Mary Nelis, a Derry-based former assembly member for Sinn Féin, looks back on her life within the republican community.

A family built on a shared belief

BY EAMONN HOUSTON
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"When people describe the republican movement as a family, that is accurate. There is a sense of comradeship, support. Sure, we have our disputes and fallouts just like any other family. But the republican family remains the finest and most sensitive family. No one feels isolated. I have not one single regret. I feel good to be alive."

It became an iconic image of the prison protests of the late 1970s. Three women, barefoot and clad only in grey blankets, stood outside Derry's St Eugene's Cathedral on a freezing cold December day. They bore placards with the simple inscription – "Do you care?"

One of the three women was a then 40-year-old Mary Nelis, a woman thrust into what she still describes today as "a horror story".

It marked the biggest statement of what became known as the blanket protest. Nelis, a Creggan mother of nine and now aged 69, had been a community activist — a troubleshooter for those who found themselves unable to deal with the paperwork of day-to-day society. Active in tenants' associations and an energetic servant of the community, Mary Nelis would have the very fabric of her beliefs first tested and then destroyed.

The arrest of her then 18-year-old son Donncha in 1976 was the point that would change Nelis' life forever.

In recent years, she distinguished herself as an outspoken Sinn Féin assembly member and a staunch defender of women's rights. During the course of the Troubles, Nelis' place in society would be upended. She confesses that, at some points of her life during the last 30 years, she thought she had lost her sanity.

"Politically, I got dragged into Sinn Féin. Donncha was one of the first arrested after the removal of political status in the prisons. He was held for seven days, and I couldn't get to see him," she says.

A meeting with the then assistant RUC commander in Derry, Frank Lagan, lit the touchpaper for Nelis' subsequent involvement in the republican movement.

She says Lagan had asked her to ask her son where he had got the gun with which he had been arrested.

"Something instinctive told me right then, right at that moment, that there was something wrong. That one incident changed my whole life. That was the beginning of my understanding of the system," she says.

Mary Nelis says that, while her son Donncha was in the H-blocks, she had "no notion" of what Sinn Féin meant or who was involved in the movement.

She had been active in inquiring about young men on the behalf of their mothers. She would have been a familiar face at the British army base at Bligh's Lane in Creggan.

As a mother, she cared only about the plight of her teenage son in prison.

"He was trying to prepare me for whatever. That was around the time that they did not recognise the courts. He told me in no uncertain terms that he would not recognise the court.

"He was to be sentenced to 16 years and he was clear in his own mind that he would serve them.

"I remember visiting him and they had shaved his head and he looked terrible. I nearly had a nervous breakdown. It was a horror story," she says.

Prisoners refusing to wear the prison uniform were refused visits. For the mothers on the outside, there was a heartbreaking feeling of powerlessness.

"They treated us like dirt," Mary Nelis remembers. On the outside, Nelis suddenly found herself isolated. Lifelong friends passed her on the street. Her belief system as a Catholic was upended.

She would not speak to the bishop of Derry, Edward Daly, for 25 years.

"I felt powerless and very alone. My whole belief system was overturned and, in many ways, I felt a deep sense of betrayal.

"Our wee boys were on the blocks. I expected the church to be our defenders but they hung them out to dry."

The iconic protest outside the cathedral was a spontaneous act, according to Nelis.

"Kathleen Deeny, Theresa Deery and I just made the placards and did it.

"The only person who gave us support on that freezing day in December 1976 was the local barber, Andy McGarvey.

"It was said later that what we did was the biggest political statement."

That protest would later appear on the Champs-Élysées in Paris and would travel to Europe and the United States. However, people were "scared" to become involved. Mothers were worried about the politicising of their sons. They worried about prison and all that this entailed in the late 1970s.

The prison protests met with an unbending British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. The intransigence of the "Iron Lady" forced the issue further.

"As mothers, girlfriends and wives, we didn't have a political axe to grind. The efforts of the Armagh Committee with Bernadette Devlin still couldn't prevent the hungerstrike."

By this time, Mary Nelis was becoming part of a bigger family — the republican family.

"In many ways, I feel sorry for the rest of the family during those times. My family paid a price for me supporting a justice and human-rights issue.

"I remember going to see my son and feigning a smile when he sat before me with long hair and a beard. They had no mirrors so they didn't know what way they looked. It was horrific."

At 1.17am on Tuesday, May 5, 1981, after 65 days on hungerstrike, Bobby Sands MP died in the H-block prison hospital at Long Kesh.

"I cried like a waterfall," Mary Nelis recalls. "I cried like he was my own son."

She quickly joined Sinn Féin. "There was a huge raft of people that had become politicised. Everybody was joining Sinn Féin. The hungerstrike was the catalyst for us all.

"It was a logical progression. We always knew that the problems of this island would have to be solved politically.

"Young people made choices, very deliberate ones, especially after Bloody Sunday. They were realists.

"They knew exactly what was in front of them because the regime was so harsh.

"The IRA is advancing the progress of peace. You cannot measure things in terms of what you've got. Globally, things have changed.

"When people describe the republican movement as a family, that is accurate. There is a sense of comradeship, support. Sure, we have our disputes and fallouts just like any other family.

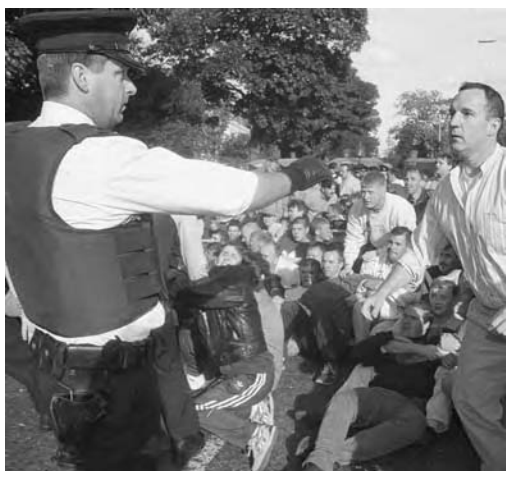
"But the republican family remains the finest and most sensitive family. No one feels isolated. I have not one single regret. I feel good to be alive."

Nelis says she believes that proactive intervention by the Catholic church, business professionals and the government in Dublin could have prevented "at least half" of the deaths that occurred during the course of the Troubles.

"It wouldn't have happened had they challenged the political and social establishment," she says.

"...that was the beginning of my understanding of the system" - *Nelis*

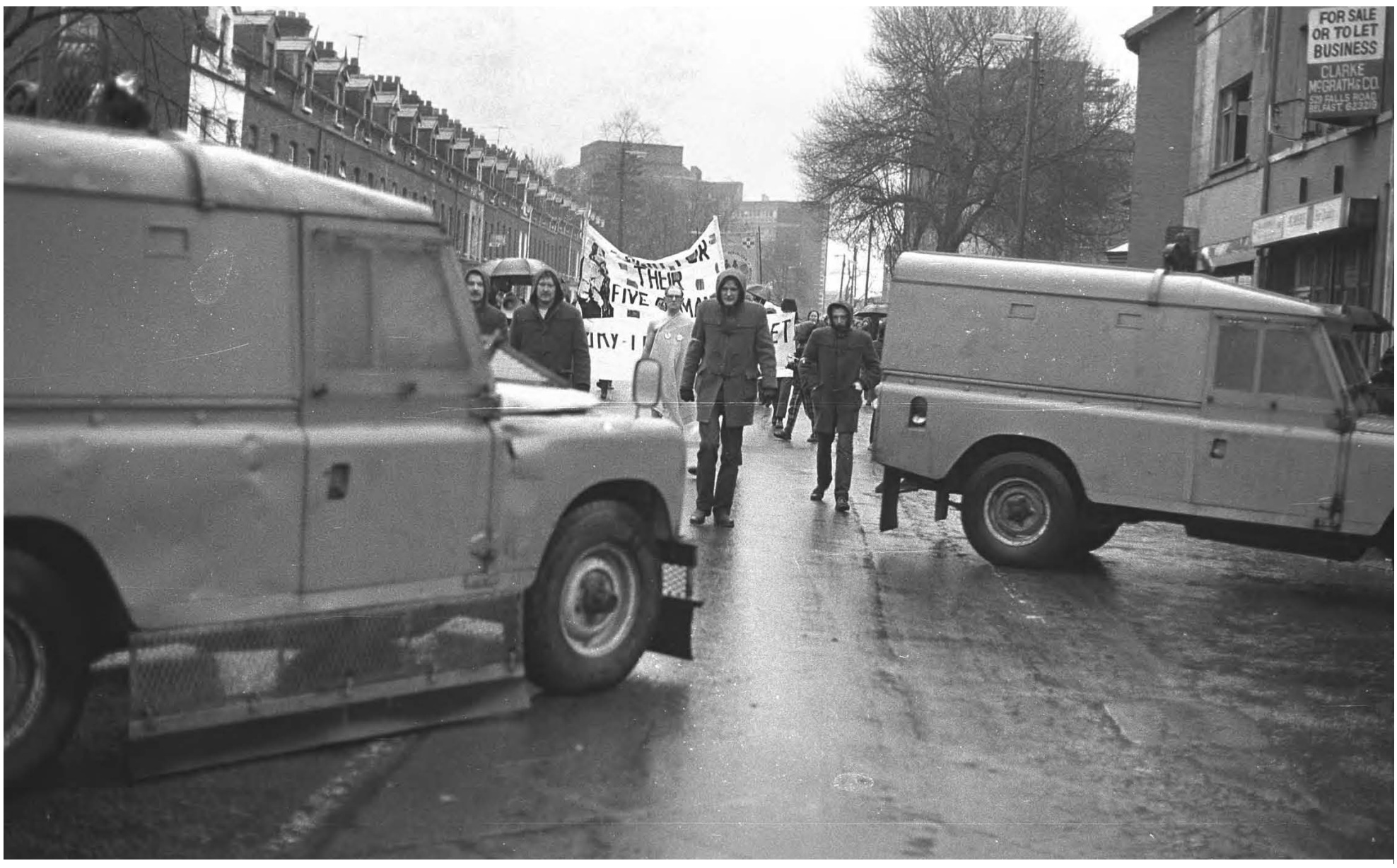
The RUC move in to clear the way for Orangemen to march down the Garvaghy Road in 1997 PHOTO: MAL McCANN



Bobby Storey takes part in a protest on the Cliftonville Road in 1997 PHOTO: JARLATH KEARNEY

A protest on the Andersonstown Road in 1996 calling for the RUC to disband PHOTO: MAL McCANN

Nationalists were barred from entering Lurgan town centre in 1996 PHOTO: MAL McCANN



A large parade supporting the blanket men and women on the Falls road in 1980 PHOTO: ANDERSONSTOWN NEWS/ARCHIVE

Times are moving on

For some of the North's youngest inhabitants, the turbulent days of the Troubles are something they associate with textbooks and anecdotes from older friends and family members.

Thankfully for them they have had the fortune to grow up in times of relative peace and have not been adversely affected by the conflict.

Daniel Lundy is not one of those young people.

Along with his four siblings, Daniel has had to grow up in Ardoyne, north Belfast, without his father, Alan, the last Sinn Féin member to be shot dead before the historic IRA ceasefire in 1994.

Reflecting on the latest IRA statement, Mr Lundy said: "Times are moving on and things have to move forward. However, all the killings and collusion can't just be forgotten about. You can't just move on and forget about them. They always need to be on the table."

The 24-year-old insisted: "I really don't think that nationalists will ever let these killings be forgotten about and they will always try to get them solved."

Alan Lundy was gunned down by the UFF while working at the house of Sinn Féin councillor Alex Maskey in Andersonstown in May 1993.

Alan, from Ardoyne in north Belfast, was helping Mr Maskey build a porch on his house to help provide additional security at the time of his death.

Gunmen drove up to the house in a red Ford Orion, firing a number of shots before chasing him inside the house where they shot him in the back in front of Mr Maskey's children.

The gunmen then went upstairs and searched the bedrooms but did not find Mr Maskey.

This was only one of a number of attempts on Mr Maskey's life as he had previously been wounded when a UFF gunman shot him at close range in the stomach with a shotgun.

Recalling the horrific day when his father was murdered, Mr Lundy said: "I was 12-years-old when my dad was killed and I can still remember that day clearly.

"It was a Saturday evening around six o'clock and I was sitting on the street playing with my friends when a priest went up to our door. A few minutes later I could hear my mother screaming and I knew straight away that my dad had been killed."

Daniel is the second oldest in the family. His mother was left to rear him and his brothers Alan Jnr and Ciaran, and his sisters Claire and Elizabeth, alone.

"I can remember my dad so well. He used to be coming home from work and I'd run down the street to meet him.

"It is still hard to this day to accept that he is dead. It is especially hard when you see other mates going for a drink with their dad knowing that we just can't do that.

"He used to take us over to Celtic matches every other week

"It's good to show people that those who have been killed have not been forgotten about and that they are still cared about. It's also still very important to try and find out the truth about what happened to them."

before he died and then we weren't able to do that after his murder."

Daniel also recalls the increased harassment from British Crown forces which he received after his father's murder.

"From I was around 15-years-old to about 18 or 19, everywhere I went I was getting stopped and searched in the street.

"They'd drive past, get out of the jeep and stop me, saying things like 'that's Alan Lundy's son'. One time in Etna Drive they grabbed me, threw me against the jeep, arrested me and charged me with resisting arrest and assaulting police. The case was later dropped, but that was the kind of general harassment," he says.

However, like many others affected by the conflict Daniel is determined to have his voice heard.

A conference affording young people with a chance to tell their stories about how collusion has affected their lives is taking place in St Mary's College on the Falls Road, Belfast, next Thursday.

Mr Lundy, who will participate in this conference, said: "I think the Youth for Truth conference is a good idea. People want to find out the truth about all those cases that haven't been solved.

"It's good to show people that those who have been killed have not been forgotten about and that they are still cared about. It's also still very important to try and find out the truth about what happened to them."

Mr Lundy is convinced there was British state collusion in his father's death.

"There was definitely collusion involved in his killing. He was working on Alex Maskey's house and they were very good friends. As they worked together, there was photos taken of them by the police and he had been stopped on the way to work on the house.

"On the day he was killed there was police all over the street and about half an hour before he was killed the police disappeared."

When asked if he ever gets the sense that his father's murder will be forgotten about he said: "I must say that to this day my father is talked about everywhere I go, especially in Ardoyne. People come up to me and say that he was a gentleman.

"You can never say never, but I really think that it is too late for somebody to be got for his killing. His death hit everybody in the whole family circle really bad as he was just one of those people that everybody likes. That was shown by the massive crowd at his funeral."

Daniel Lundy welcomes the IRA's moves towards peace saying progress is inevitable while mindful of the fact that those who have been killed should never be forgotten.

"People want to find out the truth about unsolved cases - *Daniel Lundy*"

A support rally for the women prisoners in Armagh Jail in 1981. ANDERSONSTOWN NEWS/ARCHIVE

A Saoirse protest in Crossmaglen in 1998. PHOTO: MAL McCANN

A sign highlighting the dangers of British army spyposts in south Armagh. PHOTO: MAL McCANN

A Saoirse protest calling for the release of republican prisoners in 1997.
PHOTO: JARLATH KEARNEY

Sinn Féin youth take their protest to south Armagh spyposts in 1997. PHOTO: MAL McCANN

TERRY CROSSAN:

'Struggle entering hopeful phase'

"I met many good friends from all over the country and have many good memories, but also sad ones - especially the death of Martin Hurson on the 1981 hungerstrike."

BY EAMONN HOUSTON
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Terry Crossan to this day remembers the town-land of Aughnaskea in Co Tyrone. It was the home of Martin Hurson, a young man he was to befriend and remember.

Crossan had never been to Aughnaskea, but its name is embedded in his head.

Martin Hurson was the sixth of ten men to die on hunger strike in Long Kesh prison in 1981. Crossan breaks into a fond smile when he recalls the camaraderie he enjoyed with the young country man.

Crossan joined the Provisional IRA in the weeks that followed Bloody Sunday. By his own admittance, he had no notion, nor care for politics.

Now at the age of 50, Crossan is fully supportive of the republican movement's momentum towards a new chapter. For Crossan, the war is not yet over, but simply entering a new and more hopeful phase.

Crossan was arrested with Sinn Féin chief negotiator, Martin McGuinness, in the latter's sister's home in 1976. The pair had been childhood friends. To this day they enjoy fishing trips as a hobby.

Crossan would spend six years in the cages of Long Kesh for 'conspiracy to cause explosions in the United Kingdom'.

Martin McGuinness would be released a few weeks later after their arrest.

"Bloody Sunday was the catalyst for me – that, I suppose, brought me to believe that I should play a more proactive role in the struggle against occupation and for justice."

Crossan sits in a bar – of which he is proprietor – adorned with images of Derry during the early days of the Troubles.

"When my parents found out that I was involved, they blamed poor Barney McFadden [a veteran Derry republican] - who of course was totally innocent - but still he got the blame."

For Crossan, the prison years formed an important part of his development, as a person, and a politically aware republican.

"While difficult times for my wife and family, prison had no lasting negative effects on me personally. For me it was a place to learn tolerance and respect. I also learned my native language which I now speak on a daily basis.

"I met many good friends from all over the country and have many good memories, but also sad ones - especially the death of Martin Hurson on the 1981 hungerstrike.

"He was a good friend. I met Martin while on remand and remember well some of his great stories."

Crossan describes his motivation to join the Provisional IRA as a response to a series of events.

"I suppose it was more of a reactionary thing than something that was motivated by any sort of political ideology. I had come through the Civil Rights period and witnessed the burning of my grandmother's home in William Street by the RUC and B-Specials. I also remember the attack on Sammy Devenny – a neighbour of ours – by the same people."

On April 19, 1969, the Devenny family were assaulted by the RUC in their William Street home. Three months later, Sammy Devenny died as a result of the brutal beating.

Within weeks, the resulting tension would help spark the Battle of the Bogside.

Crossan says: "There were no republican links in my family. My grandmother was of Church of Ireland stock and for a time did housekeeper at the old Lecky Road barracks.

"During the early 1960s, policemen on duty would have called to my granny's house for a cuppa and there was no sense of animosity towards them. The events of Duke Street and Burntollet would change all that."

On October 5, 1968, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had intended to march from Duke Street in Derry's Waterside to Derry city centre. As the march assembled the Royal Ulster Constabulary batoned demonstrators in the glare of the world's media. Events at Duke Street forcefully hit home with nationalist youth.

As would events at the close of a People's Democracy march from Belfast to Derry in January 1969. The marchers would endure a sustained and brutal attack from loyalists at Burntollet bridge, while the RUC looked on. Some of the marchers were reportedly tossed into the nearby River Faughan.

Crossan recalls: "I remember the early days of the Troubles and the emergence of the Provisional IRA and the 'stickies' too. It took me a while to know the difference, but I often lay in bed and listened to the crack of bullets and the pinging across to the old BSR factory, where the British Army was based. At that time I had a quiet admiration for these people."

Today Crossan finds himself able to accept the current process - but in pragmatic terms. "It is very clear to me that the republican movement has evolved to become a powerful political force on the island. We are very much admired by other revolutionary groups world-wide. Armed force is a means to an end and, personally, I feel that the armed struggle was one facet of a wider struggle that continues. I see great challenges ahead and I feel that the leadership of the movement has done great work in maintaining unity while at the same time preparing for great change."

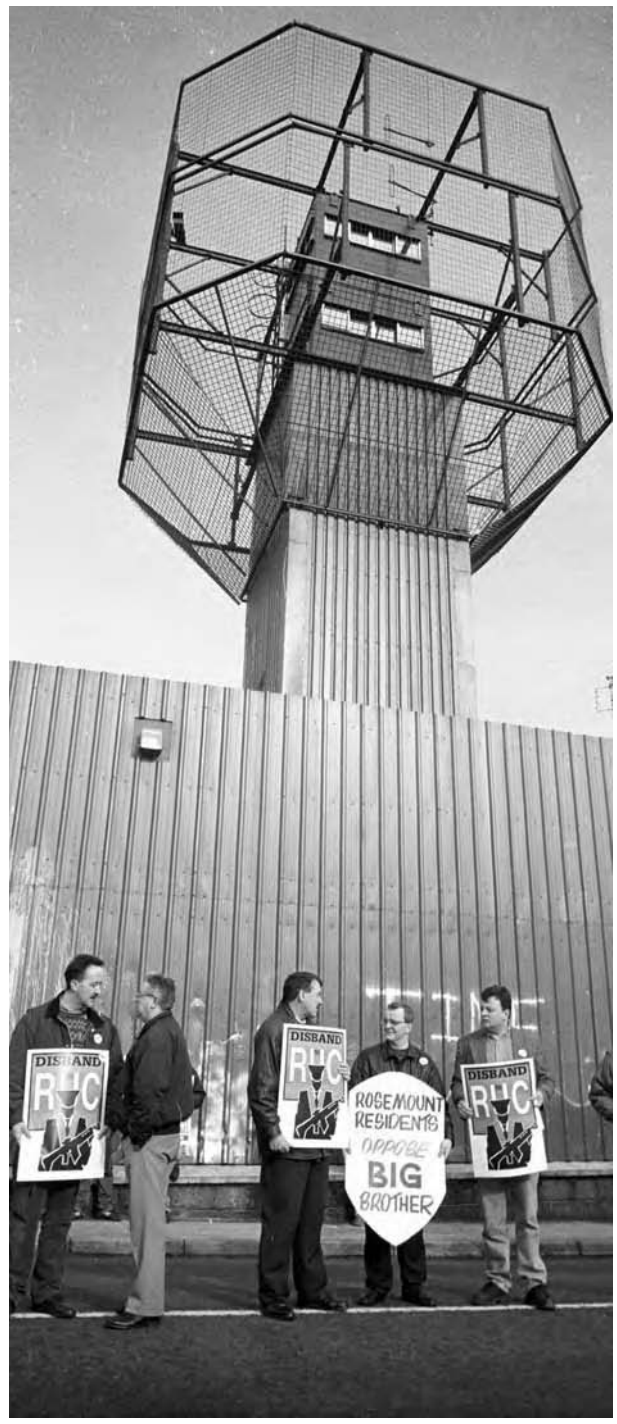
But for Crossan, the family he knows as the 'republican family' will always remain intact as will his memories of Martin Hurson.

"Republican movement has become a powerful political force" - *Crossan*

PERCUSSION: A girl bangs a bin lid on the ground outside Woodburn barracks in west Belfast in 1997. PHOTO: JARLATH KEARNEY

CYCLIST: Campaigning in west Belfast for Sinn Féin's Danny Morrison in 1983. PHOTO: ANDERSONSTOWN NEWS/ARCHIVE

SHOW TRIALS: Protesters call for an end to show trials at a demonstration on north Belfast's Crumlin Road outside the crown court in 1985. PHOTO: ANDERSONSTOWN NEWS/ARCHIVE



BARRACKS: A demonstration against the RUC at Rosemount barracks in Derry in 1995. PHOTO: JARLATH KEARNEY

Daily Ireland reporter Ciarán Barnes reflects on what the IRA statement means for him and other young people in the North

Milestone can transform lives

CIARÁN **BARNES**
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The year 1995 was a great year for me. I turned 16, got up close and personal with a 'laydee' for the first time, and enjoyed a full year of relative peace. I remember sitting in the Waterworks Park in north Belfast with a group of teenage friends, drinking cheap cider and waxing lyrical about how good things were.

Living all my life less than 100 yards from the city's Oldpark Road interface, I was not so much touched as punched by the Troubles.

Thankfully, I never lost a family member but an uncle was shot, friends were murdered and blown up and a number of relatives did some serious jail time.

Because of this, I initially treated the 1994 ceasefires with scepticism.

However, I quickly came to realise that the times were indeed changing and, by the summer of 1995, Belfast was a much better place.

My biggest wish is that, following yesterday's IRA statement, kids turning 16 in 2005 can harbour the same feelings of hope I did turning 16 a decade ago.

To be able to stand on the corner of the Oldpark Road in 1995 or in a bar or a bookie's and not worry about being shot was amazing.

Before the ceasefires, when I called into my local — aptly nicknamed the Suicide because of its peace-line location — to watch Celtic, I would stand behind a concrete pillar.

I was always paranoid about gunmen but, in 1995, I felt I didn't have to hide behind posts any more. It was these small things that were the most noticeable and ultimately life-changing.

In the same way that the ceasefires transformed my teenage years, confirmation the IRA is to go away will alter the lives of thousands of kids throughout the North.

Sure, there will still be sectarian violence, rioting at contentious parades and people getting kickings because of their religion or the soccer team they support.

But not having the IRA around sets the North on the road to normality.

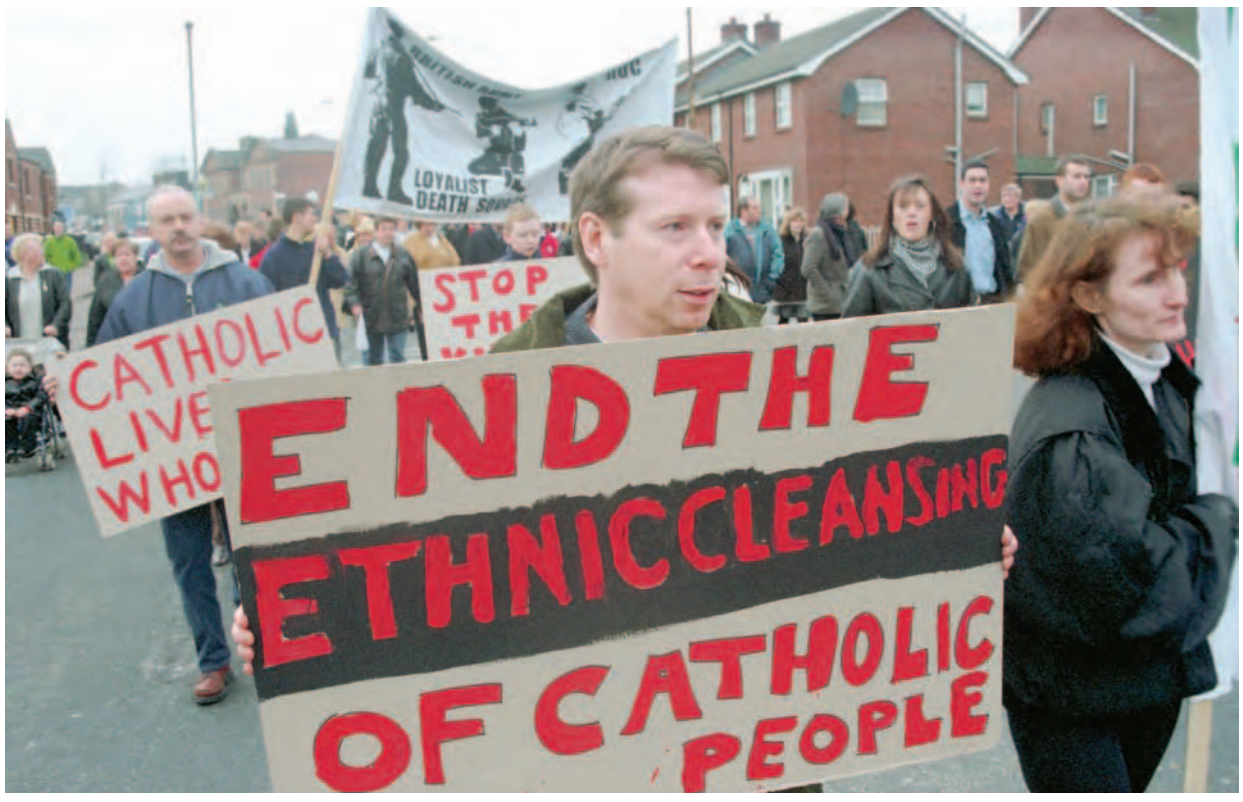
It also effectively destroys the Ulster Defence Association and Ulster Volunteer Force as paramilitary forces. What reason do they have to exist now? There is no one left to fight. Hopefully this statement also means that a measure of the political pressure applied to the IRA in recent years will now be applied to those currently shooting and bombing on the North's streets.

Later on today, I'm going to call into the Suicide and, with it being builders' pay day, the majority of my mates, who are scaffolders and brickies, will be in.

We're all the same age, we all come from the same backgrounds, we were all in our teens in 1995, and we'll all agree that July 28, 2005 is a historic day. To tell the truth, it's a milestone because none of us has known life minus the Provos.

Writing this, I'm experiencing the same emotions I did after the 1994 ceasefires — uncertainty, doubt and a hint of scepticism. But if 1995 is anything to go by, I'm quietly confident that these feelings will have been replaced by a newfound optimism come next year.

I just hope every 16-year-old across the North feels the same.

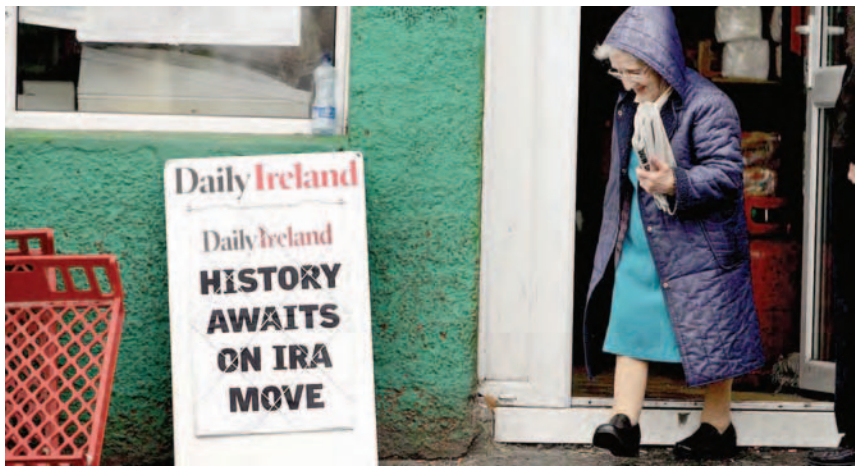


COLLUSION: A rally against collusion goes down west Belfast's Falls Road. PHOTO: MAL McCANN

FUNERAL: Gerry Adams at a funeral in May 1987
PHOTO: ANDERSONSTOWN NEWS/ARCHIVE

GIBRALTAR THREE: Hearses carry the IRA volunteers Daniel McCann, Mairéad Farrell and Seán Savage along west Belfast's Andersonstown Road in 1988. PHOTO: ANDERSONSTOWN NEWS/ARCHIVE

> "Newfound optimism will replace hint of scepticism" – *Ciarán Barnes*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HISTORY AWAITS ON IRA MOVE