if one accepted the Provos' account of the incident then a different picture is presented. They admitted the two men were returning from 'active service'. They admitted there was an Armalite rifle in the car but said it was broken down and therefore couldn't have been fired at the soldiers,' they claimed witnesses that no shots were fired from the car at the soldiers. If this story is believed the blame for the deaths of the Maguire children shifts towards the British army, although both sides certainly held a portion of the guilt.

It is important also to take into consideration the context of violence in Northern Ireland in this century and before, a policy of violence and death subscribed to by paramilitaries of all hues and by the British government itself. I do not condone any killing. I do feel explanation is necessary of why people feel it necessary to kill, and I do feel in this instance to solely blame the IRA is to be simple to the extent of political naivety.

It is unfair to say that everyone became involved in the Peace People at this stage as an anti-Provo protest. The gut feeling and rhetoric of those who became involved – including in Catholic areas of West Belfast – might have been 'Provos out' but there were others who saw it as an opportunity to protest against all forms of paramilitary violence. Protestants who became involved were, in many instances, not just standing up to oppose the Provos but to oppose the UDA, the UVF and all the paramilitaries on their side of the divide.

The movement which Betty Williams began took shape in the form of leadership quite quickly considering its amorphous start. It was a movement in the sense of a tremendous out-pouring of many different people onto the streets of Northern Ireland and further afield. On 11th August, the day following the incident, Mairead Corrigan, who was Anne Maguire's sister, had appealed against violence on television. Betty Williams' petition for peace, against violence, mushroomed spontaneously and she, too, was on television the following day (12th).

The Maguire children's funeral on the 13th was attended by Betty Williams, at Mairead Corrigan's invitation.² The same day Ciaran McKeown met Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan briefly at television studios in Belfast; McKeown offered his help. However the first significant meeting between the trio was not until 17th August, a week after the Maguire deaths, when Betty Williams asked Ciaran McKeown to come over to talk to them (Mairead had already been getting advice from

² Richard Deutsch, page 7

Ciaran over the phone)³ The day after the Maguire funeral, on Saturday 14th August, an estimated 10,000 people demonstrated in Andersonstown, called out by Betty."⁴

It was certainly Ciaran McKeown who gave direction to the movement. What the Peace People might have turned out to be like without him is impossible to say. He did not begin it although it might be possible to say he was a founder of the organisation that subsequently emerged as opposed to the movement which had already begun. He became a leader because he was a person available to give advice and help to Betty and Mairead when they were looking for it; he plunged himself in and helped to transform what had already begun. It was he who devised the rally phase of the Peace People, and, indeed, the most identifiable parts of the Peace People ideology or what was identified as Peace People ideology.

Speaking of the meeting which the trio had on 17th August, Ciaran McKeown said; "From that point on, there was a specific movement whose authenticity I would guard jealously..."⁵ The problem is to what extent a leader is entitled to stamp his own mark on such a movement (I use the male 'his' since I am referring to Ciaran McKeown). The problem of 'leadership' versus 'democracy' was to be a central issue for the Peace People.

Ideology

Ideology, structure and programme are obviously intimately inter-related, but I will try to tease out some details and conclusions on each of these areas.

Perhaps the easiest way to pin down the Peace People's ideology is to think of it in relation to certain key terms, and qualify how important each was for the Peace People, as well as providing a critique. Much of the Peace People ideology was, and is, implicit rather than explicit; the nearest detailed statements have been in Ciaran McKeown's pamphlets and in 'Peace by Peace' – and that has been principally the parts of the Peace People ideology most associated with Ciaran McKeown himself.

The Peace People declaration,⁶ while indicating a commitment of some kind by those who affirmed it, was not a specific document except as a rejection of 'violence'. Alison Pike went so far as to say; "It asserts certain beliefs and values, in sufficiently vague terms, to attract the assent of all, except the most 'extreme' of people."⁷

Common Northern Ireland identity

This is a key phrase which has continued to be used, or implied, in the Peace People through to today; that a common identity and coming together of all Northerners was more important than any possible linkages with the Republic or Britain.

This can be seen as fitting into the 'reconciliation' perspective of the Peace People but does beg a number of questions. Could it imply independence? How did it relate to the slow growth of 'independence' thinking within 'loyalist' circles? By stressing a common identity rather than the nationalist/ unionist shibboleth of 'the border' was it nevertheless accepting the status quo of the link with Britain?

Mairead Maguire (Corrigan) and others have rejected 'narrow nationalism' in this context. I agree. But, while it is certainly a two-edged sword (republican paramilitary violence being one edge), Irish nationalism can, I believe, have a positive role not only in relation to the British connection but in defending from the encroachment of an EEC super-nationalism (common defence policy et al). Furthermore, by putting the emphasis solely on the North, the term 'common identity' if over-emphasised *can* ignore the negative role of the British state in Northern Ireland (I am not saying there is no positive side to that role).

Community Politics

Party politics had certainly failed and there was a political vacuum. Northern Ireland, created on a sectarian headcount to maintain a Protestant majority in perpetuity (birth rates permitting!), is not a 'western democracy'. Ciaran McKeown deserves commendation for suggesting an alternative – community politics.

³ Ciaran McKeown, "The Passion of Peace", pages 142- 144.

⁴ For those who want considerably more details on the early days of the Peace People than I have space to give, I recommend both Deutsch's and McKeown's books.

⁵ McKeown, page 145.

⁶ Printed on page 2 of this pamphlet [page 7 of this web edition -Ed]

⁷ Alison Pike thesis – see Further Reading.

But what was it? At one level it was simply organising at the grass roots, getting together and organising what was needed locally. However the very term 'community politics' left people confused; people thought of politics solely in terms of party politics. Ann Fannin put it this way:

*“Ciaran’s notion of community politics was never ‘taken on board’ by the general membership. In the assembly of October 1977 his ideas were debated publicly for the first time. For over a year the local groups had, in effect, been actively participating in “community politics”. When these ideas were put onto a formalised base the reactions of many particularly from the middle class Protestant areas, were hostile.”*⁸

People were afraid of 'politics' – which in Northern Ireland meant 'sectarian party politics'. In the second issue of 'Peace by Peace' Sandy Woods argued that the peace movement "can never have a political programme" – something which Ciaran McKeown, as editor, expressed his profound disagreement with in the same issue.⁹

But there was another dimension to Ciaran McKeown's ideas. That was building the structure up as an alternative government for the North. Groups would get together with groups on issues of concern, and they would come together on a larger scale to provide an alternative form of democratic government – one avoiding the sectarian, confrontational politics associated with western style Stormont parliaments.

The Peace People Assembly was put forward as a model for a new governmental assembly for Northern Ireland, with a proposal for a Senate which would bring in an even wider range of groups. If things went right *“the time might not be too far off that an approach could be made by the Peace Assembly and the Peace Senate to the British Government with proven support for an effective form of devolved government which did not simply by-pass the divisions in the Community but which created a new Peaceful and creative Community out of the old one.”*¹⁰

This model was certainly audacious, throwing aside received wisdom regarding 'democracy' in these parts. But it was up against many problems. People inside the Peace People did not necessarily understand it – and even if they did they weren't necessarily for it. It was such a bold step to propose this new, emerging structure as a model for government.

The idea was certainly an interesting one but any credibility for it would have depended on the Peace People building up its own structure of Assemblies (and the proposed Senate) into something people looked to. But instead of things being built up, the Peace People numbers declined. Furthermore, the structure was seen to have problems which were all too similar – or even worse than – those provided by conventional party politics.

The proposal was also built on an act of faith that local community politics could transcend the sectarian and polarising politics associated with the parties. This was not impossible but required a certain leap of faith to believe in it. At its worst the proposed system could have ended up both sectarian and even more conservative than Stormont of old.

It was nevertheless a constructive suggestion in the context and one which did not receive the attention it deserved – partly due to the arrogance with which many outside the Peace People felt it was presented.

The 'governmental' aspects of 'community politics', that is of the Assembly and proposed Senate as models of government, were gradually and quietly dropped from Peace People policy. Today, while Peace People numbers are much smaller, there would still be the same kind of commitment to involvement locally as in 'community politics' of old.

Justice

'Justice' issues, particularly in relation to the emergency laws prevailing in Northern Ireland, came to be an important part of the Peace People's ideology, and has remained so to this day. But Protestant members, and some Catholics, had considerable problems with this area and many members and some groups disappeared over both the Peace People's policies and how they were pursued.

The Peace People basically campaigned for a return to 'normal policing', police and army accountability, and the removal of such emergency measures as the Diplock, one judge, no jury courts for 'terrorist' offences. In this they were providing an important civil liberties function at the expense of alienating some of their members.

⁸ Ann Fannin, page 67.

⁹ 'Peace by Peace', Vol.1 No. 2.

¹⁰ From a proposal to the October 1977 Assembly concerning the setting up of a Peace Senate.

But what was even more unwelcome for some members was the 'emergency status' proposals which Ciaran McKeown enunciated for those convicted under the emergency legislation. Many people couldn't differentiate it from the 'political status' which prisoners in the H Blocks were fighting for – and subsequently dying for in the hunger strike of 1981. It is fair to say that McKeown saw the potential for violence in the H Blocks situation if it was not resolved; that violence subsequently erupted onto the streets. From a civil liberties perspective I would feel that such proposals – 'emergency status' for people convicted under 'emergency' legislation was a very reasonable demand.

Of crucial importance in the perception of the Peace People on either side of the sectarian divide was the issue of informing and how they perceived the army and police. Following attacks on their criticism of army activity at Turf Lodge in October 1976 in which a boy was killed by a plastic bullet, the leaders issued a statement. This was perhaps the most forthright statement they made on such issues, and it included the following;

“We do not equate the vicious and determined terrorism of the Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organisations with those occasional instances when members of the security forces may have stepped beyond the rule of law.”

Peace People policy was:

“We fully support the rule of law, and until the Northern Irish community themselves evolve their own community institutions and form of government, then the RUC and the other security forces are the only legitimate upholders of the rule of law.”

“Our attitude to informing is this: each individual must exercise his or her conscience bearing in mind that while we do not wish to create a community riddled with suspicion, or a landscape dotted with new prisons, such an outcome might be preferable to the unending tragedy of innocents shot, burned or blown to bits.”¹¹

Peace

This meant so many things, even within the Peace People, that to attempt to define it would be very hard. While usually implying simply the cessation of physical violence, it often implied other things; but it is such a used and abused term in Northern Ireland that it is quite devalued.

Reconciliation

This was, and is, the commonest identifying thread in a Peace People ideology. If you asked local groups, past or present, what they were about, then 'reconciliation' was certainly a key aim.

Reconciliation too can mean different things. I take it in this context to mean that people would be prepared to live alongside each other, quietly and without violence, and yet get to know and respect each other for what each was. Whether we are all prepared to do what is necessary for reconciliation is another matter.

If you look at the total Peace People experience, I feel it fits quite closely – though with some differences – into the parameters set by other Northern Irish reconciliation groups. One distinction across the board is between those who see reconciliation as the object and those who see it as a by-product of work on social and political issues which need tackled anyhow.

Nonviolence

'Nonviolence' was, and is, a commitment by some people, particularly some of the key people at the centre, but is not something with which the mass of members would have identified. Shirley Morrow put it this way:

“It was not that many people would have been against nonviolence per se but most people simply didn't understand what it was about. Most people weren't ready for long Gandhian principles, they just saw there were things going on in their area and their street that they didn't like.”

Nonviolence in the Peace People was associated early on with Ciaran, with Mairead, and also with Sheena Flynn, Sally Taylor, Martin O'Brien and a few others as the years went by. It was neither popular nor understood; meetings on nonviolence were poorly attended.¹²

¹¹ 'Irish Times' 14th October 1976 and 'Peace News', 14th January 1977.

¹² April 1982 Assembly reports.

Insofar as you can equate the two words 'nonviolence' and 'pacifism', Ciaran McKeown was at pains to stress the fact that he and some others at the centre were 'pacifist' didn't mean the movement had to be such as conventionally defined.¹³

He wrote:

“Demilitarisation can only come through the downward adjustment to zero of the military profile by politicians – and by the community as a whole removing its tribal cover for paramilitarism in whatever area it attempts to show its profile.” And also that if they build a nonviolent community democracy then pacifists elsewhere *“will understand why we do not go in for single-minded, single issue, “troops out campaigns” – as if the people who carry the guns were the main problem rather than the communities which pay or support them.”*¹⁴

I personally have found the Peace People input to thinking about nonviolence disappointing. Mairead Maguire made an impassioned speech at the 1985 Peace People Assembly about turning the 'International Year of Peace' into an 'International Year of Nonviolence,' a motion was passed – and nothing happened. In this context Mairead Maguire cannot be blamed as she was ill afterwards. I hope that in the future the Peace People, perhaps in the shape of Kilcranny House which is thinking in this direction, will be able to provide input and stimulus on this; nonviolence must be a key issue for people believing in social and political change in Ireland.

World Consciousness

Although an 'also ran' as a Peace People ideology at the beginning, a commitment to the third world and to world peace was at times controversial. Ciaran McKeown's desire to devote movement resources to third world problems was resisted by some members for a number of reasons, including that they felt their particular task was to deal with Northern Ireland.

However, I would feel that an international commitment is essential to prevent parochialism; perhaps more could have been made of links with nonviolent activists in third world countries. One such link developed with Adolfo Perez Esquivel; this provided interesting fruit when Nobel prize winners Mairead Corrigan and Adolfo Perez Esquivel of Argentina were able to issue a joint statement opposing the war which their respective countries or governments were engaging in over the Malvinas/Falkland islands in 1982.

Coverage in 'Peace by Peace' since 1980 of nuclear disarmament also caused some controversy, and Peace People policy was thereby identified informally with disarmament. A few members and subscribers resigned over this.

Perhaps one major omission from the ideology of the Peace People was any economic policy, beyond the policies of the Trust and Company in trying to help community groups and small scale industry and co-operatives with a bit of money. There was no analysis of where economic power lay in society and the importance of this in overall political life. Perhaps the Peace People's views were too conservative overall to permit such an analysis which might have been in the direction of socialism.

Structure

There are two important points to make about the Peace People structure as it emerged. Firstly, it was designed on a grand scale; Assembly, Executive, Trust, Company, Consultative Boards (the last as a meeting point between the leaders, the Executive, and the members of local groups). Ciaran McKeown had in mind a model for an alternative government for Northern Ireland, and it was certainly designed for large numbers.

Secondly, it was hierarchical; there was a chairperson, an Executive elected by the autumn Assembly, and while local groups could dissent from policy this was of limited use (since in the longer term groups wouldn't continue to be involved if they disagreed profoundly). It was bureaucratic; structures of Community, Trust and Company aside from the sub-divisions within the Community of Executive, Administration (Fredheim), Consultative Boards etc. It was largely based on conventional wisdom about organisational matters, down to standing orders for Assemblies. It made for great difficulties for people, and particularly women, who had no experience of such bureaucracies.

But another aspect of its hierarchical nature was expressed not so much in the structure per se as in the location of policy making, and that was principally with the triumvirate of Betty, Mairead and Ciaran but most of all with Ciaran. As Bob Overy put it:

¹³ Though the post-Turf Lodge statement of October 1976 said "As a strongly pacifist organisation..." the label was somewhat meaningless.

¹⁴ Editorial, 'Peace by Peace', Vol. 2 No. 7, June 1977.

“it was contradictory for a movement aiming to transform Northern Ireland from the bottom-up to rely so heavily on the initiative of the three leaders working from the top-down.”¹⁵

My own opinion is that the structure was singularly inappropriate for the needs of the mass of members. Whatever the structure there would have been people who would have left the movement since the range of political, and other, views contained within those attending the early rallies could not be held together in the long term. The question I have is – could there not have been a more constructive relationship between people involved, and more constructive ways in which people left?

The structure was tackled fairly early on, too early some feel, and this enabled those who were interested in gaining power to get footholds. Undoubtedly this was mainly men and undoubtedly many of them had the best of motives. Some of the early group representatives meetings tackled the issue, and Sandy Woods proposed a structure similar to that for youth groups in Northern Ireland – a standing umbrella group. Sandy Woods identified Tom Conaty as being one of the principal people backing Ciaran McKeown in support of a hierarchical structure.

In any case the debate was basically over by the spring of 1977 and the Killyhevlin convention – far too early for those who had no experience of such structures to decide. Ciaran McKeown feels that some of the problems that arose were because he didn't use the power he could have to sort things out, and that where he was 'extreme' it was in defence of democracy.

One key failing, Ciaran McKeown felt, in the structure that was agreed was the designation of two representatives from each member group to attend Assemblies; he felt that not to give groups representation according to their numbers (thus for example, a group with ten members might have had one representative, a group with thirty would have had three, etc.) was anti-democratic. The other side of the coin, felt by some others, was whether a small group which was working flat out should have less representation than a larger group which perhaps was sitting back doing little. In any case I don't feel that this would have made any significant difference to the political balance within the Peace People, or to subsequent events.

There were other disadvantages to the structure. It was alleged that the movement was responsible to the leadership, and not vice versa. Where the leaders continued to do their own thing without taking into account the beliefs of the members it was asking for trouble; it was, perhaps, very brave and what they might have been saying could have been politically correct, but organisationally speaking it was a disaster.

What was needed was a structure where the leaders could exercise their prophetic role on issues of concern without it being immediately identified as 'Peace People policy' and thereby threatening Peace People ordinary members who disagreed. A real dialogue could only emerge where people didn't feel their position threatened.

I would feel that, speaking with the wisdom of hindsight, a non-hierarchical structure of some kind was essential. If that could have been coupled with a provision for Betty, Mairead and Ciaran to have been able to do their own thing without it being identified as official policy, things could have gone quite differently. A non-hierarchical structure would have been much better in accord with the diversity of political views within the movement and the presence of so many people who had not previously been involved in political or voluntary activities.

The Rallies

The 'rally phase' of the Peace People, as it came to be known, was set out by Ciaran McKeown; a series of rallies in Ireland and in Britain culminating with ones, respectively, at the Boyne and London. Ciaran McKeown set the venues and dates, the details were mainly worked out locally. In terms of creating a bond between those involved it worked excellently; not only was there the emotional atmosphere of the rallies themselves but what was perhaps just as important was travelling there. People travelling some distance on a bus had the opportunity to talk to others coming from the same area and get to know one another.

It is difficult to be sure on numbers of people participating in the rallies. Crowd estimates vary wildly; the numbers on the Shankill rally on 18th August 1976 were put at 25,000 by the following day's *'Sunday Independent'* and at 35,000 by the *'Sunday News'*, a fairly typical range of estimates. The numbers on the Dublin rally the same day were put at 15,000 - 20,000 by the *'Irish Times'* whose report quoted different estimates from the Gardai of 30,000 and 50,000 – the last figure being over three times the first. The estimates for the Derry rally varied from 15,000 - 40,000.

¹⁵ Bob Overy, "How effective are peace movements?", Bradford School of Peace Studies/Housmans, 1978, page 37.

There is another problem too in estimating the total number of people as opposed to the total number of attendances by people; people were bussed to the rallies in great numbers, and the 10,000 on a rally one week might be mainly the same people as on previous rallies with some 'new' local people in addition.

Without a lot more work to try to pin down figures, the best guess I could put on the total number of people from Northern Ireland who attended at least one rally would be 100,000 – about 6½% of the population of the North. The figure would certainly be under 10% of the total population.

But because it was a percentage not given to behaving in this way normally it was of considerable newsworthiness. Possibly another hundred thousand plus marched for peace in the Republic in solidarity with the Peace People – quite probably more people than attended the rallies in the North; on the other hand, a higher proportion in the North would have gone to two or more rallies.

But the numbers were sometimes interpreted to indicate invincibility, both through the impression conveyed in the media and by some members. The feeling was that such numbers could not be defeated. The illusion disappears with a little bit of perspective, such as that the same day as the Shankill rally there was a Royal Black Institution (a senior Orange institution) march attended by the same number of people as the Peace People one.¹⁶ When it came to the numbers game the Peace People were not what they perhaps appeared, especially when those numbers were divided up into the areas they came from.

The rallies usually had an ecumenical flavour, perhaps a few hymns or songs, perhaps some words from one of the leaders, and the reading of the Peace People declaration. Ciaran McKeown thought hard before making his speech at the Boyne (Drogheda) rally where he surprised many people by saying he wasn't in favour of power-sharing (1974 variety). But numbers didn't get to hear what was said at rallies anyway, and in some of them, such as at the Ormeau Park, people were still arriving when the platform contribution was over!

Rallies and marches are often an organising cliché, something suggested whenever any form of public demonstration is mooted. But there was a strong symbolism and emotion attached to some of the Peace People rallies, notably the reality of Catholics marching up the Shankill or Protestants up the Falls. It reminded some people of the bread marches by unemployed Catholics and Protestants coming together in the early 1930's. On the Shankill rally some of the bystanders had tears in their eyes as they watched uniformed nuns walk by, many of whom were embraced and welcomed like long lost sisters; it was a demonstration of common humanity and political differences were put aside for at least a little while by those taking part and those watching as local bystanders.

The rallies were normally devoid of trouble, though the IRA detonated a bomb during the Newry one. On the Shankill the paramilitaries in the UDA (Ulster Defence Association) made what was for them the correct tactical decision not to oppose the rally, and they offered 'protection' to the participants; because the Peace People were still seen at this time as being principally anti-IRA too much 'protection' wasn't necessary.

However, when it came to the Falls rally on 23rd October it was a different story. The 10,000 or so marchers were vigorously assaulted with a variety of missiles including bricks, bottles and stones as well as more personal assaults. The wet weather of the day saved many skulls – umbrellas brought to protect from the rain protected instead from irate republicans who saw the Peace People as traitors.

It doesn't look like there was any concerted effort by the IRA or Sinn Fein to attack the marchers but the fact that many local people were anti-Peace People, and the local paramilitaries did not 'protect' the march as happened on the Shankill, led to a number of mainly minor injuries. Some of the recognisable public figures were singled out for attack, none serious apart from veteran activist Saidie Patterson whose spine was seriously injured in an attack from which she was rescued by a group of local Catholic women.¹⁷

In fact it looks like the Peace People were lucky more people were not seriously injured on the Falls rally. Some people kept their battered and perhaps even unrecognisable umbrellas that saved them as souvenirs of this baptism of fire. What was not known, and I was informed about by an eyewitness, was the presence of armed men behind the cemetery gates on the Falls the day of the rally; whether they were there to possibly use the rally to shoot at the army or RUC, or for some other contingency, I cannot say.

¹⁶ 'Analysis' editorial, Dawn 24.

¹⁷ "Saidie Patterson – Irish Peacemaker", by David Bleakley, Blackstaff Press, 1980, page 91.

But the 'rally phase' could not go on for ever. Numbers showed an uncertain decline. A common figure for some of the rallies – Derry and Newry for example – was 20,000 or slightly over that. But Ballymena on 2nd October had only 5,000-8,000, with a similar figure for a special Christmas rally at Armagh on 18th December (the same day as the Ballymena rally 20,000 - 30,000 attended a rally in Cork). The culminating Boyne rally of the 'rally phase' held at Drogheda on 5th December had perhaps 12,000 - 15,000 at it. The rally goers were getting weary. The final British rally, at Trafalgar Square on 27th November, described by the *'Sunday Times'* as "low-key", had 15,000 - 20,000 at it instead of the 100,000 expected.

The Trafalgar Square rally was actually an example of a highly uncritical approach by the Peace People to the state. They sought, and were granted, the use of this prestigious venue which was denied to all other Irish-related political groups; the authorities considered the Peace People rally as "outside the political arena". Mark James of Pax Christi, who co-ordinated the extremely heterogeneous group who organised the rally in London, said that they just did not think about the fact other Irish groups were banned from using it. While the rally undoubtedly said other things (including Betty Williams' 'V' fingered sign to hecklers!), this was an example of the Peace People's message being co-opted by the British authorities in favour of their definition of 'peace'; it could also be seen as an anti-civil liberties stand by the Peace People, accepting from the state what was denied to others.

Programme

The main conclusion I would come to regarding programme is that the Peace People, in trying to provide a total response to the problems existing in Northern Ireland, actually tried to tackle too much for the numbers involved.¹⁸ Sometimes this was reduced to well-meaning but useless Assembly resolutions, such as *"That this Assembly promotes integrated housing throughout Northern Ireland."*¹⁹

There were some attempts at 'in service training' for members on dealing with the media, committee procedures etc., but generally they didn't get far. Ann Fannin concluded:²⁰ *"However the educational programme within the movement was virtually non-existent. A few stumbling attempts at sessions on non-violence, self-awareness and political debate were organised at headquarters but were never taken seriously, and soon dropped."* Perhaps on this people didn't see the value of such sessions; until they could be persuaded of that they weren't ready, and more persistence was required.

There were also different levels of operation. Kathleen Fleming put it like this:

"I believe the Peace People operated on several different levels which in a sense mirrored the norm in our society. Two of the most significant were a) the high profile of the leaders and the publicity given to the work for political and legal change although very few were actively involved, in contrast to b) low key and often quite difficult work at local level, some of which continues independent of the Peace People."

Steve McBride expressed it this way:

"On the one hand you had people who saw the Peace People, first and foremost, as a campaigning organisation, speaking out, providing public leadership, which was trying to win support for a general perspective on Northern Irish affairs. And on the other hand, a view of essentially a social welfare type of organisation, which would do good works by stealth and which would not normally be involved in controversy; it's a perfectly respectable and legitimate model and one that's been followed by most of the reconciliation organisations in Northern Ireland. The Peace People were different in trying to do both and be a campaigning, outspoken organisation."

Steve felt the two were entirely compatible and mutually supportive.

It is perhaps important to stress, too, that some of the programme – welfare and work on civil liberties issues for example – arose partly from demands which were made on the office at Fredheim. People came looking for help. Those at the receiving end felt they had to respond, and this they did in a variety of ways. Some of this programme, and other aspects like the junior football league which the Peace People ran successfully for a number of years, was not controversial. Such projects went ahead quietly.

¹⁸ The husband of one woman asked their child over the breakfast table whether his wife was any more peaceful since becoming involved in the Peace People; her reply was – "No, she's always cross and she's never at home!" In another family where the housewife was heavily involved, a young child immediately recognised a picture in a book of a vacuum cleaner as "Daddy's Hoover."

¹⁹ Ballymena, Spring assembly 1978.

²⁰ Ann Fannin, page 47.

But there were some parts of the centrally organised programme that went wrong and caused further fallout among the membership. One was a plan, in June 1977, to help in the dumping of arms and ammunition; *“the Peace People have called upon people to give all information on the whereabouts of explosives and arms between now and September. And the movement has offered to assist as best it can in the safe disposal of such war materials without risk to those who wish to get rid of them.”*²¹ But this plan was announced before, and without, the agreement of the police. The RUC told the Peace People that if they were found in possession of such weapons or ammunition they would be treated with the full force of the law – they would be arrested and charged.

A Community Action Housing Campaign in 1979 which tried to organise a big march and rally with contingents from North, South, East and West Belfast to converge on the City Hall was an unmitigated flop. It would have been so embarrassing for at least one tiny group at a gathering point to have marched to the City Hall that banners were quietly folded away, to reappear at the City Hall where the meeting took place. *‘Peace by Peace’* correctly pinpointed *“The deep resentment of the Peace People along the circuit of ‘community organisations’”*²² as a possible reason for the flop, despite a lot of organisational work.

A Peace People plan to have representatives present at army arrests and interrogations was another good idea which fell flat. Its purpose was seen as twofold; it would both protect those being arrested and interrogated as well as protecting the army from malicious allegations. But unless the status of the Peace People was both sufficiently high, and at least neutral from the army's point of view, the Peace People plan was unlikely to be agreed to. This was apart from problems of 'confidentiality' and 'security' which would have arisen.

The numbers involved in the Peace People at this point (late 1977) would also have been insufficient to run the scheme except on a pilot basis, although that would not have prevented them bringing more people into it. It would have been a tremendous undertaking but it came to naught.²³

Welfare

Welfare work began spontaneously as people came to the Peace People for help. The work fell into three or four categories; general welfare (much of it advice, perhaps on welfare rights), prison visiting, resettlement, and Lifeline which worked with "the innocent victims of violence".²⁴

Resettlement, 'the escape route', was the area of welfare work which gained most media attention. This involved resettling people who needed to get away from paramilitary pressures and the like in new situations in the Republic, Britain, and even New Zealand.²⁵ Some no longer wished to be involved in the particular paramilitary group, or wanted a clean start after finishing a prison sentence.

Mistakes were made early on through inexperience, and some hosts in Britain were 'ripped off' by a few who patently had not changed their ways. Gradually a competent, confidential system of vetting and placement emerged. Applicants were told that their names and addresses would be checked out with the police if they proceeded with their application; the Peace People were therefore not helping anyone wanted by the authorities to escape.

Figures for the total number dealt with in the resettlement programme vary, perhaps as high as 600 people, including 150 families.²⁶ But gradually the emphasis came to be on resettling people within Northern Ireland. In any case, particularly in the case of single men, many got home sick and returned to Northern Ireland after a period away. Others continued their new life elsewhere. A social worker commented in this regard that perhaps the social services used this Peace People service to get rid of some of their problem cases.

Prison visiting was established quite quickly, by October 1977 there was a team of 4 visiting 30 people in Crumlin Road jail, and more volunteers got involved. This is one aspect of welfare work which has only been continued in a very small way today.

The minibus service to the Maze (Long Kesh) and Magilligan prisons provided an alternative to those run by the paramilitary welfare organisations. Initially it was only the families of loyalist prisoners but it then became mixed. It

²¹ 'Peace by Peace', Vol. 2 No. 6.

²² 'Peace by Peace', Vol. 4 Nos 12- 14..

²³ Fionnuala O Connor, 'Irish Times', 21st October 1977.

²⁴ The name 'Lifeline' was liable to confusion with the 'escape route' or resettlement work; the 'Belfast Telegraph' even made the error in print. The two were not directly connected.

²⁵ See examples of a couple of cases in the autumn 1980 Assembly reports.

²⁶ See e.g. 'Welfare and warfare', Dawn 59 - 60.

continues to provide an important service for those who wish to avoid being reliant on services provided by paramilitary organisations; it also afforded a chance for more personal welfare work in the opportunity it gave to get to know the wives of prisoners and what their problems were.

Peter Graham and subsequently Pat Hale, as welfare workers, along with many volunteers from at home and abroad, helped establish what was an important piece of generally low-key programme on some sensitive areas.

Lifeline

Lifeline was established by Ena Hart-Jones and Betty Williams following the La Mon hotel bombing of February 1978 which killed 12 and injured 23. It was to work with 'the innocent victims of violence' and saw itself as a counter-weight to the rest of the Peace People welfare programme which was primarily for prisoners and prisoners' wives.

However, the criteria which was exercised as to who was 'an innocent victim of violence' was a controversial one within the Peace People. Families of shot army or police personnel were automatically sent letters of sympathy and offers of help; the families of paramilitary members killed would generally not have been, though members of Lifeline were free to contact them as individuals and without their Lifeline cap on (and some did exercise this option).

While Lifeline existed under the Peace People's aegis, it was semi-independent in its working. The criteria of who was offered help was one problem. Another arose over Lifeline having a bank account separate to the Peace People; Ena Hart-Jones felt that many in the Peace People weren't interested in Lifeline and that the bank account had to be separate since people gave money to Lifeline who wouldn't give it for general Peace People funds.

An attempt by the Peace People Executive to get control of the Lifeline bank account was given by Ena Hart-Jones as the reason Lifeline left the Peace People. But since the individual members of Lifeline were all leaving the Peace People this break would have happened anyway.

Lifeline continues its work today, with a couple of dozen members. It organises holidays and weekends for families and parents, visits people, contacts the bereaved, and organises outings. Lifeline can be contacted by phoning Belfast 718718. The chairperson is currently Tilly Lindsay. Ena Hart-Jones, who was latterly president of Lifeline, died in late 1986.

Reactions to the Peace People

(i) *Political parties and government*

The political parties of the centre and near right welcomed the Peace People and were certainly willing to hold their fire until they saw which ways the movement headed; Alliance party members made up a strong band within the Peace People who, while supporting the call for peace made by them, were unwilling to let the Peace People stray into what might be called by them 'political' waters where it would conflict with the political party they supported.

The British government welcomed the Peace People and interpreted it as support for its policies on 'peace'. They initiated a poster and propaganda campaign that "7 years is enough" of the troubles; this slogan was quickly adapted in West Belfast to "700 years is enough" – of British involvement in Ireland. Many people thought the poster campaign was initiated by the Peace People rather than the British government.

But not everyone welcomed the Peace People. The Paisleyite '*Protestant Telegraph*' of 21st August 1976 was quite blunt in stating its conspiracy theory; "*The priest-inspired campaign going under the apparent leadership of the Andersonstown women, is yet another front organisation to gain credibility for the Roman Catholic Church...*"

On the republican side of the spectrum, Gerry Adams, writing from Long Kesh where he was interned, put the Peace People in the context of the impossibility of peace in an Ireland controlled by British imperialism: "*The leadership of the present peace campaign tell us that they are dedicated to building a peaceful and just society in Ireland. No amount of pray-ins or liberalism can give us this. The system which the Irish live under is not built for peace, and it is this which will defeat the desire which is being demonstrated at present.*"²⁷ Some republicans and others were more straightforward in expressing their view of the Peace People as agents of the British government.

There were certainly a number of conspiracy theories circulating but in the nature of things these are impossible to prove or disprove except by common sense. What does seem certain, however, is that both the Provos and the government

²⁷ Gerry Adams, "Peace in Ireland – a broad analysis of the present situation", Belfast Republican Press Centre, 1976, 15 page pamphlet.

intelligence agencies kept close tabs on what was happening in the Peace People through plants or informers. This was hardly surprising. The Provos felt their position threatened by the Peace People in the early days, and the British authorities were keen to see the Peace People head in a direction acceptable to them. But there is no evidence that members of these bodies took on any active covert role in the affairs of the Peace People.

(ii) The media

There was not only very little criticism of the Peace People in the early days but also very little realistic assessment of what the possibilities were for such a movement.

The Peace People's relationship with the media was a remarkable one at the start. Newsmen clamoured to interview, interpret, comment and photographers and cameramen filmed away. The early Peace People as an organisation was a slave to the media, every journalist being fitted in if at all possible. There were no moves to overcome the cult of personality surrounding the leadership trio when it might have been possible to do so at the beginning. Indeed, an early leaders meeting decided to continue to highlight Betty and Mairead rather than extend those representing the Peace People to the media; and the constitution which was adopted in 1977 specifically mentioned Betty, Mairead and Ciaran as the founders.

Drastic steps would have had to be taken to overcome the time and energy sapping requirements of the media. A once weekly press conference and perhaps one leadership interview would have been sufficient for the needs of the Peace People in Northern Ireland. Now obviously as much money might not have come from abroad but in the long run that disappeared anyway.

There are some who would perhaps write off the Peace People as 'the creation of the media'. This is mistaken. The Peace People movement would certainly not have grown so big, nor so quickly, had the coverage been more 'normal', but it began with Betty Williams knocking on doors without the aid of the media. Obviously the relationship between the origins of the Peace People and the media is a complex one. The Peace People fitted what the media wanted at the time; personalities, 'good news' from Northern Ireland, mass demonstrations against violence. The media in a sense rewarded the Peace People for being what they – and their readers – were interested in. But it cannot be said that they created the movement itself.

Unfortunately for them, slavery to the media did not bring the results that might have been anticipated. Martin O'Brien's analysis of the relationship between the Peace People and the three Belfast daily papers has this conclusion; "*the movement was largely unsuccessful in communicating its views through the media. In Northern Irish society, with its minefield of sensitivities, the movement was perhaps naive to attempt to use the media to such an extent.*"²⁸

Martin O'Brien's analysis, covering key periods over the Peace People's ten years, shows that there was much concentration on the personalities of the leaders and little on Peace People policies and ideas; there was also distortion, outright factual inaccuracies, and partial coverage in the sense of coverage reflecting the preoccupations of the readership of the newspapers concerned. When controversy arose it was the controversy that was reported, naturally enough, but usually with no reference to anything else they were doing; they were being bit by the hand that had helped to feed them.²⁹ Ann Fannin put it this way:

*"During the initial stages of the movement, when it appeared that Peace People criticism was only directed at the Provos, both the government and the media were delighted to highlight their statements. When they started to criticise the army however the media backed away and were eager to focus on points of dissension within the movement."*³⁰

(iii) Intimidation

Direct physical intimidation was the extreme end of negative reactions to the Peace People on the ground. One woman was intimidated out of a working class housing estate in Belfast because of her involvement, although this may have been the only case. Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan were beaten up numerous times and at times the leaders were threatened by a hostile crowd, as at Turf Lodge in October 1976. Cars belonging to Peace People were attacked, as was the first minibus to take prisoners' relatives to Long Kesh.

Paint was thrown at supporters' houses or flats or slogans daubed on their walls in some areas. The greatest physical attack happened during the Falls rally in October. Some of those most involved just accepted intimidation as the price of being involved and gained acceptance of a kind in demonstrating their courage in continuing their work.

²⁸ Martin O'Brien thesis – see Further Reading.

²⁹ See also McKeown pages 277, 305.

³⁰ Ann Fannin, thesis page 81. See Further Reading.

It would be wrong to think of it as solely being a reaction in working class areas. And while intimidation was probably worse in Catholic areas than Protestant this was because the Peace People were seen as being more anti-IRA than anti-UDA or the other Protestant paramilitaries and the state. All around there were plenty of cold shoulders, and 'friends' or members of the same church who no longer spoke. One person reckoned their small business suffered badly through their being identified with the Peace People. Many Peace People were judged to have become traitors to their tribal identity as Catholics or Protestants.

Relationship with others

In the early days the relationship with other community and peace groups was disastrous. The latter were given the clear impression that they should come into the new (Peace People) structure that was being set up and merge their identities in it. These groups were clearly unwilling to do, and the arrogance with which the message was seen to be conveyed caused problems for genuine co-operation later on. It also ensured that some of the good ideas of the Peace People were rejected out of hand in these quarters.

Of course there were two sides to the coin – arrogance on the part of some Peace People and jealousy on the part of some community and peace groups at the amount of money and publicity that the Peace People were receiving. The Peace People also suggested joint fundraising abroad to other peace groups, but again they were wary of being subsumed in some greater Peace People scheme. It was only after a few years that the Peace People were able to show that they were genuinely interested in co-operation but by then the Peace People were no longer a mass movement.

It is a difficult area to sort out. The Peace People leadership felt they were offering a new, viable structure to replace ones which weren't getting anywhere. People could either come into the Peace People itself and the Assembly, or keep more of their identity and join the proposed Senate (members of the Northern Ireland Peace Forum were invited to join the latter). But the fact that established community leaders, such as Saidie Patterson, Winnie Jordan and others, were passed over in extending the Peace People leadership made for further difficulties.

There was an undoubted arrogance associated with some of the leadership in the early days, and with some of the membership too – though probably in inverse proportion to the extent to which people were involved in local activities. Those who knew the score locally knew just how difficult things would be, and therefore had a more realistic perception of what was possible.

Terminology

There was, and is, a difficulty with the name chosen by the 'Peace People' for themselves. The singular of 'Peace People' is, after all, 'peace person', and who can be committed to peace and not be a 'peace person'? The name 'Peace People' may have been chosen in order to indicate a basic commitment and an orientation to being for all who stood for peace; but the very terminology created problems for those who were committed to peace but were not committed to the Peace People. The proper name for the principal body, 'The Community of the Peace People', only partly overcame this problem since in common parlance it was always just the 'Peace People' and not 'the Community of the Peace People', except perhaps in identifying that part relative to the Trust or Company.

The name went along with the arrogance which many in the local community and peace fields felt emanated from the Peace People. Suddenly the Peace People were 'the peace movement' – both so far as the media and the Peace People were concerned. What I find fascinating is that not only was this terminology taken on board by people within the Peace People but that some who later left still used terminology which was singularly inappropriate to their status as former Peace People; I have heard one prominent former member say "*When I was in the peace movement proper...*" – referring to the Peace People!

Trium'vir'ate and leadership

What can be said about the trio of leaders that emerged? Betty and Mairead became leaders by dint of their moral courage in standing up against violence (though they were neither the first nor the last Northern Irish women to do so) and by their media profiles which attracted people to them. Ciaran McKeown became a leader through his relationship with Betty and Mairead, which was due to his being someone not only with a knowledge of the media but also with a deep commitment to peace. None of them was initially chosen as a leader in an elected sense; they emerged – Ciaran more slowly as his position was low profile to begin with.

But why did they emerge? The media and people at large, in Northern Ireland and internationally, wanted some hope for the North and some heroines and heroes. Bad news was usually the big news for Northern Ireland; now the time had come for

'good news'. The fact that the two visible leaders were women added to the newsworthiness – and the fact that they were attractive looking women added further.

Each of the three had positive qualities that different people could relate to different parts of. Betty was direct, forceful, plainspoken, volatile, but vulnerable in ways underneath; the 'sinner' compared to Mairead as the 'saint'. Mairead had a gentler presentation, yet forceful underneath, and deeply religious (some people thought sanctimonious; I feel not). Ciaran was the pipe-smoking, soft-spoken, bearded intellectual man of ideas.

Different people were drawn to the Peace People by different qualities of the leaders; there was something there that might appeal to almost anyone. If you didn't like one of the leaders you could identify with another; it was, in terms of appeal to people, a very successful combination.

There was a tremendous empathy between the three of them. Ciaran McKeown put it this way:

"There was also an embarrassing attempt to deify us in some circles, to suggest that we were 'divinely sent', that we were some kind of reflected 'Trinity' in which Betty was the heart, Mairead the soul, and me the head, or sometimes it was guts, heart and head in the same order. Certainly it was an astonishing relationship..."³¹

All three of the leaders were undoubtedly affected, as anyone else would be, by the film star treatment they received. Different people identify it as affecting Betty, Mairead and Ciaran in different ways. It didn't help the charges of arrogance. Sometimes they, and others, could be stubborn, or fight unduly to get their own way. Betty tended to work in bursts; though she had an underlying commitment she could disappear for a period, and then return full of enthusiasm.

Ciaran McKeown had a 'philosophical' way of both talking and writing which was certainly fascinating at an intellectual level, the way he explored ideas in relation to the question in hand, but it often lost people. People got side-tracked, unintentionally so far as Ciaran McKeown was concerned, and lost where a simpler, more straightforward, statement would have sufficed. This is, of course, totally aside from those who, having seen what Ciaran was saying, disagreed with him. Much of the time it was simply a lack of communication as to what was being said.

But there was another disadvantage to Ciaran's style of talking which Kathleen Fleming identified:

"Ciaran's statements were so absolute and expressed with such conviction that people either gave support or became defensive, attacking his views."

There's no doubt Ciaran did try to help people participate in the structures. Someone – not someone particularly identified with him – said nothing pleased Ciaran McKeown more than helping people to develop themselves personally – even if they were subsequently able to oppose his line more strongly. But perhaps he expected people to be stronger and more forthright than many people felt able to be. To encourage further participation would have needed a different structure.

For the leadership, and principally for Ciaran McKeown in the position of what he saw as moral guardian of the Peace People heritage, speaking out on issues of concern *there and then* was an essential part of leadership. It was moral cowardice to let things go by without comment. The tide of the times was rushing by so fast that it was essential to get their word in when they felt it mattered – now. Tomorrow would be too late. And so, driven by what was felt to be a moral imperative to give a lead and a light to the people of Northern Ireland, the leadership continued to speak out on justice and other issues that concerned them. Endorsement by the Executive or the movement could come later.

But in doing so they perhaps fell into what might be labelled the 'party political correct line trap'; that is, an overemphasis on having the correct line on an issue as opposed to exploring possible ways of resolving it through discussion, mediation or action. The 'correct line trap' was doubly unfortunate because after a while people ceased to listen, and this is especially true in Northern Ireland where people label others in a very particular way.

Peace People statements, which might initially have been thought-provoking, quite soon would have had the effect simply of reinforcing other people's views (good or bad) on them; the subject matter got lost. Eventually the Peace People did learn that a quieter way of lobbying and the like could be just as effective (or ineffective!) as public pronouncements.

However, it must have been very frustrating for the leadership and for others who wished to press ahead with the Peace People's work when there seemed to be no end to the list of people's questions, doubts and criticisms. The same issues of lack of consultation kept cropping up from the beginning; Norman Lockhart's report on the first group representatives'

³¹ Ciaran McKeown, page 150.

meeting in October 1976 said “*Consultation and communication were the twin themes.*”³² For the leadership the problem must have seemed to be – how was the movement to go ahead and deal with all the important issues if people kept making, and sticking to, the same old criticisms?

But if you want people to continue in a movement you cannot ignore such criticisms, even if they have been heard a thousand times before. As Margaret Watson put it; “*Of course we had heard these questions over and over and over again, but the very fact that they were still being asked, meant that they hadn’t been satisfied with the previous answers they had been given.*”

There was one particular case in point which Margaret Watson mentioned. A delegation of some ten or so people from local groups came to talk to the Executive; “*These were people that had been members from the beginning of the movement and had very deep, genuine concerns about how things were going. I think basically they felt that there was a lack of liaison, lack of consultation – that word ‘consultation’ is burnt into my brain. That was the whole bugbear at the time, accountability was not evident, in so far as the three leaders were going on television, they were on the radio, there were statements being made by them, and perhaps causing problems within local groups.*”

Margaret Watson felt these people were treated in a condescending way by the Executive. Since their complaints had been ones aired before, the Executive were not even going to discuss them; when it did get put onto the end of the agenda it merely resulted in a sub-group of three being appointed to reply to the delegation. Margaret Watson went home and wrote her resignation.

However she did not immediately resign and over the summer of 1977 undertook some work and research on the issue of dismantling the ‘peace barriers’ which are physical barriers (walls, corrugated iron etc.) between Catholic and Protestant areas (in this case in Belfast). Her report was that it would be arrogant for the Peace People themselves to take down these barriers when local people felt more secure with them. She preferred to try to work with people on either side so that in time the barriers could be removed with their co-operation – “*My plan was to reduce the barriers in people’s minds first of all.*”

She proposed a pilot project in the Duncairn Gardens/New Lodge/Tigers Bay area. Her report was seen by some on the Executive, principally by Betty Williams, as being insufficiently dramatic, and Margaret envisaged the Peace People plan as being to physically dismantle a barrier while cameras rolled. Margaret Watson left.

Nobel prize

The award of the Nobel peace prize to Mairead and Betty was announced just after the autumn 1977 Assembly. There were slightly conflicting reports of where the money (under £80,000) would go; in one newspaper account Betty Williams was quoted as saying “*Most of the money will be devoted to Third World projects*”³³ and in another that “*Mrs Williams said most of the money would go straight into the funds, as the Peace Movement planned projects costing several million pounds*”³⁴

What a shock it was, then, when Betty Williams announced to Mairead and Ciaran that she was keeping her £38½ thousand share. To keep up appearances, Mairead Corrigan also kept her share personally. Both were undoubtedly generous in giving some of it away, although Betty Williams was seen as being more extravagant personally. The incident was part of a widening gap between Betty and Mairead.

But the people of Northern Ireland would not wear it. Gossip of fur coats had gone on long enough; here was the proof of Peace People making money out of the Northern situation. What credibility the Peace People had left took a tumble. What is ironic is that Betty Williams could have had her cake and eaten it; if the money went into the Peace People accounts but been earmarked for Betty’s and Mairead’s salaries there wouldn’t have been a quarter of the fuss.

Betty Williams, speaking on the ‘*First Tuesday*’ Yorkshire Television programme “*Peace People – the dream that died*”, shown in February 1986, said that “*I was broke, absolutely flat broke. And my family was in trouble for money. And my marriage was just gone, you know, and I didn’t have any money so I kept my half... I needed it more than the third world at that particular time...*” She also said she was sick of apologising for keeping it and “*I kept it so I’m guilty.*”

³² ‘Peace by Peace’, Vol.1 No.2

³³ ‘Sunday Times’, 16th October 1977.

³⁴ ‘Irish Times’, 12th October 1977.

Keeping the Nobel money was undoubtedly the single most damaging incident so far as Peace People credibility was concerned. 7 out of the 50 people I interviewed in a 'vox populi' exercise in Belfast on the Peace People (see appendices) specifically referred to the Nobel money as being problematic in the decline of the Peace People.

Women

It seems to be generally agreed that women comprised around 95% of those attending the early rallies, though slightly less in the local groups. However, while the ad hoc Executive formed at the Killyhevlin convention of April 1977 had 12 women and 9 men, the first full election in October 1977 led to 7 women and 9 men on the Executive³⁵ – the men were in control at the centre of the Peace People.

Why? It is clear that women were confused or frightened of attending the different formal business sessions of the Peace People³⁶ – even women who were highly motivated and involved. One woman even alleged to me that the physical layout of Assemblies was made to discourage people from speaking. Women had less 'organisational' experience than men, and taking into account the 'experience' of men, women helped to put men into a majority on the Executive.

What I also find strange is the reluctance of women in the Peace People to identify with feminism, due to some form of conservatism. Internationally many women did see the Peace People as a feminist movement but it was certainly not understood in that way by those taking part. There was a certain paradox there that, while being involved in the Peace People necessitated 'standing up' in a way women weren't used to, the initial reaction was one of revulsion at the death of the Maguire children. That is, women were becoming activists in the Peace People through an identification as women and mothers (their 'normal' role) with the Maguire family. Feminism tended to be understood in the stereotypical 'burning bras' image and so was rejected; and yet, the positive image of feminism, of the assertive woman carving out her own destiny, could have offered much to the women involved.

Undoubtedly many women did strike out a new path for themselves through their involvement. Many became involved against their husbands' or families' wishes. Sadly the movement catered badly for their needs in sticking to a structure which was off-putting, encouraged male domination, and was not understood by them. Women, and the men involved too, needed smaller groups, less pressure, and more time to get to grips with the issues than they were afforded. Perhaps only after the 1980 'split' and the reduction in numbers did the women involved get a fairer deal. Maximising the contribution of women would have needed a different structure.³⁷

Youth for Peace

Youth for Peace was begun in the early days on the basis of a few young people who were regulars at the office being appointed to lead – although youth groups had started spontaneously on a local basis. 53 youth groups were recorded in the Youth for Peace report to the October 1977 Assembly, I presume nearly all or all of these associated with adult Peace People groups.

The majority of these youth groups were in the Belfast area but there were others throughout the major centres of population in the 6 counties. However the decline was rapid; by April 1978 the numbers had declined to 36 groups, with varying levels of activity. And one year later (October 1979) Trevor Betts and Chris Skillen were reporting "*This has not been a very good year for the now practically non-existent Youth for Peace...*"³⁸

Why the rapid decline? Undoubtedly the major reason was the difficulty which most youth groups have in reproducing themselves; if people become involved in their last year or two at school they are no sooner heavily involved than they've moved away to work or college. There was little back up to the groups from the centre. And at the centre there was only a limited amount of programme work undertaken. While Youth for Peace provided the backbone for the 'flying squads' in the early years selling 'Peace by Peace', in this they were perhaps used as the nonviolent equivalent of cannon fodder!

And as with the adult movement, the initial surge of members was not built on, or perhaps could not be built on, to add new members to the group. Its status with regard to the adult organisation was indeterminate and perhaps not sufficiently independent to try to develop its own thinking and work; it was used by the adult organisation to sell papers without perhaps the commitment and help in other areas which such routine but exhausting work might have deserved.

³⁵ Ann Fannin, page 56

³⁶ Ann Fannin, page 68

³⁷ See article by Gena Corea, "*Where did all the women go?*"

³⁸ These figures and the quote are from the respective reports to Peace People Assemblies.

Some local groups did work on projects, including painting pensioners' houses and removing graffiti. But the main focus of local groups was primarily discussion and a social outlet. While the decline was relatively faster than for the Peace People themselves, undoubtedly many young people did benefit from the experience, contacts, and friendships made. The Norwegian camps had begun in 1977 but it took some time for the planning and follow-up work to develop in order to maximise the potential from them – sometimes they were just holidays. When Youth for Peace was re-established in 1981 it was on a more independent footing.

Group development

Group development work began around the time of the Killyhevlin convention in 1977, and over the years was associated with people like Jimmy McIlwaine, Eddie McCotter, Pat Massey, Pat Johnston, Saidie Johnston and others. Life was busy for the group development team; a report to the April 1978 Assembly showed that 48 groups had been visited in the month from 9th January to 9th February!³⁹

Group development work fell into three stages. The first was helping groups to get established. The second was cold start canvassing in areas where there was no Peace People presence, coupled with work alongside existing groups. But this was too much to attempt to do, and encouraging responses on the doorsteps of Northern Ireland weren't able to be translated into new groups. The final phase was work with continuing groups and trying to stimulate some which were on the brink of closure.

The crack

The social side of the Peace People is something that should not be ignored. It was good crack for most of those involved. At a minimum level the rallies were a day out. At a more involved level there was good-hearted humour and crack, much of it founded on the acceptance of each other which enables Northern Catholics and Protestants of an ecumenical persuasion to make fun of each other's beliefs in a light-hearted way; this in turn reinforced the acceptance. One example quoted was where a good Protestant woman who might not even have met a Catholic priest a few months previously ended up sitting on a priest's knee during a meeting because there were no chairs left! People who lived in religiously segregated areas had opportunities to meet others across the divide, in informal and formal meetings, as well as at organised socials and dances.

Close friendships were formed, only a relatively few of which would have been broken by the subsequent quarrels in the Peace People. One woman said how in 1976 her friends were the wives of her husband's friends; today the situation was reversed – their friends came from friendships which she formed through the Peace People. And this was a woman who for the first time went against her husband's wishes to get involved in the Peace People at the beginning!

Administration

When the Peace People began its first 'office' was Betty Williams' house; after a few weeks this was becoming impossible. The Peace People were then given the use of a large room at the top of Corrymeela House in Upper Crescent, and this was their office until they moved into Fredheim, 224 Lisburn Road, in May 1977.

While the room in Corrymeela House was inadequate for the numbers of people trying to use it, it had the advantage of everyone knowing everything that was going on. When the move took place to Fredheim (named after the Norwegian for 'house of peace'), a large former Presbyterian manse, the space meant that things were divided up. This led to problems of communication.

Attempts to increase the efficiency with which the Peace People operated also seem to have conflicted, although perhaps it needn't, with the concept of Fredheim being an 'open house' for members and groups to use. Gradually ordinary members and groups felt less welcome to use it. A 'group room' was dismantled as such.

I would stress that the Peace People administration staff over the years have been as friendly and efficient as they could be. But however decisions were made it began to be a 'headquarters' for the staff and less a house for members to use. Part of this is the natural trend to bureaucratisation in any organisation unless it is staunchly resisted. Today, with the smaller numbers involved, most Peace People activities centre around Fredheim.

'Peace' caused by Peace People?

Did the Peace People outpouring of people's desire for 'peace' (I use the term here in inverted commas because it clearly meant many things to many people) have the effect – as claimed by several people in this pamphlet – of significantly reducing the level of violence? There is certainly no doubt, as the following table shows, that 1976 was part of a turning

³⁹ Tom Donaghy report, April 1978 Assembly.

point in the recent past concerning the usual indices of violence – killings, injuries, shootings, and explosions. But proving cause and effect is another matter.

Table 1
INDEX OF VIOLENT INCIDENTS, DEATHS, AND DEATHS AND INJURIES PER VIOLENT INCIDENT

	ALL INDICES = 100 in 1971					Absolute Numbers of Occurrences				
	Index of deaths	Index of injuries	Index of violent incidents	Index of deaths per inc	Index of injured per inc	No. dead	No. injured	No. shootings	No. explosions	No. violent incidents
1971	100.0	100.00	100.0	100.0	100.00	174	2543	1756	1022	2778
1972	269.0	191.74	432.3	62.2	44.35	468	4876	10628	1382	12010
1973	143.7	104.25	215.8	66.6	48.30	250	2651	5018	978	5996
1974	124.1	94.30	140.1	88.6	67.32	216	2398	3206	685	3891
1975	142.0	97.29	79.3	179.1	122.73	247	2474	1803	399	2202
1976	170.7	107.31	96.3	177.3	111.49	297	2729	1908	766	2674
1977	64.4	54.97	52.1	123.6	105.54	112	1398	1081	366	1447
1978	46.6	38.73	43.6	106.9	88.93	81	985	755	455	1210
1979	64.9	34.41	41.4	156.9	83.12	113	875	728	422	1150
1980	43.1	31.50	33.2	129.9	94.90	75	801	642	280	922
1981	58.0	53.09	43.7	132.9	121.58	101	1350	815	398	1213
1982	55.7	20.64	21.6	257.7	95.43	97	525	382	219	601
1983	44.3	20.06	20.0	221.1	100.20	77	510	290	266	556
1984	36.8	34.05	15.2	241.6	223.65	64	866	230	193	423

To explore this matter in detail would necessitate close examination of the policies of the government, the military and the paramilitaries over a number of years and, for example, the change to a cell type structure by the IRA. I have neither time nor space to do that here. My conclusion, nonetheless, is that the Peace People outpouring was both a symptom of the genuine concern by a large section of the population for - a cessation of violence and that this in turn very much reinforced that message. The sea that the guerrillas were swimming in seemed to have shrunk, or at least the tide in this part of the world had gone out; for example, the wide-spread no warning attacks of the past half decade declined.

A Sinn Fein spokesperson told me he felt the Peace People had no effect on the level of violence. Rather, the 1974-5 cease-fire, following the Feakle talks of December 1974, was demoralising for the IRA, he said. The criminalisation policy introduced by the British government also had an effect. He felt that when the IRA reorganised into a cell structure they then regained momentum.

Speaking in the House of Commons several months after the start of the Peace People, Roy Mason, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, stated there had been a 12% increase in the use of the 'confidential telephone' – a method of informing to the police – since the start of the Peace People.⁴⁰ However, it is unlikely that any change in the willingness to inform due to the emergence of the Peace People was significant compared to the overall propaganda effect of the Peace People in helping create an atmosphere where bombs and bullets were more difficult to justify.

The paramilitaries suffered other reverses and advances in their fortunes but with public opinion more demonstrably against them, and certainly against what even some sympathisers might have regarded as their excesses, they were prepared to pull in their horns somewhat. This would have happened anyway, but probably more slowly if the Peace People had not hit Northern Ireland.

It is nevertheless important to put this into context. The Peace People did not 'win a war' against paramilitarism; militarism and paramilitarism are symptoms of deeper malaise which are not so easily eradicated. The war continues. What the Peace People experience did was make paramilitaries more conscious of the need to have the support of 'their' public, and less likely to engage in widespread action without it. Paramilitaries remained 'in control' of certain areas, just as the military sought to gain control of the whole of Northern Ireland.

The 'Split'

As 1979 progressed the different tendencies and perspectives within the centre of the Peace People had not resolved themselves. Ciaran McKeown was contemplating some form of nonviolent direct action or non-cooperation over emergency legislation and powers. It was discussed but the idea was dropped. It was certainly too hot for some members to handle.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Quoted in 'Peace News' 11th February 1977 in a radical pacifist critique of the Peace People, entitled 'The Demands of Peace', which appeared in that issue and in the one of 14th January 1977, written by Robin Percival and Hilary Sidwell.

⁴¹ Ciaran McKeown, p. 265

Relationships were wearing thin. Some people at the centre believed Ciaran McKeown was ill and needed a rest; Ciaran McKeown himself agrees he was exhausted in the summer of 1979 but had returned to good health prior to the 'split' of 1980. Instead of such issues being discussed openly it was done behind people's backs – as with previous discussion of Betty Williams' lifestyle. The tackling of such undoubtedly difficult and intimate subjects behind the backs of the people concerned may have been well-intentioned but became mixed up with internal political manoeuvring.

During the latter part of 1979, small meetings of people in Fredheim thrashed through the issues. This can be interpreted in two ways – as cliques or as honest attempts to deal with the issues at a small, personal level. But it was too late.

Those involved were unable to hold the centre together. Kathleen Fleming, who had hoped to help do just that, felt she could no longer continue and that if she resigned it might help point to the seriousness of the situation. She resigned quietly in November but that made no difference either.

Feelings had been getting ugly. One person only got through Executive meetings with the help of valium. Another attended the 'split' meeting of 7th February, 1980, with a crucifix in a pocket for protection – something they had never done before; it was a feeling of malign forces being at work. Feelings were that ugly, deep, and emotional.

But the Executive late in 1979 had also been trying to get to grips with its work and with the realities of a much smaller budget than before. One problem was the question of Peter McLachlan's job description (now that Company and Trust money had all but run out) and salary – it looked like there was no money for his salary. Betty Williams then assured the Executive that there was money in a German trust being set up to support the Peace People which would pay Peter's salary. That looked settled.

It subsequently came to light that there was only £2,000 immediately available from Germany for Peter's salary since the trust was only being formally established. It looks clear to me that the money for his salary and expenses – £10,000 in all – would have been forthcoming if he continued to work for the Peace People. But Betty's statement that there was the money for the salary was taken by Ciaran, Mairead and others as a deliberate attempt to mislead the Executive into budgeting for Peter's salary when there was really insufficient money.

I would feel that it was a typical Betty Williams exaggeration, something she was prone to. And the German trust subsequently switched support from the Peace People to integrated education in the North which it has funded to the tune of £40,000.

'The split' happened on the night of 7th February 1980; it was acrimonious, complicated and interwoven. Ciaran McKeown asked for the suspension of the agenda and stated by the end of the meeting either he would be out or Peter McLachlan and Betty Williams would be out.⁴²

Betty Williams said she was going to resign and she left the meeting. Ciaran and Mairead identify the fact that she was going to be confronted over misleading the Executive on the German money for Peter's salary as the reason she left. Perhaps she had, in any case, just had enough. The meeting continued.

Two proposals were tabled. The first was that all four leaders should move off the Executive, effectively a radical compromise; this was rejected with 4 votes for, 5 against and 3 abstentions. The second motion was that Peter McLachlan should move off the Executive and continue to work as projects officer; this was carried with 7 votes for and 5 against. But if it was a victory for Ciaran and others it was a Pyrrhic one.

Legally speaking it wasn't even clear if the Executive could dismiss someone voted onto it by the Assembly. Jim Galway, who wanted both Ciaran McKeown and Peter McLachlan involved, resigned promptly from the Executive and as treasurer; a few more resignations followed later on. Ironically if Betty Williams and two other absent members had been present for the vote it would almost certainly not have gone the way it did.

The Executive subsequently 'sacked' Peter McLachlan from his job as projects manager – despite the fact that his employer was the Company and not the Community! Even though there was considerable overlap of personnel this was nevertheless legally impossible. Peter McLachlan later resolved the impasse by resigning from his job on 4th March.

Why did the 'split' take place? Well, referring to the Executive and core workers, Kathleen Fleming said:

⁴² Ciaran McKeown, p. 296

“We did not split on a matter of principle. It is sad that major disagreements were among people who shared the same ideals and hopes for Northern Ireland. Rather the differences were on methods of achieving these goals and on human frailty but never on the essence or ethos of the Peace People.”

And Peter McLachlan publicly *“agreed that his personal views on the controversial emergency status of prisoners issue were close to Mr McKeown”*⁴³

There were a number of reasons for the split. Peter McLachlan's style of leadership was quite different to Ciaran McKeown's. What was interpreted by Peter McLachlan as an attempt to allow people to get to grips with Peace People work and programme was interpreted by Ciaran McKeown, Mairead Corrigan and others as backsliding, and an unwillingness to present members with what had been agreed by the Executive. It is true that McLachlan's style of leadership sometimes caused problems through people not knowing where he stood, or two sides in a dispute both thinking they had his support, but the more general problem was a lack of an agreed form of leadership.

The personality differences between McKeown and McLachlan were part of it. Ciaran McKeown would go straight for a problem, tackle it head on. Peter McLachlan skirted around problems, exploring here and there what people felt, and to a surprising degree expressed the desire to avoid any kind of conflict. McLachlan saw part of his role as trying to persuade groups to stay in the Peace People, through allowing them space to express their frustrations and concerns; this was interpreted by McKeown and others as exacerbating the situation and stirring people up. The misunderstandings reached the point of no return. The group dynamics of the Peace People had got into an impossible twist; instead of untangling the knots they were cut out.

Peter McLachlan's other involvements, such as housing association work or involvement in the Queen's Silver Jubilee Trust, also caused confusion at Fredheim; he worked hard for the Peace People but his other involvements confused people at the centre as to what he was doing. Again this is a question of things not being sorted out and agreed; there need have been no problem.

Peter McLachlan was also held responsible by Ciaran McKeown and some others for the failure to get loan repayments in his projects officer job. This question is dealt with in greater detail in the chapter *“Where the money went”*. But the feeling by some at the centre that McLachlan was not doing this part of his job adequately was another source of conflict in the 'split'.

When the news of the split hit the media, which gave most prominence to the H Blocks issue as a cause, mass confusion reigned. The Executive's decision, taken for what seemed the best of motives, not to go into details only caused more rumours and confusion.

A petition was organised to hold an extraordinary Assembly. This was rejected by the continuing Peace People people who pointed out that there would be an Assembly in April anyhow. Instead the issues were thrashed out at a consultative board meeting in Newry, where in an effective vote of confidence the continuing Peace People won 42 - 24. The minority in this Newry meeting left the Peace People from this time, though some had ceased involvement prior to this.

There had also been media speculation about an 'alternative movement' being set up. There certainly were some meetings for ex-Peace People but the question of setting up an alternative movement was somewhat premature, and initial exploration was more of how people could support each other. No alternative movement was set up.

Christabel Bielenberg shocked the Assembly at Benburb in April 1980 by comparing recent events in the Peace People Executive to those in Germany: *“all methods far too reminiscent of Hitler's Germany in 1933 for comfort.”* By this she was referring to the fact that the NSDAP (Nazis) under the Weimar Republic never got more than 32% of the popular vote; they used both legalistic and other means to get a majority in parliament and abolish opposition though none of them were legitimate under the meaning of the constitution. The Peace People parallel she saw was that Betty Williams and Peter McLachlan had topped the poll in the Executive elections at the previous Peace People Assembly; they had both been pushed off the Executive, those who were elected with the biggest popular mandate.

However, any reference to “Hitler's Germany”, whatever the details, was too emotive to get a considered response. And whatever Ciaran McKeown may or may not have been in relation to the Peace People he was not a Hitler; his departure

⁴³ 'Belfast Telegraph', 11th February 1980

from active involvement shortly afterwards showed that he knew when he could no longer be involved in what he saw as a constructive way (although there was a point of principle in his non-involvement as well).

There are groups which build up in bitterness until a split occurs. It is a not uncommon feature of group dynamics, as Brendan Behan once referred to in his own way. I have personal experience of this and the taste in the mouth for any 'rump' or remainder – whatever the rights, wrongs, majorities and minorities – is an exceedingly bitter one. But if people build on the positive, as people did both inside and outside the Peace People from 1980, a new beginning is possible, and the bitterness can be lost in the healing balm of time, or at least balanced by new achievements.

Since 1980

1980 did in many ways represent a new era for the Peace People. Those remaining were not a monolithic group, and many still inside were just as critical of some of the events as those who left but for various reasons (loyalty, or the sight of new possibilities) wished to continue involvement.

After the fallout from the departures of Betty Williams and Peter McLachlan, and of those who felt they could no longer stay, the Peace People has continued to be fairly static in membership – gain a few, lose a few. Membership is currently around 130 with an additional 60 'friends' (non-members who pay a supporting subscription). This is obviously small compared to the halcyon days but large for a Northern Irish peace group (second only to Corrymeela and PACE), and these figures do not include involvement in Youth for Peace.

1980 was the ending point of the dissension which had begun late in 1976. There were still differences of approach, some heated arguments, and the odd heated departure or personality clash in the seven years since but by and large things have been much easier sailing. The differences which had been built into the instant movement of 1976 had played themselves out.

The Peace People in early 1980 was naturally in a fairly demoralised state but confidence gradually returned. Mairead Corrigan took over the post of chairperson; this had previously been held by Ciaran McKeown, and then by Peter McLachlan until the 'split'. Subsequent chairpersons were Pat Johnston, Steve McBride and Hazel Senior. The Executive is currently experimenting with having a rotating chair for meetings.

There have been difficulties along the way since 1980. Adjusting to a smaller organisation and a smaller budget has been difficult. In 1983 a working party was established by the Assembly to re-assess the membership, functions, everything associated with the Peace People.⁴⁴ Such searching analysis was naturally a painful affair at times.

One of the debates within the Peace People in the years since 1980 has been between those who felt the Peace People should stick to what they were doing, and those who wanted to branch out into new areas. But there have in fact been significant achievements in several areas; helping to set up the Committee on the Administration of Justice, re-establishing Youth for Peace, and setting up Killycranny House as a 'farm' or rural education centre.

The Peace People had long been involved in civil liberties issues. A conference on the Administration of Justice, chaired by Lord Gardiner, was organised in June 1981 by a number of interested individuals with a significant Peace People input as well as from former Peace People and others. Out of this grew the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) which has established itself as the most significant body in Northern Ireland working on civil liberties issues. Steve McBride worked as the first secretary of the CAJ. To some extent the Peace People 'handed over' its civil liberties brief to the CAJ though more recently there was an attempt to re-establish a Peace People voice on such matters.⁴⁵

Youth for Peace

When Youth for Peace (YfP) restarted in the autumn of 1981 it was as a much smaller but more independent group – a report to the April 1982 Assembly stated that "*We wish to work in close co-operation with the Peace People but do not consider ourselves as junior Peace People.*" The new group was due to work by Eleanor Brenna, Renata Eustis (respectively Norwegian and American volunteers), Paul Smyth, Martin O'Brien, and Sheena Flynn (who had been involved with the previous Youth for Peace).

⁴⁴ See minutes of reconvened, November 1983 Assembly.

⁴⁵ See '*The Administration of Justice in Northern Ireland*' and '*Emergency Laws in Northern Ireland*', respectively CAJ Pamphlets Nos. 1 & 2; also various pamphlets following these.

But the problems of leadership and continuity of numbers and membership still apply. Youth for Peace tended to rely on full-time volunteers like Paul Smyth and Martin O'Brien and has found the going tough when there was no one in this role. Currently Danny O'Rawe and Sam Cobain are working as volunteers with Youth for Peace.

Many recognise that without the summer Norwegian camps (which usually take a total of 80 16 - 18 year olds) there would be no Youth for Peace; people who have been on these provide the backbone of the membership. However, while the fact that Norwegian campers have come from all around the province has helped make contacts outside Belfast, it doesn't help numbers in Belfast itself which is the only place where it exists as a group. There has been contact with places like Enniskillen and Lurgan, and a commitment to getting groups going elsewhere, but so far it hasn't materialised.

Activities which they have been involved in include an annual fast at Christmas (raising a few thousand pounds a time shared between things like the Norwegian camps and a third world project), running floats during the Belfast Lord Mayor's parade, and sometimes some community-type work. There has been involvement in the Kilcranny farm including camp preparation. The camps themselves have become much more of a challenge to young people as the contents – before, during and after – have been built up. But the main focus of Youth for Peace otherwise has been on discussion type meetings which typically might have up to 20 present but on occasions have had 30 or 40.

Just as the earlier Youth for Peace was associated with an inter-schools group which also ran independently, Paul Smyth of Youth for Peace was partly instrumental in the setting up of PRISM (Peace and Reconciliation Inter Schools Movement) with a recent school graduate as full-time worker, funded by the Department of Education.

Youth for Peace has also had to come up against the hard world of the sectarian politics of the North. In response to the protests at the Anglo-Irish Agreement they ran a poster campaign 'Ulster says peace' (instead of 'Ulster says no') and another one on the first anniversary 'No talk costs lives'.

It did prove difficult sorting out their response to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and its aftermath (they didn't take sides on it). In relation to the cessation of funding to community and youth groups resulting from the unionist-controlled councils refusing to meet in protest at the Agreement, some in Youth for Peace wanted to take action. But some Protestant members objected and also didn't feel councillors should have to sit with Sinn Fein members. A compromise meant concern expressed at groups being denied funding but no action (as in picketing). The world of sectarian politics was having to be dealt with.

Most Youth for Peace members go on to be involved in other groups and organisations than the Peace People. However the Peace People have gained the involvement of people such as Paul Smyth, Martin O'Brien and Donna Breen to the adult body, and these are people whose contribution would be a credit to any organisation.

Kilcranny House

When the Peace People purchased Kilcranny House, a couple of miles outside Coleraine, in 1985, it was almost in a Peace People tradition. Planning to set up such a 'farm' or rural education centre had been going on for a couple of years, with American volunteer Bob Gordon doing most of the pushing which made the project a reality.

However there had been previous Peace People involvement in a youth farm in 1978-80. Following an article which he wrote in *'Peace by Peace'* entitled "A Farm in the City?",⁴⁶ Helmut Riethmuller was involved in setting up just such a youth farm with other Peace People on land owned by Ann Campbell; the Drennan Youth Farm wasn't exactly in the city but it was accessible to it. This was set up as an informal Peace People project.

Subsequently the land had to be sold but the Save the Children Fund took over the idea and established Minnowburn Youth Farm on National Trust Property in 1980, with suitable buildings, closer to Belfast. The Save the Children Fund Minnowburn Youth Farm has thrived in the years since.

The idea of a 'farm' in Peace People circles was reborn after they were offered use of a farm in Fermanagh. The deal fell through but the idea was planted. Some land was rented for 1984 to try out the idea. It worked. A suitable building and site were sought, and eventually Kilcranny House, outside Coleraine, was purchased.

Kilcranny House is a sturdy farm house which can currently accommodate 15, although it may be extended to a maximum of 25; there is 31/2 acres of land and they hope to have another acre in the near future. There are outbuildings which can be converted into workshops. And, perhaps most importantly, there is lots of enthusiasm and ideas from those involved.

⁴⁶ 'Peace by Peace', Vol. 3 No. 4.

As well as fitting into Peace People programming, for example with Youth for Peace and Norwegian camp weekends, the house is heavily used by other youth groups. There are plans to develop further local involvement including with unemployed people. There are hopes to use alternative technology, a commitment to organic gardening, and plans for craft workshops and to develop work on different aspects of nonviolence. There are currently three volunteers working there; Donna Breen, Jorg Springer, and Paul Barclay. There are hopes to get a fourth volunteer. With all that is planned they could use half a dozen!

Other aspects

Other aspects of Peace People programme continue. Welfare work, which suffered somewhat after the departure of Pat Hale in 1982, has been regaining some momentum. It has proved difficult to run welfare programme employing a one-year ACE worker and there are hopes to fund their current welfare worker, Terry Deehan, as full-time. She is involved in travelling on the minibus to the Maze and Magilligan (used by 60 families), visiting a few prisoners, running residentials for the women, as well as some basic welfare rights and other work.

In all of the Peace People programme they have been very lucky to have had the contribution of some excellent volunteers from abroad, chiefly from the USA. Volunteers from abroad have played significant roles in civil liberties, welfare, and Youth for Peace work, as well as establishing Kilcranny House and in the general administration of the office.

The Peace People are currently relatively well staffed. In addition to Ann McCann as administrator who runs the office in a competent and friendly fashion, there is a book keeper (Brenda Harrison), a secretary (Brenda Connery), a minibus driver (George Hendry), the welfare worker, three full-time volunteers at Kilcranny House, two local volunteers for Youth for Peace, and two foreign volunteers (Jim Deyo and Kim Smith, both from the USA).

The Peace People has continued to take up new issues. One such was that of intimidation which arose at the 1986 Assembly. Jim Deyo started work to see what could be done and gradually some ideas were rejected and new ones emerged; there is now a working group with involvement from a number of different organisations looking at the question.

Some of those still involved in the Peace People and some former Peace People have over the last year or so been involved in informal reconciliation talks at a personal level to try to explore the differences which arose in 1980 or at other times. This process was spurred on in 1986 by the 10th Anniversary of the start of the Peace People, and by the deaths of some prominent Peace People or former Peace People. Sometimes these moves have been successful in restoring relations between people; in other cases the basis for reconciliation has not existed. Betty Perkins (Williams), Mairead Maguire (Corrigan) and Ciaran McKeown have agreed to meet again, away from the glare of television cameras, whenever it is feasible to do so.

What happened to...

Betty Williams' first marriage, to Ralph Williams, had broken up and she left Northern Ireland. She moved to the USA and married oil executive Jim Perkins; they live in Florida. Unfortunately as I had no communication from her I cannot say more.

Mairead Corrigan, now Mairead Maguire, married her former brother-in-law, Jackie Maguire, and they have two children of their own as well as three by Jackie's previous marriage to Ann Maguire. They moved from Belfast to the County Down coast. When Mairead has gone abroad on Nobel business her husband has had to take holidays from his job as a mechanic to look after the children. She is as involved in the Peace People, and other local activities, as she has time to be.

Ciaran McKeown found he couldn't get a job as a journalist and trained as a typesetter. He now makes his living from typesetting but with the difference in salary has been unable to clear the substantial debt which he got into when working for the Peace People. His commitment to nonviolence was under-lined by his (unsuccessful) attempt to set up a non-residential nonviolent community a few years ago. He lives with his family in south Belfast.

Peter McLachlan became general secretary of Belfast Voluntary Welfare Society, now Bryson House, where his talents as a person in contact with everything that is happening are well utilised. He is a principal force behind the recent founding of the Northern Ireland Conflict and Mediation Association, as well as being involved in different projects and groups which are probably literally too numerous to mention. He lives with his family in Lisburn.

Closing remarks

My conclusions are clear enough, I hope, in the appropriate sections that I will not repeat them here. I would like, however, to make a few further comments regarding 'the Peace People experience'.

The worst enemy the Peace People probably has today is its name and the connotations this brings to mind from the past. But many of the members today are willing to be critical and open about the past of their organisation. The Peace People experience also affected how people thought of 'peace'. Isobel Bennett explained that "*Not many will wear a peace hat now. And that's not cowardice.*" Many would prefer to do what they want to do under a different label than 'peace'.

But the Peace People of today deserve to be judged on the Peace People of today and not that of 1976 or 1980. If you want to find out about people today I recommend you contact the Peace People, or Lifeline, or the Derry Peace and Reconciliation Centre or whoever (though others who were formerly involved are not so easily approachable or identifiable). The Peace People address is 224 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 6GE, and the phone number is Belfast (028) 9066 3465.[year 2000 phone number – Ed]

Furthermore, the Peace People experience should be judged for its totality as well as its constituent pieces. The inspiration which it offered internationally is one point sometimes ignored in Northern Ireland. And there is the clear evidence in this pamphlet of the many things which did come, directly or indirectly, from that 'Peace People experience'.

Sometimes peace in Northern Ireland has connotations of well-meaning but rather futile people chasing after a 'peace' that is possibly not worth the trouble. I would like to conclude with a quote from Pat Johnston; "*Peace movements have got to be, in a peaceful way, just as forceful as terrorist groups, there has to be the same passion for peace and action for peace.*"