



## Historical Dialogue and Memory in Policing Change: the Case of the Police in Northern Ireland

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**Historical Dialogue and Memory in Policing Change: the Case of the Police in Northern  
Ireland**

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## Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between organisational change and historical dialogue in transitional societies. Using the policing reform process in Northern Ireland as an example, the paper does three things: the first is to explore the ways in which policing changes were understood within the policing organisation and ‘community’ itself. The second is to make use of a processual approach, privileging the interactions of context, process and time within the analysis. Thirdly, it considers this perspective through the relatively new lens of ‘historical dialogue’: understood here as a conversation and an oscillation between the past, present and future through reflections on individual and collective memory. Through this analysis, we consider how members’ understandings of a difficult past (and their roles in it) facilitated and/or impeded the organisations change process. Drawing on a range of interviews with previous and current members of the organisation, this paper sheds new light on how institutions deal with and understand the past as they experience organisational change within the a wider societal transition from conflict to non-violence.

## **Keywords**

Policing

Organizational Change

Historical Dialogue

Memory

Northern Ireland

## 1. Introduction

‘We honestly thought we could win this, and in the end we thought we’d lost it.

But it was a victory for politics.’

(Interview with retired Special Branch Officer)

By 1998, Northern Ireland had begun to emerge from almost 40 years of inter-communal violence, resulting in almost 3700 deaths and an estimated 40,000 injuries (Smyth 2010). During these decades the role of policing was central to and an institutionally contested aspect of, the wider conflict and developing peace process. An urgent challenge at the time of the 1998 Agreement was to consider the nature of the systemic and substantive organisational transition required within policing and in the nature of the police’s relationship with the wider community (Murphy 2012; Mulcachy 2006). Policing itself was considered too controversial and difficult to be included in the negotiations directly, instead it was agreed to pass it to an independent commission to recommend changes and a reasonable way forward. While much of the existing debate about the move from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) to the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has centred upon aspects of equality (50-50 recruitment, symbolic changes and changes in personnel) (Murphy 2014; Topping and Byrne 2012), or issues of justice (Lundy 2010), this paper adopts a different approach. In doing so it seeks to accomplish three things: the first is to explore the ways in which policing changes were understood within the policing organisation and the policing ‘community’ itself. The second is to make use of a processual approach to this understanding, privileging the interactions of context, process and time within the analysis. Thirdly, it considers this perspective through the relatively new lens of ‘historical dialogue’,

understood here as a conversation and an oscillation between the past, present and future through reflections on individual and collective memory.

By focusing on the organisation as the unit of analysis, (the case the Royal Ulster Constabulary / Police Service of Northern Ireland), this paper extends contemporary debates about individual and collective memories by drawing on extensive interviews with past and present police officers, to examine the politics of memory in transition and community remembrance. The changing police structures, symbols and stories shaped the very nature of how officers understood the history, present and future of policing and how the change itself was framed by the priorities of peace-building. As such it adopts a four dimensional framework of analysis. The first dimension is a temporal one, based around already established periods of intra organisational transition in Northern Ireland policing (Murphy, 2013). The second is analytical and relates to the organisational change process, and the third is the contested interface between the organisation and the community. The last, but most difficult dimension is historical and focuses on the role the organisation has played in the past, particularly in relation to the Northern Ireland conflict. The paper is therefore framed through the lens of the case study, which is positioned at the outset to delineate and demonstrate the centrality of organizations in historical dialogue during peace processes. It provides a critical engagement with the concept of historical dialogue before moving into a research approach, key findings and a considered discussion of the role of historical dialogue in conflict and change.

The quote that opens this paper from a former RUC Special Branch officer reflecting on the past, the future and the difficulties of that journey, abruptly illustrates the nature of the oscillation at the centre of this narrative: the dynamic between the past, the future and memory as a active participant in understanding (Berg and Schaefer 2009). During the

Northern Ireland peace negotiations in the 1990s and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the implications of these negotiations on policing was a matter of serious concern for serving police officers:

There was hurt there and that was difficult to deal with. 302 officers murdered; a lot of sacrifice. Some people have got over it; others have difficulty. People are concerned about airbrushing the RUC out of history (Interview with a member of the RUC George Cross Association).

This comment captures the diversity of experience and attitudes towards changes in policing catalysed by the peace process. The core of the article settles on this diversity as a means to understanding how past and present policing officers understood their position and role in organisational transition from the RUC to the new PSNI. The hegemonic narrative inscribed by the emerging peace process instigated a dialogue within and at the same time inscribed a settled parameter for the terms of this dialogue. The radical changes to policing brought about by the peace process defined the terms of reference for historical dialogue in which the RUC's position in history was cemented in contestation. A new hybrid policing structure emerged in this context. The challenges posed to the RUC at the beginning of this process of change were deeply rooted in the history, culture, politics and identity of the organisation. This in turn was just as deeply embedded in the history, politics, violence and conflicting identities that made up Northern Ireland's divided society. As with other divided societies, policing and the operation of justice has been a key issue of contention (Brewer 1996; Guelke and Milton-Edwards 2000; Ellison 2007; Mulcahy 2000, 2005). The next section will outline some of fateful foundations (Collinson & Pettigrew; 2008) of policing in Northern Ireland.

## **2. Background to Policing Change in Northern Ireland**

The partition of Ireland in May 1921 had seen not only the division of the island's territory into North and South but also the division of its existing police force. The establishment of the Royal Ulster Constabulary soon after the creation of the Northern Ireland saw problems of representation and loyalty emerge very quickly. The unsettled and contested nature of the Northern Ireland state, the civil rights movement of the 1960's, the opposition from unionism to reform and the emergence of a new generation of nationalist leaders, led to increasing unrest. By the onset of the 'Troubles' in 1969 and the imposition of direct rule from Westminster in 1972, the evolution of policing was characterised by a high measure of secrecy, security and a military approach (Mulcachy 2006). For those from a Catholic background, membership of the RUC was extremely low, with only 7.7% of members Catholic in 1992 (ICPNI 1999). Following the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in 1998 the RUC was transformed into the Police Service of Northern Ireland and deliberate attempts were contrived to usher in a more diverse and accountable policing structure and culture as part of the emergent peace process. This RUC-to-PSNI process of change was officially instigated by the acceptance of the British Government of the report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland '*A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland*' (1999), led by Right Honourable Chris Patten. The Report was a secondary outcome of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and followed by the devolution of policing and justice powers after the St. Andrew's Agreement of 2007. Policing and the realisation of a 'peaceful' society have long been connected. Yet, what has been overlooked to date is how police officers who remained in the organisation throughout the change, responded to the demands of transition. This is a live issue: in 2009 almost 5000 out of 8,000 serving PSNI officers had previously served in the RUC. Therefore, rather than this being lustration-light, the transition from RUC to PSNI encapsulated a process driven by internal and external change dynamics bringing to the fore tensions between the past and what was emerging in the

present. Drawing upon twenty three semi-structured interviews conducted with former and current policing officers in Northern Ireland during the period (2010-2013) and another forty interviews conducted between 2007 and 2009, this paper examines how some of these officers responded to change, and considers how their individual memories of policing (as a vocation for many) reflected the collective organisational understanding of 'new' policing in the 'new' Northern Ireland.

### **3. Historical dialogue, organisational memory and conflict transformation**

As an organisation at the centre of a peace process, the newly created PSNI was inhabited by conflicting dynamics of individual and collective memory that are disrupted, interrupted and altered by the external processes. Given that discussions about memory and remembering in the context of inter-communal conflict often occur outside organisations, it is clear also that such conversations, compromises and 'working through' processes also ensue within organisational systems, overtly or covertly, whether the organisation in question 'officially' engages in the process or not (Mulcachy 2006). With this in mind, it is helpful to explore how existing organisational scholarship intersects with studies of conflict transformation. This article contends that the process of change undergone by policing in Northern Ireland facilitates a deeper understanding of organisational memory, at an individual and collective level as well as emotional memory in organisations that are involved in historical dialogue that has both internal and external ramifications. The importance of engaging in a form of historical dialogue about difficult pasts is widely accepted within conflict resolution discourse, and is at the crux of transitional justice and the development of a sustainable peace in many contested societies across the world (Barkan 2001; Berg and Schaefer 2009; Bevernage 2012; Weldon 2012). In the aftermath of violent conflict and the process of peace building, most studies of contested memory and historical dialogue happen at a community, group or national level (Hackett and Rolston 2009; Nets-Zehngut and Bar-Tal 2013; Simoni



2013). Through the presentation of a processual (Pettigrew 1997; Dawson 2003a) analysis of change and changing (Bennis 1966) with the case of policing in Northern Ireland, this paper seeks to provide a longitudinal analysis of the challenges to individual and collective memory within the organisation. Processual analysis looks at change with a particular concern for the interactions of context, process and time, paying particular attention to the history and initial conditions, which often define and shape organisational change processes. Through an exploration of policing in transition, the analysis demonstrates that in attempting to understand how memory remains of central importance to a dialogue with history, widening the lens of analysis to organisational memory shines a light on an often-overlooked conflict transformation dynamic.

Organisations are at the core of how society is structured and functions (Bratton, Forshaw et al. 2007) and also the major focus of intergroup conflict (Guelke and Milton-Edwards 2000; Goldie and Murphy 2010). In turn, the concept of 'historical dialogue' allows for a broad interpretation of how societies can begin to reflect empirically on propagated myths, past violence, victims and victimhood, the use of history as a weapon and the elements necessary for fostering public discussion (Berg and Schaefer 2009). However, within all of these fundamentals, sit organisations and institutions which themselves go through processes of discussion on the past, violence, responsibility, roles and remembering. This is true of all public management structures within a divided society, and is especially significant for policing and military organisations that were often at the heart of conflict processes (Guelke and Milton-Edwards 2000; O'Rawe 2002; Ellison 2010; Goldie and Murphy 2010; Murphy 2013). It is understandable that most of the scholarship relating to the societal consequences of coming to terms with conflict originates from a political science, sociological, historic or human rights perspective. Yet, within the management and organisational theory literature,

significant work exists that illustrates and illuminates aspects of conflict resolution, which are often otherwise missed. Drawing upon these analyses, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between societal dialogue in relation to past and present conflict and the role of organisations and institutions in coming to terms with the past and providing positive pathways to the future. In this, it sees organisational structures as a key infrastructural element in how society is both structured and evolved and an important influencing mechanism within conflict transformation. While almost all aspects of organisational development have some relationship to conflict transformation in embedded contexts, several areas of organisational theory are particularly salient to a discussion of historical dialogue through an organisational lens. These centre on concerns for organisational memory, knowledge management and processes of change that are often intrinsically linked to external politically driven conflict transformation processes (Pettigrew 2003; Murphy 2013). Institutional change processes can also be hugely significant in illustrating both organisational resistance to change and the need for transitions to be powerfully manoeuvred through complex, political, organisational and cultural territory (Buchanan and Badham 1999; Pettigrew 2012).

The persistence of collective societal and group memory of intractable conflict is an important feature of the psychological and behavioural features of parties involved. Such memory is by its nature typically biased, de-legitimising of its rivals, and glorifying of the in-group to the exclusion of those outside that perspective (Nets-Zehngut and Bar-Tal 2013). These collective memory characteristics can inhibit peaceful resolution of conflict and intensify polarisation. To take such collective memories and transition them to less partial and more collective understandings is vital for peace and reconciliation at a societal level. Much time and many perspectives focus on the type of methods that allow groups and societies to begin such a process. Many case studies and conflict resolution methodologies

exist for communities (Ramsbotham, Miall et al. 2011), but at an organisational level far less scholarship has explored how institutions and organisations that are deeply embedded in conflict resolution at a societal level have dealt with and continue to cope with the demands of such organisational challenges internally as they continue to negotiate relationships and inter dependencies with external, sometimes political, stakeholders (Eyben, Morrow et al. 2000; Murphy 2013). However, there is much within the realm of organisational studies which allows us to begin to explore the complex inter-relationship between an organisation's place within a society emerging from conflict and its role as an actor in and agent of the resolution of that conflict. This role operates in four ways: at a temporal level in relation to already established change junctures (Murphy; 2013); at an internal organisational level in relation to change activity, at the contested interface between the organisation and the community and at a historic level in terms of the role the organisation has played in the past and especially during active conflict phases.

Like many fields of organisational studies, work around memory continues to develop and change, both in relation to theoretical extension and empirical studies (Walsh and Ungson 1991; Akgün, Keskin et al. 2012). Organisational memory remains an under specified multi disciplinary construct (Casey and Olivera 2003) linked with learning, improvisation and knowledge management but has significant roles to play within both understanding of 'change' and the struggle of 'changing' within organisational processes (Mirvis 1996; Buchanan and Dawson 2007). Walsh and Ungson defined organisational memory as 'stored information from an organisation's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions' (Walsh and Ungson 1991). An understanding of organisational dialogue between past, present and future establishes the impact of organisational memory for those engaged in significant change.

It is clear that internal memory has a very significant part to play on an organisation's functioning and as such has an intuitive appeal for researchers who are normally concerned with optimising performance and mitigating against strategic drift (Stein and Zwass 1995). Two particular aspects of how memory works within organisations have been identified using Morgeson and Hoffmann's framework for conceptualising collective contrasts (Morgeson and Hofmann 1999). The first involves the functional aspect of recollection of past events, routines and procedures. The second is the significance of structure within relationships between organisational individuals and the use of memory as a tool for sensemaking (Weick 1995), decision making and strategizing into the future (Walsh and Ungson 1991). Critically, Mirvis (1996) expands these ideas to include a distinction between what is referred to as 'declarative' and 'procedural' memory (Mirvis 1996) and also identifies the particular role of 'emotional memory' within organisational contexts and the significance of this type of memory to how behaviours are created, interpreted and altered in the future. While the idea of emotional memory has often been regarded as one of the 'black boxes' of organisational studies (Feldman and Feldman 2006) the role of emotions as part of the memory and the decision making capacity of organisations is firmly established (Mirvis 1996; Akgün, Keskin et al. 2012). Olick and Robbins (Olick and Robbins 1998) define emotional memory as 'memory of the past strong episodic emotional experiences or events that are unconsciously embedded and imagined for use in present and future actions, and operations of organisation' (Olick and Robbins, 1998:99). If we take this work and begin to look at the consequences for an organisation going through a difficult, emotionally charged, politically contentious change process with a backdrop of violence and conflict, it becomes possible to see the connections between what is happening internally, the relative prospects of 'success' for the

organisational change process and the potential impact, for good or ill, on the external conflict resolution setting.

The significance of the interrelationship of the contexts is underlined by Schmidt (2003) in the assertion that organisational memory is generally established partly through exposure to collective and personal experiences but also through public narratives as the internal and external contexts connect through the organisational interface. In this way, individuals within structures are critical in developing the emotional memory that feed into the memory structures of how an organisation sees its past, its present and its future. Symbols within organisations also function as vehicles that help organisational members come to terms with aspects of experiences that are not accessible to conscious thought (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997). The role of organisational narrative is also significant, especially in relation to how it forms, carries and develops change (Buchanan and Dawson 2007). Connections between emotion and narrative are strong and Engeström et al underline the importance of the retrieval and transfer of emotion through narrative (Engeström, Kerosuo et al. 2007). Akgun et al comment: 'Stories, drawn from the firm's history, which tell of experiences and events in the organisation, also form a foundation for new narratives' (Akgün et al 2012:101). Most importantly though, narrative is closely connected to a focus on processes of change within organisations and how organisation members explain those changes to themselves, make sense of them and resist / embrace the change itself. In this, how organisational actors express memory and emotion in narrative form has a potentially huge impact on change processes – especially those closely tied to external environmental discontinuity. In the words of Buchanan and Dawson (2007): 'narratives shape meanings and can act as counters in the game of organisational power and politics around programmes of organisational change' (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007:673).

The large and varied nature of the literature on organisational change leaves a wide body of work to draw on, but a difficult landscape to navigate. The RUC/PSNI experience as explored here is an examination of ‘radical’ organisational change - a transformative shift from one organisational form to another (McNulty and Ferlie 2004). This substantive change consisted not only of a new name and a new approach to recruitment but embodied significant procedural, material and symbolic transitions. The political and environmental circumstances of the change process meant that the research relied heavily on a processual approach which seeks to convey the ‘embeddedness’ of the organisation in its political, social and historical context (Pettigrew, Ferlie et al. 1992; Pettigrew 2012). Such concerns tie in with Greening and Gray’s (Greening and Gray 1994) comment that the polarisation of perspectives on organisational change have given way to the interaction of choice and context when looking at organisational change processes. One of the most significant points in adopting such an analytical approach is the realisation and acceptance that ‘real life’ policy formulation and implementation are interactive and muddled: researchers should resist the temptation to seek to resolve such tensions (Pettigrew 1990; Dawson 2003a; Mintzberg 2007). Most importantly however, is the centrality of ‘time’ as a measure of analysis. Pollit has reflected on the neglected nature of the passage of time as a vital, pervasive and neglected dimension within the wider public policy and organisational arena (Pollitt 2008). Others crucially pinpoint how awareness for ‘power processes’ within an organisation and the interaction between internal power and external power brokerage is significant to the process of change (Pettigrew 2003; Dawson 2003b). What are the implications of this approach to understanding how memory works in an organisation being transformed through external change processes, namely the Northern Ireland peace process? Narratives that existed at the point of agreement and emerged in the post-agreement context were very much shaped by the sanctioned languages of peace building and the peace process. In the following section we outline the ways in

which historical dialogue speaks to the discrepancy between the internal and external drivers of change in the period following the peace agreement in 1998.

#### **4. Policing in Northern Ireland: casting off their past for a different future?**

As negotiated settlements impacted upon policing in Northern Ireland and the police were forced to confront collective memories, held both internally and externally, more visible changes also became apparent. In highly observable ways, the RUC changed its name, its badge, its structure, its recruitment policies, and began the process of overhauling its organisational culture as a response to the Northern Ireland peace process. There are three distinct, identifiable periods in the Northern Ireland policing transition (Murphy, 2013). Firstly, the ‘looming change’ period (1995-1999) – where ceasefires had occurred, pressure to change (including financial) was apparent and the organisation was beginning to explore the new prospects of policing within a peaceful environment. A second period followed when change began to be defined (1999–2001) with the report of the Independent Review of Policing and the impact of the external environmental backlash of the unionist community to the review. The third is the period of symbolic change itself (2001-2003) when the name, symbols, badge and crest of the RUC become the new symbols of the PSNI and the organisation begins to grapple with what policing means in a new environment. The ‘new’ post-Agreement Northern Ireland however is not a place where violence has completely subsided or where community tensions have ceased to exist. PSNI officers in the years following these changes have had to deal with the threat of anti-peace process Republicanism and the ongoing disputes surrounding parades, flags and the past (Braniff, Byrne, McDowell 2013). Highlighting the three identifiable periods of organisational change process, we now

consider the reflections gleaned through the interviews that shine a light on the challenges of organisational change and historical dialogue.

#### *4.1 Adjusting to and resisting the Looming Change:*

In response to the paramilitary ceasefires in the early 1990s, the RUC instigated its own 'Fundamental Review' in 1996. This was an initial internal attempt to make organisational sense of the rapidly moving and unstable political process as well as capture internal attitudes towards a changing operational landscape. This review is also the first recognisable attempt of official, internal dialogue in relation to the external environmental political change that was underway. Internally, how police officers viewed their organisational memory diverged between ranks. For example, the organisational leadership understood the tension between past, present and future in these terms:

I was appointed as Acting Deputy Chief Constable with a brief to examine our approach to policing and make recommendations as to how our approach to policing should change, if we were truly to be in an increasingly moving security environment. Now that would have been in about February 1995. So in fairness to Hugh (Annesley, the Chief Constable), it was then left to me to define how I would approach this. And thus was born a concept of a fundamental review because I wanted it to be a fundamental review of every aspect of activity in which we were engaged (Interview with Sir Ronnie Flanagan, RUC Chief Constable 1996-2001 and PSNI Chief Constable 2001-2002).

This reflects an initial and foundational reflective exercise, tapping into how police viewed their role, as individuals and a collective in the past, present and future. Another member, holding the rank of Superintendent and operating as a District Commander at the time, reflected on what this meant for embedded cultures of practice:



I suppose back in 1994 when the ceasefire came in there was very little discussion around change in the RUC so in September 1994 we had the ceasefire – that was when the IRA announced a ceasefire – now at that stage I think most people were in a state of disbelief and certainly in policing then – we were starting, very, very gingerly to scale down. We had huge, massive operations in place, it was military and police doing vehicle check points, guarding stations and then in September we had to start to look at that – but it was a very, very gradual process (Interview with Superintendent).

In itself, this reflects a conflating of external and internal dynamics of change that are impacting upon how the individual police officer views the seemingly unavoidable process. Understanding that the change itself is multi layer – laminated between ‘ordinary’ public management responses to a changing external environment, but also between a highly disputed, contentious political process. This uneasy relationship between continuity and change not only affected procedural, symbolic and personnel issues but how individuals performing different roles within the organisation understood their past, present and future, as reflected by Interviewee 21 above. While the Fundamental Review made 189 recommendations for change, it stayed firmly distanced from the symbolic issues of name, badge and flag, and even more so the concrete issues of recruitment and reform of the ‘Special Branch’ (RUC 1996). The most interesting aspect of this dialogue was that it happened at the highest level of the organisation and outlined, both logistical issues, anxiety around change and concern for what change would mean:

If the current peace talks are successful there will be many benefits both for the force and the country as a whole. However, in an organisation, which has for 25 years devoted most of its energy to countering terrorism, the individuals within the organisation will inevitably have problems dealing with the many changes with which they will be faced. Doctor Courtney of the Occupational Health Unit is extremely concerned about the consequences of change

following a cessation of violence. His intimate knowledge of the health of the force allows him to make assessments and conclusions on the consequences of this change. ....uncertainty causes stress...marital problems can be caused by husbands being at home more frequently...loss of earnings, that is overtime, causes debt...boredom caused by normal duties as opposed to the anti-terrorist role causes stress.. increase in sickness, drinking and martial breakdown because of the above (RUC 2000b 'Position paper on culture'; Internal RUC memo, dated 15 February 2000).

In sum, this period of initial reflection at the beginning of the process forced both officers and the organisations leadership to confront the past (in all its complexity) and the future, with all its uncertainty. It was the beginning of individual and collective engagement with memories of what policing had been and might become.

#### *4.2. Forcing the issues: Change begins to be defined*

The political 'talks' referred to above culminated in the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 10<sup>th</sup> April 1998 and prompted a dialogue between understandings of what policing was in the past and what change meant for the future. Policing itself was regarded as too divisive an issue to be explicitly included in the peace talks themselves. Instead, the Agreement provided for the establishment of an Independent Commission to look specifically at police reform. The Commission was chaired by the Right Honourable Chris Patten (CH) the last British Governor of Hong Kong and a former UK Cabinet Minister. The Commission reported in September 1999 and made 175 recommendations. In general, the recommendations were very similar to and were informed by those of the RUC's own internal fundamental review,

referred to above. Where they differed substantially was in the proposal for a change of name, badge and uniform, all of which represented significant socio-cultural symbols of memory and belonging within the RUC:

Taking account of the principles on policing as set out in the Agreement, the Commission will inquire into policing in Northern Ireland and, on the basis of its findings, bring forward proposals for future policing structures and arrangements, including means of encouraging widespread community support for those arrangements. Its' proposals on policing should be designed to ensure that policing arrangements, including composition, recruitment, training, culture, ethos and symbols, are such that in a new approach Northern Ireland has a police service that can enjoy widespread support from, and is seen as an integral part of, the community as a whole (ICPNI 1999).

The British Government's general acceptance of Patten's Report against the opposition of Northern Ireland's unionist majority lit the torch paper on the pace of change. In response, the RUC leadership accepted the Reports' recommendations and in September 1999 appointed a Change Manager and a change team. The organisational response began in earnest. For the RUC, the process of transition to the PSNI was a painful and complex one (Mulcahy, 2006; Murphy; 2013). While most change processes are executive led and teleological (at least on the surface), the process within Northern Ireland policing was intrinsically linked to its external environment, highly political and deeply unsettling for the organisation as a whole and for many within the wider, external community.

Campaigns opposing change were forthright and emotive in their rhetoric and imagery. For example, the largest unionist party (the Ulster Unionists), published an alternative proposal to that of the Patten Commission, and on the ex-Chief Constable of the RUC, Sir Jack Hermon spoke in opposition to the Patten Report at pro RUC rally in the Ulster Hall in Belfast. Meanwhile, a UK wide campaign was launched to 'Save the RUC', beginning with a province wide poster campaign with the emotive slogan 'Defend the RUC – they defended us'. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of October at the Conservative Party conference Sir Norman Tebbit began what he described as 'the Conservative fight back' to 'save the RUC', followed up by UK Conservative Party's front bench attack on Patten in the House of Common's on the 7<sup>th</sup>. On the 8<sup>th</sup> DUP leader Ian Paisley branded RUC changes 'an insult' and ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher expressed her 'disgust' on this issue 'of great importance'. The Methodist Church who had asked for people to think and make prayerful consideration of the proposals, faced protests outside their Churches and on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October two former RUC officers chained themselves to the railings of Downing Street under the banner '302 police officers killed' as a symbolic gesture of the 'slaying' of the RUC. On October 27<sup>th</sup> the former Northern Ireland Secretary of State Lord Mason called Patten 'petty and mean spirited'. This was followed in November by the distribution of the Police Federation's 'Save the RUC' petition to Churches (omitting Catholic places of worship). On the 12<sup>th</sup> January 2000, two RUC widows handed a petition against the change in name and symbols of 400,000 signatories into 10 Downing Street. Meanwhile, internally the leadership of the RUC itself were setting a rather different tone. A memo from the now Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan to his officers outlined the need for a careful response:

This report will undoubtedly mark a milestone, not only for policing in Northern Ireland, but perhaps also for the development of society here. It thus deserves to be considered in detail in its entirety before any conclusions are reached in this regard.

There has of course been much widespread speculation, particularly in recent weeks, about the reports contents. I am acutely aware of the anguish some of this speculation has caused. Just as we go about our policing business however, in a professional dignified, rational manner, without dealing with speculation, so we will deal with this report when we have had the opportunity to see and study it. We will not rush to judgement. Neither will we be slow to articulate to the government and to the public any concerns we have in relation to any of the report's recommendations (Flanagan 1999).

Furthermore, Flanagan outlined a series of questions that he hoped would frame discussion:

does it enhance our ability to deliver the highest quality policing service to all our citizens?; does it encourage our citizens to play their part in working fully in partnership with us?; does it have due regard for how you are to be treated – the men and women who have been, who are, and who must continue to be the bulwark between anarchy and order in society here? (Flanagan 1999)

This set of internal documentation is very important in its emphasis on two key considerations. The first of these is a concern and a reminder for the job of policing itself – aside from and separate to the political machinations around the organisation. By ‘reframing’ on the essence of ‘policing’, by reminding colleagues that they joined to be police officers, Flanagan brings the debate back to a different more professionally considered space. The second issue that emerges here is that it gives open acknowledgment to the treatment of members of the organisation as they move forward. This is no doubt a tacit nod to hard issues like voluntary severance packages; and softer concerns around organisational culture and symbols. Even with this careful leadership messaging, many in the organisation were unhappy and expressing their unhappiness in a number of ways. Middle ranking officers also

reflect upon the juxtaposition between the political and the practical. One (at Inspector level) commented:

It was a challenge for many people on a personal level because of the symbolic changes, some people found that hard and I have to accept that. I didn't find it that hard, you got a job, you get paid I didn't find it that hard, you move on but I think we are now into that more difficult were we are actually having to make particularly difficult decisions where you are suppressing people's jobs. It actually makes a difference to them. You're saying to them, "you're not doing that job anymore, you are going to there instead. You are going out to the front line." (Interview with Inspector)

For those tasked with managing the transition, an acknowledgement of the emotion and of the memory of the recent past was necessary:

There was a feeling among officers, 'look, what were all the deaths for, you are just forgetting all those people who died', that was creeping through as well. I mean I was one of the ringleaders and to a certain extent I don't think I have ever been forgiven by some people because they saw me as being quite ruthless, but I had a job to do – I was brought in to do it. So there was a sense, even I had to remind myself that people had died and I had to be more sensitive. I lived through it and was part of it and what I am describing to you was real – I have sat on focus groups where I have seen chief supers with 30 years service, who were going anyway, they were just in turmoil and they were just not accepting what I was saying, and it got very aggressive, I could write a book about it – very difficult times (Interview with senior retired officer).

The internal historical dialogue focused on two issues: the process of change, especially around voluntary severance and how to come to terms with the past and legacy of those who had been killed or injured:

For the first few months that the Patton report came out the amount of rumours, concern and anxiety that that created and interest – you know a lot of people wanted to know ‘when am I getting away – when am I getting the big cheque – getting my severance’ and then down to the full-time reserve, you know ‘when am I losing my job’ because basically what it says is that the full-time reserve will go and other things too like the name, ‘what about our comrades who gave their lives?’ (Interviewee with Chief Superintendent).

This comment also refers to expectation (‘getting away and getting a big cheque’) as well as disillusionment and disenchantment held by many officers. For many the leitmotif of the transition narrative was the name change:

I think the main barrier was the change in the name and change in the uniform. And I think there was a sort of a general resistance, I mean particularly people who had been in the RUC for a very long time and who had been personally affected - who had lost colleagues, lost relatives during the troubles. That was a difficult thing for the organisation to handle. I mean those people had, could identify with a lot of very traumatic things that had happened in the past and you know, I think really the sort of watershed was the change in name. I think there was sort of a slow movement up until that point and after that it really started to progress and progress quickly (Interview with Retired District Commander).

This is a point shared by Ronnie Flanagan who goes on to address these issues himself:

Look, this Title and this Crest - let nobody here be in any doubt, it means as much to me as it means to anybody. But as an organisation which is no stranger to pain, if we get the great gain of young Catholic men and women, if this is a chill factor to prevent young Catholic men and women coming forward to join our organisation in numbers that we have never ever been able to achieve in the past, then that great pain will be worth the pain of the change in the title and the crest (Interview with Sir Ronnie Flanagan).

At this point we can begin to trace the development of dialogue about the past throughout the organisation. As organisational members, both uniformed and civilian staff, began to understand that change was really coming, dialogue began to develop along a series of discernible themes including caution and frustration. For one officer the prospect of changing the collective and culturally memorable symbols of the name, the badge and the uniform represented a difficult hurdle:

I bitterly opposed many of the changes. The name change was the final compromise. There was an understanding that we could keep other things – the Athletic Association and things like it. It soothed the heat to a degree’ (Interview with Police Federation representative).

Yet, at the same time, a creeping dissatisfaction with the slow progress towards the perceived inevitable change emerged:



I think we paid lip service a bit for a couple of years 1999 – 2000, there was a particular phrase ‘we stand ready for change’<sup>1</sup> which irritated me no end. Because it was totally meaningless, it was like the single transferable speech. It meant nothing. You know, why didn’t we just get on and do it, as opposed to standing ready for it, you know. That sort of sums it up for me a bit (Interview with Chief Superintendent).

With the remit of impending change more tangible, policing leadership and officers were able to conceive of what this meant for policing practice, but equally importantly, for the culture and memories of the organisation.

#### *4.3 Delineating between past and present: Change begins*

Agreement reached, the success for reforming policing relied largely upon how policing would be received in the ‘new’ Northern Ireland and more importantly how it would be judged. Broader societal assessments of policing are undoubtedly informed by past experience and previous relationships. Thereby, through methods of engagement and recruitment the new PSNI sought a rapprochement with the Catholic community, a community that was historically sidelined and had a deeply contested relationship with the police service that went before. The transformation was two-fold: how they appeared externally and how they reformed internally. Internally, the police were tasked with a ‘root-and-branch’ transformation. The impact of this transformation on police officers that continued serving after the Patten process was deeply individual and personal to their memory of policing. Over half way through the Patten reform process in 2009, almost 5000 serving PSNI officers were former RUC officers. The interaction of their historic memories

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase was used repeatedly by Flanagan in public interviews. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/1634984.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/1634984.stm) (accessed 2nd July 2008)

and their present reality is acutely illustrative of how organisations and their memories respond to the pressures of peacebuilding and nascent peace processes.

An initiative that encouraged dialogue within policing about the past and how policing could be in the future was enabled by a local organisation called Mediation Network. This organisation facilitated officers to reflect upon what the process of organisational change meant for them, for the organisation and for broader society. In its initial work, the Mediation Network carried out workshops and training to raise awareness of what organisational change could mean but simultaneously promoted dialogue within senior ranks on the anticipation of police reform (Murphy 2013). Writing about this, lead facilitator Brendan McAllister, remarked that the process involved ‘hitherto taboo subjects’ such as ‘personal disclosure of personal and political views, reflection on the contribution of the RUC to the conflict’ for example (2004: 7). The effect of the Mediation Network intervention was felt for many participating officers: for example, one officer remarked that understanding this transition as part of a wider change process helped to bring about a more positive appraisal of why change was important:

I believe that the Mediation Network project helped us to gain enlightenment about policing and professional issues, personal insight into ourselves and deep-rooted issues about conflict management, conflict resolution and community policing and so on (Interview with Retired Assistant Chief Constable).

Another senior change manager at ACC level commented:

Mediation network were very useful but that is only because they know the problem over here and the difficulties – I would be quite sanguine about the consultants – a lot

of the consultants, I think, got their money for our work – consultants come in and tell you what you already know and that was my experience in this – now they were very nice people but this was such a major ... this was not a situation of Cadburys deciding to change their fruit and nut bar. This is a situation where a lot of the change process was external to the organisation – it was political, it required inside the policing when it happened major process change, major cultural change. It required leadership, particularly at middle management level to deliver it. This stuff – it is what you make it. I found the combination of sometimes seeing policies that there didn't work very useful but more importantly to at times was that you met people who were touchstones for you (Interview with Former Assistant Chief Constable).

Accepting the role of policing as part of the peace process also forced consideration of the police as part of the conflict. What policing meant to society in terms of its position in its past, and its future, caused immediate problems for new recruits who did not carry the internal collective and individual memories of the RUC. This juncture, where the past was being transformed by the present, created challenges for how people understood their role within the organisation and more broadly. One facilitator commented:

I didn't yet fully understand what I had started with the police. I was to learn that. So it's not like one knows at the start, but I have to say I had an intuition, a very, very strong intuition that this was the place to go and work, to go and work on policing. And at the time people were saying to me, it's too early for that, you shouldn't do that, you're going to damage yourselves and I knew we were going to damage ourselves, just like getting involved with parades, I knew we were going to damage ourselves. I knew that we'd make enemies basically but I factored in, here was a

societal issue, conflict. If I travel abroad to conferences, people would ask me, not about neighbour to neighbour disputes, not about family rows, they would ask me ‘what are you doing about Northern Ireland?’. So I had an intuition that there was a conflictual issue here, the relationship between the police and the community was one that needed to be fixed and that mediators could make a contribution (Interview with Community Relations Facilitator).

Of course, for the new recruits, the pattern of moving ‘with’ as well as being part ‘of’ the change process was less problematic than for those making the transition from RUC to PSNI. This dialogue between what the RUC had been to those people and what the PSNI would be fostered bitterness and opposition, as one interviewee, then holding the rank of Assistant Chief Constable remarked:

If you got down below superintendent level I would say there is still a level of resistance to change. They are sort of the sandwich. You have the new recruits who are Patten – young and enthusiastic. But you have the guys in the middle, came in as RUC, seen badge change, name change, seen a lot of their friends go out on severance. There is resentment towards the change culture (Interview with retired Assistant Chief Constable).

This process of change meant that, for the first time, officers who moved between the RUC to the PSNI had to have a dialogue between their past and their present and future. This is epitomised by the words of one young Catholic officer reflecting upon his training and visit to the RUC memorial garden, situated in police headquarters:

I went to the Garden of Remembrance. I didn't have a problem with it but I don't think you could have opted out. It was expected you'd be there' (Interview with early career constable).

This officer captures the tension between how the past is negotiated, mediated and understood within a 'new' policing organisation that was seeking to induct not only new recruits but also a new ethos and institutional memory.

## **5. Conclusions**

Dialogue with the recent and often contested history within policing has been a key driver for change within policing in Northern Ireland. The processes of organisational change within policing structures in Northern Ireland initiated a period of reflection (Topping 2009) not just about policing practice in the past and present but also about what it meant to belong to the organisation. That sense of belonging (or alternatively of not belonging) was articulated through debates over expressions of identity such as symbols, uniform and language. These conversations were crucially important in positioning the new service in a post-conflict context and facilitating the transition to an unknown future. It was not solely members of the organisation that engaged in historical dialogue. As pointed out above, the change process provoked emotive responses from both the opposition camp encapsulated in the poster campaign 'Defend the RUC: They defended us' and those in support of far-reaching reforms who had rival posters 'Disband the RUC'. These expressions of support from external groups and individuals arguably had a powerful impact on the nature and speed of the reform process. Resistance from outside the organisation, based on sympathetic interpretations of the RUC's role in both the conflict and in Northern Ireland more generally, struck a chord with some members who were finding the transition to the new force challenging. The study of how peace processes take hold and mature necessitates an understanding of the history and

memory of public organisations such as the police for it is here that continuities of governance, public service and security prevail.

Approaching how memory is understood within a process of organisational change is inherently linked to narratives. Thus, as Buchanan and Dawson remind us, organisational change is ‘multi-authored’, comprising ‘competing accounts’. Moreover, these ‘narratives have causal functions and intent, in seeking not only to shape understanding of past events, but also in seeking to shape trajectories of change into the future’ (2007: 669). Likewise, as Netts-Zehngut contends, collective memory in intractable conflicts determines the characteristics and responses of the parties involved. The individual and collective memories of the RUC officers who continued to serve and perform high ranking positions within the new PSNI were therefore uniquely placed to legitimise or delegitimise the new order, act as the ‘in group’ within the new organisation or on a broader scale, ‘inhibit’ or promote polarisation and reconciliation. Therefore, how officers, especially those at a high level, who persisted through the transition and were engaged in the transformation of organisational memory were vital for the broader and bigger processes of peace building in Northern Ireland, but also to the successful transition and reform process within the organisation. For Akgun and Keskin, the processes of change and transformation within the organisation are affected by collective and individual memories: ‘those stories are both about and become the change process’ (2012: 669). Or in other words, the stories of the past are also very much the stories of the present, and thereby of the future (Buchanan and Dawson 2007). In Northern Ireland both the organisation and the people it was tasked with protecting and serving engaged in a dynamic dialogue not only about if and how it should change but also about its role in the past, present and future. In sum this paper has sought to address the historical dialogue that occurs as organisations change. It has suggested that change is multi-authored

(Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) and influenced by narratives internal to and external to organisations. As the PSNI continues to evolve and transition in a post-conflict era, new narratives are emerging.

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