

Fordham International Law Journal

Volume 22, Issue 4

1998

Article 23

Counteract: Working for Change

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Counteract: Working for Change

Billy Robinson and Stevie Nolan

Abstract

This article discusses Counteract, an anti-intimidation unit, that was formed in 1990 with the sponsorship and support of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Their aims are to develop actions, policies, and strategies to alleviate the incidence of sectarianism and intimidation in the workplace and the community. The article discusses how their work affects North Ireland, as it tries to become an increasingly pluralistic society.

COUNTERACT: WORKING FOR CHANGE

*Billy Robinson**
*Stevie Nolan***

INTRODUCTION

Depending on who you ask, “the Troubles” started in either 1969, the mid-twelfth century, or any number of dates in between. What is without doubt is that the current situation arises from a complex and muddled historical background. This historical aspect of our division and its interpretation is as divided as our housing estates, and only rarely brings agreement.

Looking into the past to strengthen the present is a favorite pastime here. We like to discover our heroic ancestors: the myths, old literatures, and folk customs provide the authenticity that we need to justify ourselves; it is what makes *us* right and *them* wrong. Those who can provide themselves with a history can provide themselves with a modern reality. So we point fingers and shout dates at each other, we claim the past as our own, and disagree on the present.

Outside the debating chamber, however, aside from the violence we are strangely quiet. One of the great paradoxes of the present conflict is that when we meet in everyday context, we often say nothing. Our silence when in one another’s company, our politeness is well practiced, but scratch the surface

There is an aversion here to talking about anything to do with politics or religion in mixed company. In order to maintain good relationships many people adopt a rule of *politeness*. The adoption of this rule has allowed our society to function in ways that often look normal. It has been so successful that there are some people who refuse to believe that there are any problems at all. We have established a comfort zone between the two major communities in which the majority of us sit in uncomfortable silence. How many times have we sat in mixed company hours after an incident and said nothing? Or simply mouthed soulless platitudes of “Och, that’s tragic” or “What a pity?”

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Whatever you say, say nothing
Smoke signals are loud mouthed compared with us
O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod.¹

Of course, the value of polite relationships is that they make day-to-day relationships manageable. To this extent, politeness is necessary. The difficulty and danger is when politeness is the only relationship that we have because when we avoid the difficult issues, we actually reinforce division. It has prevented us all from tackling the root causes of our violent division and the ways to resolve it.

We believe that to ignore the reality of our violent division is dangerous. If you live in Northern Ireland, ask yourself the following questions: Where do you work? Where do you live? Where do your children go to school? What sports do you play and which clubs do you support? Do you have any friends whose religion you do not know? Where do you shop? Where do you socialize and with whom? Who do you vote for, Nationalist or Unionist, united Ireland or United Kingdom? Answering these questions will state the painfully obvious fact that we do live in a divided society. So divided, in fact, that we kill each other.

In the last thirty years we have suffered up to four thousand dead and forty thousand wounded, bombings, shootings, checkpoints, street and house raids, mass arrests, interrogations, prison visiting, wakes and funerals, intimidation from work and home, bomb scares, riots, the disappeared, marches, and counter demonstrations. Not convinced?

We live in a divided and sectarian society. It is one of the most militarized states in the world, with a painful legacy of discrimination in housing, jobs, opportunities, and access. Inequalities in class, age, sex, religion, disability, and race still exist. People experience cultural norms and values that accept political violence as a way of life. All of this arises from a disagreed-upon past and a historical cycle of violence that will not be easy to break.

We believe that to ignore the reality is to perpetuate the violent division that exists. There is a traditional view that ethnic difference is equal to cultural and historical difference, which is equal to social separation, which in turn leads to spontaneous

1. SEAMUS HEANEY, NORTH (1975).

and organized violence. This view suggests that because we are different, conflict is inevitable, so why fight it? Such an analysis prevents any acknowledgement of the possibility of cultural diversity and interdependence. If we are to argue for a different analysis, one that allows nonviolent resolutions to disagreement and the development of a pluralistic society, then we must address our differences.

Addressing differences has long been regarded as the responsibility of community groups, the churches, or the voluntary sector, and within these sectors the promotion of community relations has often been the task of individuals. "It has generally been recognized that the task of building peace on the island of Ireland has tended to remain the responsibility of entrepreneurial individuals rather than the organizations or groups they represent."²

As a result, peace-building has remained dependent on the vision and motivation of a small number of people, with institutions at best adopting a neutral approach to these issues. Our experience in dealing with conflict in the workplace, however, has shown us that flawed relationships are best dealt with at an organizational level, *not piecemeal conflict resolution, but wholesale*. The challenge is to facilitate organizations and institutions in integrating and embedding the principles of equity and diversity within the mainstream of the organization.

Fairness, valuing and welcoming difference, and relations built on trust and mutual understanding are central to any democratic society. We cannot move towards a plural and peaceful society until our institutions reflect diversity and accept equality. Mary Robinson, the U.N. Human Rights Commissioner, in a speech in Belfast recently said: "A society which seeks to recognize the richness of difference, and to respect its many manifestations is truly a healthy one."³

The Good Friday Agreement has provided an agreed framework and a space for debate and action to create such a society. It has given permission to individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions to begin addressing these difficult issues in a more open and challenging way.

2. Karin Eyben et al., *Future Ways* (unpublished manuscript, on file with authors).

3. Mary Robinson, *Address at the Conference on Equality and Human Rights: Their Role in Peace Building* (Dec. 1, 1998).

I. COUNTERACT

Counteract, an anti-intimidation unit, was formed in 1990 with the sponsorship and support of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Our aims are to develop actions, policies, and strategies to alleviate the incidence of sectarianism and intimidation in the workplace and the community. We also undertake research into workplace intimidation and trade union and employer responses to it. But our initial work has been crisis intervention at flashpoints, mediation, and resolution of work-based conflict. Since Counteract's inception, we have provided a very effective "fire-fighting service" for a large number of organizations across the public, private, and community/voluntary sector.

In the not too distant past, Counteract was approached by a large company with a serious problem regarding the wearing of emblems.⁴ As is usual, we were contacted when the problem was at crisis point. Critical to reaching a workable solution was the necessity of involving not just union representatives and management, but also key workers.

In an industrial relations context, a bilateral approach based on an adversarial or confrontational meeting is normally adopted. Though the two interest groups of unions and management are essential in reaching an accommodation, the role of other stakeholders is indispensable. This multilateral approach was vital in the process of bringing on board all those people who had a genuine stake in the conflict.

Key to the dispute was the apprehension about the local impact of the decision on whether to ban the wearing of the particular emblem. The message coming via certain key workers was that the local community demanded that the emblem should be allowed in the workplace.

The wearing of emblems cannot be dismissed as an irrelevancy because they are a reflection and a recognition of community allegiance and identity. The company decision to ban the emblem was seen as a further erosion of their political and cultural power base as part of wider political developments.

Over a series of initial meetings an Equality Committee was set up to look closely at the main issue, but also to address other

4. An emblem is a symbol worn by an individual. The emblem identifies the wearer as belonging to one community or another.

issues such as intimidation, harassment, policies and procedures, flags and emblems, and legislation. This inclusive approach to the problems ensured that any decisions taken would have the support of all the constituent parts, and therefore ensure its success.

Following the successful resolution of this crisis, the Equality Committee insisted that the training that they had undergone be replicated throughout the factory and the other divisions of the organization where there had been similar problems. However, while this facility provided an immediate response to the short-term needs of these organizations, it did not offer longer-term solutions to their problems. Counteract has recognized the need to facilitate an internal capacity within organizations to develop and sustain an anti-discriminatory/anti-intimidation ethos, and to move towards the promotion of equity and the acceptance of diversity. This facilitation was in many ways a transition from *fire fighting* to *fire prevention*. It involved:

- the development of anti-discriminatory policies and procedures;
- the creation of a greater understanding of what constitutes sectarian harassment/intimidation;
- the training of harassment advisors and investigation officers; and
- addressing the reality of living in a divided and sectarian society.

This work was effective in bringing difficult and challenging issues into an open arena for discussion. It has forced people to confront their own prejudices and how prejudice is reflected structurally within their organizations. It is a style of training that is not designed to make friends, but to challenge behavior and working practices. Within these criteria that we had set ourselves, we were satisfied that we were meeting our objectives.

It became increasingly clear, however, that a different approach was needed. In order for an organization to work effectively and for people to work free of intimidation, in order for an organization to work towards mending flawed relationships and creating an ethos that prevented discriminatory or intimidatory practice, a well-meaning mission statement and paper policies were not enough. What was needed was a commitment at all levels of the organization to the eradication of such practices

and the development of a neutral, if not harmonious, working environment. Our intention was to give ownership of the process to the organization, to build the capacity of the organization to deal with issues of conflict and division, and to create an ethos of equity recognized internally and externally. To achieve this, we developed a series of building blocks. These include:

- anti-sectarian policy and procedure;
- joint declaration of policy and procedure signed by company and trade unions;
- implementation of all procedures;
- management commitment at the highest level;
- permanent agenda item at board meetings;
- establishment of equality committees made up of management, unions, and key workers to oversee the implementation of all procedures;
- training for all existing staff on equity and diversity with follow-through training and evaluation;
- induction training for new employees;
- creation of improved two-way communication between management and staff; and
- continual review and monitoring of policies and procedures.

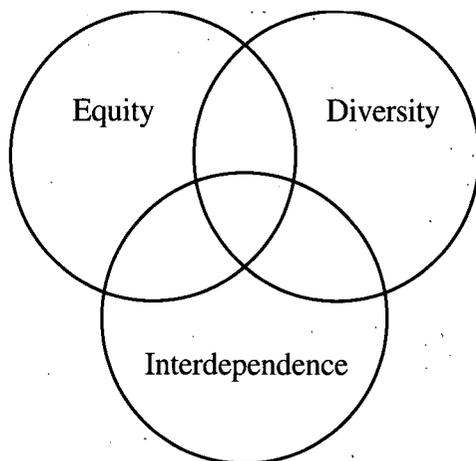
II. "FUTURE WAYS"⁵—UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

More recently, this concept of embedding community relations practice within organizations has been developed as a conceptual model by Future Ways at the University of Ulster. The aims of Future Ways are to support relationships and organizational practices that seek change and to work towards a society where differences are accepted and acknowledged through education and training.

It is a model that takes the principles of equity and diversity from the periphery of the organization and embeds them within the mainstream. Its practical design allows for the integration of current good practice (if it exists) with new practice, enhancing the role of an organization in addressing conflict and division. This model addresses both the internal and external relation-

5. Future Ways is a program with the University of Ulster, Mediation Network Northern Ireland, and Understanding Conflict Trust.

ships of an organization, building the capacity to make meaningful and practical contributions to the development of a more fair, stable, and accommodating community. The principles of this approach lie in the promotion of the concepts of Equity,⁶ Diversity,⁷ and Interdependence.⁸



This model provides an approach to addressing issues of conflict and division that is based on an acknowledgement of the synergy of these three concepts. We must of course be aware of equity and the issues of equality, justice, and fairness. There must be an awareness and acceptance of the fact that we do live in an increasingly diverse society, diverse socially, culturally, and politically. And, of course, any approach to improved community relations must recognize that although we are increasingly segregated, we are still interdependent.

6. *Equity* is a commitment at all levels within society to ensuring equality of access to resources, structures, and agreed decision-making processes and to the adoption of actions to secure and to maintain these rights. See KARIN EYBEN ET AL., *WORTHWHILE VENTURE?: PRACTICALLY INVESTING IN EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND* (1997).

7. *Diversity* is an acknowledgement of the growth in the variety of community and individual experiences. Respect for diversity affirms the value that we attach to the existence, recognition, understanding, and tolerance of difference, whether religious, ethnic, political, or gender-based. See *id.*

8. *Interdependence* is a recognition by the different interest groups within society of their obligations and commitments to others and of the interconnectedness of individual and group experience leading to the development of a society that is at once cohesive and diverse. See *id.*

III. INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

As Northern Ireland makes tentative moves towards becoming a pluralist society, the embedding of the principles of equity, diversity, and interdependence will increasingly become a practical task for all the social partners, including the private and public sectors. Increasingly, the private and public sector has recognized that issues of conflict and division are not simply the responsibility of the community and voluntary sector. Current and new national and European legislation has and will continue to ensure that there is a safety net or a minimum standard of acceptable behavior in the areas of Equity and Diversity.⁹ Minimum standards, however, are never enough if business or organizational results are to be improved and flawed relationships mended.

In partnership with Future Ways and the Crossing Bridges Program,¹⁰ we have developed and begun projects within the private sector and local government. The Relationships in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence ("REDI") Project provides the means to focus on improving Equity and Diversity performance in order to achieve overall business or organizational results more effectively. The project integrates Equity and Diversity into the four fundamental areas for a group or organization:

- people management;
- policy and strategy;
- customer satisfaction; and
- impact as a part of communities.

The REDI Project ensures that Equity, Diversity, and Interdependence are central to the business of a group or organization, and move beyond moral or value-based judgments to adding real value to the goals of individuals and their institutions. REDI is a direct result of the *experiences of practitioners* who have been working in the areas of anti-sectarian and community relations. These experiences have informed the project's development

9. See, e.g., Fair Employment Act, 1976 (Eng.); Fair Employment Act, 1989 (Eng.); Sex Discrimination Order, 1976 (Eng.); Equal Pay Act, 1970 (Eng.); Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 (Eng.); Race Relations Order, 1997 (Eng.); Policy Appraisal & Fair Treatment, Partnership in Equality White Paper.

10. The Crossing Bridges Program, coordinated by Joe Hinds, is a designated program of the International Fund for Ireland. The program has been instrumental in the development of a number of strategic and innovative community relations projects.

and its focus on Equity and Diversity issues across political and religious lines.

IV. *TRAINING*

Institutions consist of people and when we talk of the importance of structural change, we are talking about a *change in the nature of people's relationships to one another*. If an institution changes, then so must the people within it. They do not change by being sent a memo or receiving a copy of a new policy. They change by talking about the difficult issues, addressing their differences, and confronting their prejudices.

As we have said before, this type of conversation is not one with which people are comfortable. Because of the discomfort, people, even those involved in building better community relations, adopt a position often referred to as non-sectarian. A non-sectarian approach has been at the center of much community relations work over the last thirty years. Cross-community contact schemes within the youth sector have been one of the main areas within which this approach has been adopted. For those organizations involved in this work, it was often radical and innovative. But thirty years later and after the space created by the cease-fires and peace agreement, there is a strong feeling that we can no longer afford to be polite all the time. It is no longer enough to declare that we are non-sectarian. We believe that to continue to use it as a core principle allows us to abdicate responsibility, and if this is the case, then non-sectarianism is not neutrality but collusion.

Counteract's approach to addressing these issues is anti-sectarian. It is work that addresses attitudes and practices that are beyond those already covered by anti-discrimination and equal opportunities legislation. This work is designed to decrease sectarianism at individual, group, and institutional levels. Anti-sectarianism seeks to challenge those personal and group attitudes, culturally and socially formed, that result in sectarianism. It tries to address the resulting lack of knowledge about the "other side," fear of the unknown, sectarian behavior, and intolerance of difference.

There is still significant disagreement about ways to approach training and education on issues surrounding conflict

and division. The following are some general training principles:

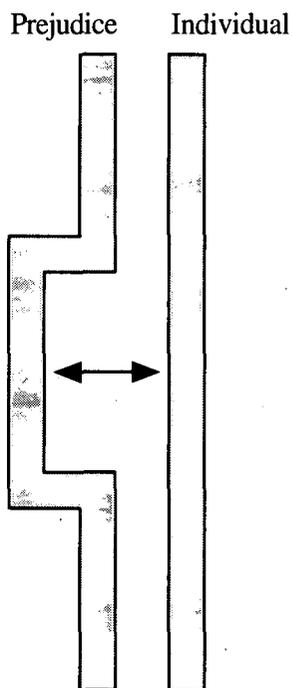
1. As a trainer you are simply the neutral facilitator of an open and honest debate.
2. You are offering a safe space for people to express their opinions and views without fear.
3. The basic principles of the training are honesty, trust, and openness.

These are nice sentiments that do have a lot of value, but in reality, it is a lot more complicated and difficult. For a trainer to think that he or she is somehow neutral, opinionless, and objective is dangerously self-delusional. We all bring our own ideology and system of beliefs with us; these values inform the work that we do and the outcomes that we expect. In Counteract, we do not simply want to facilitate a debate; we want to move people from A to B. The question is whether that movement of people is so important that we will do anything to achieve it. Will we be so Machiavellian in our arguments that we destroy the goal we are trying to achieve? In our experience, that line is often pushed, stretched, and twisted, but rarely crossed.

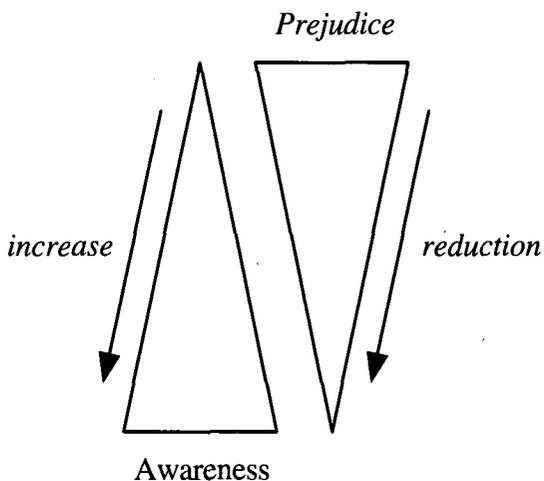
So what are our agreed beliefs? What does that movement entail? Sectarianism is a reality; we live in a society in which prejudice, fear, misunderstanding, and inequality have led to violent conflict. We believe that there is a better way to live based on the principles of equity, diversity, and interdependence. Any approach to addressing issues of conflict and division within our society must be based on an acknowledgement of the synergy of these three concepts. This involves difficult discussions, pain, and, dare we speak its name, compromise. For those in Counteract, this is what we mean by moving people from A to B.

The fundamental principle of anti-sectarian training is to engage people in a debate about our society, specifically looking at the dynamics of our flawed relationships and how they can be mended. This principle is addressed through different styles of delivery and differently themed workshops. Our style of delivery is not so much down your throat as in your face. We are careful, however, that we do not simply verbally attack individuals; the purpose is to engage people in a debate, not alienate them.

We try to create a space in which the participants can be made aware of prejudice, its roots, and effects. If we are able to



examine the prejudice, then it means we can avoid simply attacking those who subscribe to it, something that is all too easy. Hopefully, in this examination, some movement can take place. The movement will not remove cherished prejudices, but it may lead to an increased awareness of where and why such prejudices arise.



CONCLUSION

We all suffer badly from moral relativism. When an incident is heard in the media we listen out for who and where. If one of ours is killed, then we feel a righteous anger and hatred. It reconfirms that they are, in fact, all bastards. If one of theirs is killed, then oh well? "No smoke without fire . . . ; apparently he was involved."

Alternatively, we like to consider ourselves as victims. If we are all victims, then we escape the feelings of guilt, responsibility, and shame; if we are always pointing the finger at someone else, then there will always be one pointing back. Perhaps we should start by pointing the finger at ourselves.

For our society to find other ways to resolve differences, we must stop blaming everybody else. We must stop waiting for somebody else to come up with a solution. We are all complicit in the violence, to a greater and lesser degree, and we must all be part of finding a solution.

Despite agreements at a political level, institutional change and grass roots initiatives are the true adhesive of the peace. All of us must be involved in building that peace.

Our prejudice, mistrust, and unwillingness to talk have prevented us from resolving our conflict, and unless we do, it will return. Violence is not new to this island and there is no certainty that it will not return. In 1921, when the last peace treaty was signed, it was signed by two warring governments, no one voted for it, and even fewer agreed. This time we have voted, we do have agreement, and we have the best chance in our histories to break that cycle of violence. If the opportunity presented by those who have taken risks to bring about this agreement is not to be wasted, then we must all take responsibility to ensure its success.

Peace *n.* 1. state existing during the absence of war
2. a state of harmony between people or groups.¹¹

11. THE COLLINS PAPERBACK ENGLISH DICTIONARY 21 (1986).