

## UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS

# Uncomfortable actions would speak much louder than words



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IT IS FOUR YEARS since Sinn Féin's Declan Kearney called on republicans to be courageous "and embrace the discomfort of moving outside our political and historic comfort zones".

In his *An Phoblacht* article "Uncomfortable conversations are key to reconciliation" (2 March 2012), the conciliatory undertone of listening unconditionally, consideration for being apologetic and making new compromises, being willing to be persuaded and exploring how to heal divisions in our society, encouraged those of us within unionism intent on moving our faltering process forward, to sit up and take notice.

Since then, a number of engagements whereby loyalists and republicans have participated in 'Uncomfortable Conversations' with each other have taken place. Whilst this is crucial to communities seeking to reconcile after conflict, the key element missing in Kearney's article – the one which may engender greater confidence within unionism and "define engagement in terms beyond what suits" republicans – is action.

Conversation as some sort of preparatory approach to seeking new understandings is characterised by each party being 'open' to the other. This requires acceptance from both that a point of view, opinion, belief or perspective is worthy of consideration and thus genuine.

Conversations, uncomfortable or otherwise, are necessary for interacting with each other. However, they should not be framed by prejudgements or our own fixed understandings of the 'other'. Instead, by seeking to discover other people's standpoints (without necessarily agreeing with them, and not being concerned with winning the argument) we create new understandings and human well-being is advanced.

In my experience, republicans are willing to participate at engagements of 'Uncomfortable Conversations' when they are 'armed' with their preconceived, single-narrative monologue. In doing so, they name the



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▲ Declan Kearney – Words must be followed by action which demonstrates pluralism, says William Mitchell

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world as they see it, through their lens, through their articulation of history and, as such, genuine dialogue is denied to unionists at such engagements who see it through a different lens.

If Declan Kearney, as Sinn Féin National Chairperson, is genuine in calling on all republicans intent on nation building through dialogue by "using new language and making new compromises to create trust", then action which demonstrates pluralism is required.

Dialogue is supposed to create new understandings which develop praxis – the creative, productive action which is inclusive of the 'other' as subjects, not reaffirm 'fixed' positions which need defending.

Within unionism, particularly those defined as loyalists, there is a regard that republicans have a view that we are all only objects. As such, dialogue in this context falls short of being emancipatory. The Freirean concept of critical consciousness considers it reasonable to be constantly questioning and recreating the world we live in.

This crucial year in our 'Decade of Centenaries' is influential in the present lives within both our communities

of a significant number of our population intent on creating their present through the heritage, culture, traditions and history of our past.

The altering of the critical consciousness of unionists requires action from republicans which extends beyond Uncomfortable Conversations.

It cannot be that republicans call for pluralism while systematically dismantling the vestiges of all that is British.

It cannot be that republicans demonstrate patriotism to the Irish Tricolour while decrying the legitimacy of all that is Orange.

It cannot be that republicans claim to cherish "all the children of the nation equally" while denying the rights of those children from the unionist community.

Given that we are wrestling to deal with the legacy of our past, republicans are well positioned to 'break new ground' if they would cease procrastinating. Dispense with the isometric politics of everything being equal yet opposite.

Unionists are continually told by republicans that we are not the enemy. Instead, we learn, the new enemy is deprivation, social injustice, inequality and so forth. This being so, republicans could foster reconciliation within unionism if they stop 'speaking out both sides of their mouths'.

Uncomfortable conversations are not what are required. We have had decades of these. Uncomfortable actions would speak much louder than words.

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