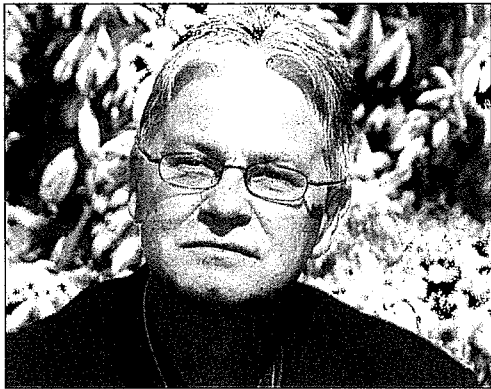


News

Their path to peace



William 'Plum' Smith, 53, is an ex-member of the Red Hand Commando. He lives in Woodvale, north Belfast and is married with one 22-year-old son. He was the first loyalist to serve time in Long Kesh prison where he was jailed for 10 years for attempted murder in the early seventies.

"I WAS brought up in the conflict. From the age of 14, I was fighting against the other side.

As far as we were concerned it was "shoot the Catholic."

Both communities were at war with each other. It was a tit-for-tat war in the early days, very black and white.

I was arrested in 1972 for attempted murder and was the first loyalist prisoner in Long Kesh. That's where the seeds of the PUP were sown, where we started to question the status-quo.

Most of the population of the prison on both sides were under the age of 25. I was seeing a whole generation of young people from both communities whose lives were ruined by years and years of incarceration.

Prison life either makes you or breaks you, but we used the prison system to our own advantage.

In those years we refused to recognise the prison authorities and we did our own classes. I got my O-levels in English and maths so I taught English to loyalist prisoners inside.

Gusty [Spence] would have taught political history to prisoners, history which most would not have been taught at school. I became education officer for loyalist prisoners. Inside we also campaigned for open university courses.

It's been a long journey and I've been there since the start. We have seen so many deaths and lives ruined though the conflict. To come here today and hear the statement be read out shows that we have reached the completion of a certain milestone - probably the most

important milestone - since the Troubles began.

And that milestone should be cemented so that future generations don't go down the same path we all went down because in the past Irish history has had a habit of repeating itself.

In terms of decommissioning the weapons we'll do what we think is right and not what other people think we should do.

The IRA haven't decommissioned all their weapons, they have kept some. We are not concerned about decommissioning - the guns are irrelevant. The IRA decommissioned to buy seats in Parliament.

But we are doing what we are doing to improve our future society, and if further down the line this is not the case let people come back and talk to us.

We have issued the statement about what we intend to do and people should be positive.

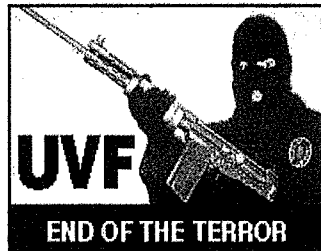
The war is over and everybody has to bear responsibility for that - not just the UVF and Red Hand Commandos, but the whole of civil society.

The establishment of the new Assembly on Tuesday is the best chance we have had politically of establishing stable government. We do have the IRA in a certain mode and the UVF and Red Hand Commandos are in a certain mode now but there will always be people who try to destabilise peace.

After 40 years of Troubles this is the best opportunity we have of ensuring peace. Most people want to move on and move away from violence.

For a majority of young people, the war is not just over, the war is history.

Kate Chambré asks two former prisoners about their experiences of living through the Troubles and what they think the future holds for Northern Ireland



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Tom Roberts



Tom Roberts, 55, from Portadown is an ex-member of the Ulster Volunteer Force. He is now director of EPIC (Ex-Prisoners' Interpretative Centre) and is married with two children. At the age of 27 Tom was jailed for murder and sentenced to 13 years in Long Kesh prison.

"IF someone had said to me as a teenager that I would serve time one day for murder I wouldn't have believed them because I wasn't involved in any form of violent activity then.

It was the mid-70s and Northern Ireland was spiralling out of control. The security services didn't seem to be able to control republican aggression.

People were dying on a daily basis without anyone being made accountable.

Aged around 23 or 24, I became a member of the UVF and got engaged in various activities on their behalf.

It was a personal choice of mine to become a member of the UVF. My family had never been involved. A couple of people I had been through school with went into the security forces and were killed by republicans.

At the time republicans were particularly hard on working-class unionists. I was always a unionist but I wasn't advocating my unionist beliefs in a violent fashion.

When I was 27 I was sentenced to 13 years in Long Kesh for murder.

The time I spent inside is certainly something I would never want to do again.

Prison gives everyone time for reflection.

Prison life didn't make me and it didn't break me. In my case as a way of escapism I immersed myself in education. And during my time inside I gained a first class honours degree in maths and computer science.

Before I went inside I came to the conclusion that violence was never going to solve anything. Violence begets more violence. I

regret that anyone had to die as a result of the conflict here.

But the way to salvage what has happened is to create conditions where no one else is going to die. It's incumbent on all of us to ensure that future generations don't have to endure the violence we experienced.

I think it's a truly historical day today. In terms of the statement, I think it's the UVF's way of signalling that their war is over.

I welcome the statement. It has been the product of long deliberations and it's a statement that has been arrived at through consultation with grassroots of the organisation right through the ranks. It has been the result of many years of consultation and deliberation and hopefully the changes are well underway.

The UVF have said that as from midnight tonight they are adopting a civilian role, and civilians don't use weapons. I can understand why there is concern in the civilian community that the weapons have not been decommissioned.

But it's not weapons that kill people, it's people that kill people. We have to decommission the mindset that encourages people to inflict violence.

The threat of violence from any paramilitary group, dissident republicans in this case, has to be worrying but I would be confident that the security forces have a good handle on it.

The timing of this statement has not come by accident.

With the launch of a new power-sharing executive next week the statement is the UVF's way of signalling that they are helping return Northern Ireland to accountable democracy.]