



MEDIATED DIALOGUES AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND ‘POLICING OUR DIVIDED SOCIETY’ (PODS) 1996-2003

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Abstract

This paper is a synopsis of “Changing Police Culture, A Critical Dialogue Project”, Morrow, D., Mc Allister, B., Campbell, J. & Wilson, D A., an Unpublished Report of a Five Year Programme of mediated dialogues around policing and community relations in Northern Ireland carried out by Mediation Northern Ireland and a charitably funded University of Ulster Action Research Programme, Future Ways. Because of the sensitivity of people from diverse traditions and organisations taking part in inclusive meetings around policing, we undertook not to publish the material until there was a sufficient time distance. The programme was funded by a variety of funders including the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Ireland Funds and the United States Information Agency (USIA) with support from the Northern Ireland Office and the Irish Government.

Keywords

Mediation, dialogues, Northern Ireland, society

Introduction

The primary effect of violent political crisis in Northern Ireland on social and personal decision-making and relationships, especially at the time of this initiative, was to radically prioritise issues of self-defence and security over other considerations. ‘Safety’ became primarily defined in the negative as the absence or elimination of threat. In a context where life-threatening violence was a constant possibility, relationships were always inseparable from a risk analysis. One of the most obvious consequences was the underpinning of ethnic separatism by a semi-permanent ‘presumption for suspicion’. To live then in



Northern Ireland was to live in a climate of endemic conspiracy, transforming anxious suspicion from a mental illness into a form of folk wisdom.

Because of their role as enforcers of the disputed rule of law, conspiracy and fear had additional and specific consequences for the police. On the one hand, the then Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) retained a formal obligation to apply the rule of law in a manner compatible with democratic principles of even-handed equal citizenship. On the other, police officers were identified as 'legitimate targets' of lethal violence. The resulting impact on the culture of policing was profound. Relationships with huge parts of community, especially where 'the enemy' was embedded, were infected by an almost unavoidable climate of suspicion and even hostility. Over decades of violence this crystallised into a culture of profound antipathy, and a cycle of mutual recrimination where blame for the circumstances was traded.

On the other hand, the police tended to retreat into relationships of trust based on a narrow circle of support in a world of 'friends' and 'foes'. Cop culture, always tight, loyal and self-referential, took on echoes of an almost military 'band of brothers' organised to protect the group from martial and political opponents which might be described as hierarchical, unswervingly loyal and masculine. Antagonism spawned a pattern of policing whole areas defined by the presumed risk of violence from specific, but unpredictable, quarters in the community. Over time, commitments to equal service were increasingly implausible, despite formal protestations to the contrary and enormous efforts on the part of some to maintain service and relationship.

Worse still, the logic of security creates a context within which tactics which appear unacceptable in a context of fundamental trust, become acceptable, even necessary. Policing in Northern Ireland took place between these poles of commitment to a democratic and equal order and the reality of systemic violent confrontation with parts of the community. By the 1990s, the cost of this to officers, to communities and to democratic policing was incalculable. Nobody who thought about change in Northern Ireland could separate reform from radical transformation in the police. After decades of violence, change was overwhelmingly defined and understood from within the lens of the security relationship. Critically, police and the communities they served were not meeting in a climate of partnership and/or mutual problem solving with the consequence that any debate was at risk of being overwhelmed by political ideology, paranoid but deeply emotional attachment to versions of reality and profound prejudice and ignorance.

Within this context of 'chronic crisis', Mediation Northern Ireland (MNI) engaged with part of the police leadership to try to expand and design possibilities for 'reflective space' as a development of mediation within which a different form of safety could be established, at least for a small leadership group, called a "development group". This development group sat both within, and at a distance from, the organisation and had a mandate from the Chief Constable to do so. The task was to establish frameworks within which reflection on experience, honesty about the costs of suspicion and challenge from outside could be both articulated, probed and acknowledged, in radical contrast to the normative expectations of a society in conflict (Senge et al, 2000: 412).



The starting presumption of mediation is that changes in relationship create the possibility of different outcomes. Above all, MNI and their partners in the University of Ulster started from the conviction that the absence of these opportunities is a crucial deficit in change processes that are understood as purely technical without reference to their emotional, political and intellectual aspects (Eyben, Morrow, & Wilson, 2002:30).

In this context, 'safe space' implied reducing the risk of chaos and/or uncertainty in a hierarchical, loyal and masculine culture. In effect, the aim was to create spaces where exploration, uncertainty, unorthodoxy and ambivalence were safe, making different relationships possible and thereby liberating the organisation from standard responses to external change through fear. 'Safe space' implied providing opportunities where dilemmas could be honestly surfaced, contradictory impulses acknowledged and explored and practical ways to both support and enable change could be identified. Above all, safety meant generating opportunities for people from very opposed backgrounds to meet together to explore the consequences of hostility and suspicion and to generate sufficient freedom from threat for people and their institutions, to reconsider priorities without insubordination or disloyalty.

Furthermore, by creating room to acknowledge the unpalatable consequences of violence on individuals, culture and practice without compromising courage or raising questions, an opportunity was created to explore practice and structures (Murphy, 2013).

In a brittle and violently politicised environment, organisations responsible for public administration and order are vested in particular structures and outcomes. All those who initiate and participate in mediated dialogues and systemic change work run a risk that the interests of others and the consequences in relationships will overpower any simple good intentions. Coping with jealousy, envy, rivalry, and antagonism within and between organisations and groups are important aspects of this work.

In a command and control organisation, opportunities for leaders to have dilemmas and complexity acknowledged and owned by others, to acknowledge 'not knowing' and to create shared understandings that enable coherent strategy, can be critical. However, without the deliberate creation of such opportunities they are easily undervalued in practice.

Systemic challenges ultimately require a level of creative response that is unlikely to emerge from formal or informal routine. In consequence it is almost certain that opportunities will have to be specifically promoted and engineered. The presence of outsiders in the group, and the permission granted by them and their contract with the organization to ask questions, is critical to this new dynamic. When opportunities to explore at depth succeed, the resulting insights and opportunities can be paradoxically the opposite of artificial.

Indeed, they can be transformational in at least three dimensions:

1. Promoting personal development and growth;
 2. Developing a new honesty in professional relationships with people from whom important debates and issues have been hidden in the context of hierarchy, organizational culture and/or rivalry;
 3. Giving practical pointers towards practical possibilities for change when previously excluded
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knowledge is included.

Change in Policing? Developing a practice of engaged dialogue in policing in Northern Ireland

Policing Our Divided Society (hereafter ‘PODS’) was a critical forum between citizens and a diverse group of 15 (later 24) police officers established with the agreement of the Chief Constable with a view to enabling direct, open and frank engagements around the sensitive and contested issues of policing and community relationships and the overall ethos of the police service in Northern Ireland in a context of privacy and confidentiality. It took place with members of the (then) Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on a monthly, sometimes fortnightly basis and offered an opportunity for systematic engagement with members of diverse political parties, community organisations, civil servants and civic organisations. A prerequisite for meaningful dialogue was the development of mutually respectful relationships: between police officers from diverse backgrounds themselves; between diverse citizens; and between police officers and citizens when meeting and working together.

What was different about this project?

The Programme was centred on robust engagements with police officers and in ‘private space’ meetings with citizens from diverse civil society organisations and political figures. Meetings took place for whole days and evenings on a monthly, sometimes fortnightly, basis. These meetings were augmented by five, week long, intensive USA based study trips to New York, Atlanta, Boston, San Diego and Washington linking police officers, members of civil society groups and political representatives to local community policing practice there. Each visit was followed up through local participants linking the US resource people in robust discussions with members of the diverse civil and political constituencies they belonged to in Northern Ireland.

The programme engaged major international thinkers on justice and policing in Northern Ireland including: Police Commissioner Paul Evans, Boston; Professor Howard Zehr and Kay Pranis, Eastern Mennonite University on Restorative Justice; Dr Jeremy Travers, (then) US Government Adviser; now President, John Jay College of Criminal Justice; Chuck Wexler, Executive Director, Police Executive Research Trust; Professor George Kelling, Rutgers University and author of *Fixing Broken Windows* (Kelling and Coles, 1996). The PODS project was a new departure in a number of important aspects.

Community Relations Practice: Community Relations practice (Morrow, 2013) had tended to avoid engagement with the RUC. Until the 1990s, practical action to address community relations was often the domain of civil society organisations, and often concentrated on direct Protestant - Catholic encounters. Furthermore, many groups regarded engaging with the RUC as beyond criticism, some saw them as an unacceptable partner, and others still regarded engagement with the police as too dangerous.



Policing Practice: Until 1994, the RUC had not involved community relations partners in the design or delivery of their community relations training. The PODS project grew from pioneering MNI work in this area.

Organisational Location: Critically, however, PODS was not focussed on training but on the whole culture of the RUC, engaging officers from across the organisation with members of the community in a consideration of community relations issues and what these challenges meant for all organisations, relationally and structurally.

Commitment: PODS was established as a dialogue that, initially, would last three years, although the RUC were asked to commit themselves to one year at a time.

Structure: PODS was a partnership and dialogue project, owned by two independent partners (the RUC then PSNI and MNI/ Future Ways), each able to maintain and defend their own independence. This was an important innovation in police-community partnership. At different points both sides withdrew and then, after robust engagements, re-engaged.

Methods:

Method (1) - Relationship Building: Policing in Northern Ireland had traditionally been approached as a managerial-technical matter (dominated by consultants) or as a matter of politics (dominated by politicians). Both of these gave rise to defensive responses, either in the police or in the community. PODS aimed to supplement these methods by an open dialogue between a group of influential officers, practitioners in the community relations field and members of the public drawing on the well-tried reconciliation programmes associated with MNNI since 1991, the Corrymeela Community since 1965 and the Understanding Conflict Trust/ Future Ways since 1987.

Through changing the traditional model of relationship inside a traditionally hierarchical organisation, it was envisioned that new learning would become possible. The presence of civilians was an essential part of 'moving the chairs around' and establishing new space as was the creation of a Development Group (Eyben, Morrow, & Wilson, 2002).

Method (2) - Capacity Building: The PODS project aimed to build the capacity of both the RUC and community to think more holistically and innovatively about police and community issues, rather than to offer training. Although it takes considerable time to grow a different vision of what is both possible, and desirable, as well as creating a less defensive atmosphere in relation to the difficulties of present circumstances, it was hoped that the time spent on examining this now would flag up other problems early and create a more realistic backdrop against which to think about change. The Project drew specifically on a number of leading thinkers in policing represented in our US based resource people listed above.

Method (3) Learning to learn: The project was intended primarily to engage both Police and Civilians in learning rather than to devise specific plans. We were informed by approaches associated with developing Learning Organisations and deep reflective learning approaches that were part of the history of the ecumenical movement in post war Europe.



(See: <http://www.eaea.org/index.php?k=11650>; <http://www.eaalce.org/>;
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes>).

Within a context of systemic political and organisational challenges and the prospect of transformational change, the project was designed to develop the capability of senior police leadership to engage intellectually and emotionally with the challenges of managing policing. Ultimately, however, the value of PODS lay in the application of this learning culture to the range of practical challenges emerging rapidly over the period.

Method (4) – Robust Dialogue: PODS aimed to break the destructive cycle which categorised all dialogue with the RUC either as destructive criticism (the traditional RUC view) or as collusion with the enemy (the traditional view of many RUC critics), bringing the practice of engaged critical dialogue developed by MNI and Future Ways to bear on policing. In so doing we hoped to create a context in which deeply held differences could be expressed, recognised and even explored and at the same time trust could be grown. By seeking an environment of trust and difference, difference can become a means of growth not only antagonism.

Method (5) - Personal Sharing - Policing is traditionally a question of ‘command and control’ where pleasing those in a higher rank is often associated with reward. The RUC had a formal culture where junior officers only spoke after Senior Officers had given their views. With the strong support of the most senior Assistant Chief Constable this culture was set aside within PODS and open engagement encouraged. After this breakthrough, PODS was conducted as a limited forum where officers of different ranks shared views openly and with confidence. This allowed a recognition of knowledge and experience held at lower ranks, the creation of teams and the recognition of the difficulties of commanders. The presence of civilians, free from any contractual obligations to the police, was essential to creating an atmosphere of non-hierarchical interchange.

Content:

The goal was to raise, in open forum, all issues of importance related to policing a divided society, especially those of greatest controversy in public debate. This in itself was unusual.

Funding and Independence

To safeguard the independence, the project was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Ireland Funds and the United States Information Agency (USIA) with support from the Northern Ireland Office and the Republic of Ireland Government. The authors produced an independent report on the project for each year of

The project structure had two main characteristics:

It required a serious commitment from the leadership of the RUC and then the PSNI, in giving the group of officers a self-critical brief and mandate. At the same time the project needed a clear and



demonstrable independence from that same leadership to guarantee its integrity.

At the same time, political and financial independence was crucial. The reality of Northern Ireland politics was that external groups could easily assume that small organisations would be ‘used’ by a propaganda-wise partner of such experience and size as the RUC and, at the same time, the police were understandably suspicious of working with a civil society group because of previous work with civil society organisations where the groups involved had openly criticised the police.

There was a risk inherent in a civil society group working with police. The group had to face important challenges put to them such as “where does control lie?” and “is there the freedom to be independent?” The citizen group insisted on the right to produce independent reports for funders, over which the citizen working group would exercise absolute editorial control, despite a strong RUC preference for a joint report.

Independent partners were a huge risk for an organisation like the RUC which had grown used to expecting open attack and had developed strong internal protective defences. The fact that they were prepared to make a leap of faith beyond the closed fortress with the PODS project was itself significant and, contextually, it was ‘of its time’. Police had to make the effort to consult because, traditionally, they had been bound to a “command and control” culture. At the outset it was very important, from the police point of view, to be as clear as possible about the relationship and, internally, to be able to communicate that to different constituencies within the organisation.

Vision

Relationship-building, especially strategic relationship building, was important to this mediated dialogue. Critical dialogue in a robust relationship is a different experience to speaking ‘about the other’ when they are not present.

The vision of PODS was less about a specific model of policing than about beginning to generate a new and open relationship between the community and police that would protect and enhance reconciliation in a divided society. The fundamental task of PODS was to put flesh on that vision, by exploring the possibilities and obstacles presented by the changing political environment and the changing needs of both police and the divided communities they served.

In the process there was a continuing paradox. Police were clearly part of a system which was generating violent antagonism in the society and, at the same time, police officers were often the direct victims of this conflict. Underlying this, was a clear feeling that the, then, RUC had not engaged with the feelings and experience of a large part of the community, and that such engagement was ultimately going to be essential if an inclusive future was to be found.

This project offered a means to explore how the community could begin to take responsible ownership of policing, while supporting those within the RUC who were hungry to explore and examine the many issues which arose. In addition, this programme, unlike many other community initiatives, was located at the centre of the organisation rather than banished to a small part such as training. In this way



PODS represented a step- change in engagement with the RUC that had implications for systemic change processes beyond policing in Northern Ireland.

Aims and Objectives: ‘assisting the evolution of policing and community relations.’

Evolution is an important word because in this meditative work a ‘sense of time’ was needed to move police and community relationships from one style to another. Evolution refers to a process of change in which organisms adapt to their environment in a process of continuous change and development. The most successful organisms are those that can adapt to the conditions around them, including transformational events that prefer one form to another.

Evolution presupposes the necessity of change and adaptation while aiming towards stability and balance. It differs from revolution less in the scale of change demanded than in the mechanisms by which change occurs, and in its understanding of the relationship of the future to the past.

The commitment to ‘policing’ rather than ‘the police’ was equally significant: the primary commitment being to the activity (the verb) rather than the organisation (the noun). The task always remains larger than the institution, and where one appears to run contrary to the other, then change should primarily occur within the police, in order to facilitate the satisfactory delivery of policing.

The PODS project was always, also, an experiment in the development of community relations practice. Disputes over ‘justice’ and ‘law and order’ had been, and are still, critical focal points of conflict in Northern Ireland. Community relations practice, at that time, had more often than not adequately wrestled with the serious issues which policing poses, preferring to hide behind ideological certainties or avoidance. As such, the dialogue within PODS, while focussed on the RUC and policing, posed constant challenges to those engaged with peace building, mediation and inter-group relations.

‘Our perspective was that ‘policing’ would continue to evolve as a profession in Northern Ireland and that its evolution should be considered within the context of a society struggling with division enmity and the challenge of reconciliation’ (Year One Report).

Policing and Politics

A core task of the working group was to engage police officers in a discussion on the proper place of policing in a democratic society and to locate these abstractions within a divided society such as Northern Ireland. The primary goal was to encourage an on-going interchange between police officers and between police officers and civilians as well as within civil society groups about the implications of a dispute over legitimate authority for a police force that, then, had to carry out the law for a single legitimate lawgiver.

The overall aim of introducing politics into our discussions was to provide a social and political context within which policing and the dilemmas facing it could be realistically assessed and debated and, in time, a new more inclusive political structure, in which the implications of a vision of widespread unanimous support for policing in Northern Ireland, could be explored.

The more detailed objectives were:



- To highlight the dilemmas of policing with a model which assumed a transcendent source of authority when such a transcendence clearly did not exist?
- To examine the meaning of democracy and human rights for policing in the Northern Ireland context?
- To provide parallels and analogous situations which might provide insights into possible initiatives?
- To encourage police officers to actively consider the dilemmas which Northern Ireland posed for liberal models of policing through creating space for comparative reflection.

Our purpose throughout was to ensure that the wider social context was always present when discussing policing and to provide a safe space to acknowledge some of the unanswered questions and dilemmas. At no time was it our purpose to insist on a single interpretation of political events. This was structurally reflected in the challenging range of citizens and groups who participated in the programme with the police as well as the themes and issues addressed.

During this phase the core points of learning were:

- Communities in Northern Ireland shared very different views of the legitimacy of the lawgiver and its servants. Certain community policing models, which assumed that communities started from the same point of departure, were therefore flawed.
- The social contract between government and the governed was extremely weak in Northern Ireland, up to and including parts of Northern Ireland where the illegitimacy of the RUC to carry out and enforce the law has been successfully established as local orthodoxy in some places.
- Police in these settings, may still have needed to assert that they were carrying out the same law equally, but they needed to protect officers and the fear of attack from the policed community destroyed any notion of the police as agents of the community carrying out the community's wishes on the ground. Instead, in some areas, the police, there, appeared as a force of occupation that was only visible through their armed protection.
- Because this programme started before the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the Policing reforms that then flowed from this agreement, no single centre of loyal citizenship had yet been established in Northern Ireland at that time. The result was that no single presupposition about citizen-police relationships could be made or enforced. Furthermore, we had all adapted to this situation and had not generated any new alternatives to it, at that time.
- We were forced to learn our way out of this predicament. Citizen-citizen relationships were not conducted as one equal to another but as one competitor to another. This created dilemmas for policing where the police were expected to enforce one side's demands over another. All police actions therefore tended to be seen by others as partisan rather than the impartial exercise of the law, and the police, rather than being the agents of a transcendent law, were instead often caught in the middle, like no other agency.



The fact that politics remained a constant theme of our dialogue had a number of critical advantages:

- It rooted the project in the reality of divided opinion, experience and understanding of political power in Northern Ireland.
- It took external events seriously, reducing the scope of PODS to focus only on safe issues.
- As such, PODS could build a reputation of dealing with harder issues than were normally approached in policing circles with officers or community organisations.
- It provided a potential transformative platform (Lederach, 2005) where safe space around the most difficult of conversations could be experienced by both police and non-police simultaneously.
- It constantly reminded everyone of the risks inherent in the policing change project underlying PODS- Looking Forward.
- It reduced to a minimum the area of taboo in our working relationships.
- It allowed police officers to exhibit different understandings of communal affairs among themselves, breaking down the image of monolithic certainty.
- It allowed the working group to demonstrate the sincerity of their commitment to relationships beyond political differences.
- It enabled the working group to show that they were serious about their willingness to disagree and to live with real tensions within PODS.
- It was a test of the integrity of the project that we could sustain long and serious dialogue about critical issues without pulling punches.
- It created an agreed reference context to which practical and professional matters could be referred in subsequent debates.

The primary task facing any police service in Northern Ireland is the creation of a diverse and representative service that enjoys organic and open relationships with all parts of society. Human rights, we understood, should not have become caricatured as the measurement of entitlements and the defence of interests. From our perspective, in our mediated dialogues, Human Rights were understood to be an essential framework where human beings work in mutually respectful relationships, including sensitivity to one another's culture and professional tasks as police officers.

Learning together, and structuring real partnerships, had to be managed and organised intentionally by both police and civilian managers if a new culture of partnership was to emerge. Similarly, community organisations and political parties needed to develop new ways of exploring, and understanding, partnership with those they are or have been antagonistic towards.

Transparency is a valuable goal. In a society emerging from endemic conflict and suspicion, however, real openness and dialogue sometimes requires safe space and so we made much use of 'private space, non- attributable' meetings, as part of this programme as well as 'public space', open meetings.

Our intention had been to 'increase awareness' rather than 'teach knowledge' or 'deliver training'.



We were confident that increased sensitivity (to Community Relations themes) among a critical body of police officers informed their contributions to strategic developments within policing since that point.

An honest assessment of one core outcome, ‘that a learning community enabled one group of officers to plot some kind of emotional and professional course through total turmoil’, was attained. To some degree the critical dialogue approach created a human flexibility in a brittle organisation and allowed change to come as a human and committed reality to people who got real responsibilities in the change process rather than only through coercion. It is also comment on the absence of this kind of work, in other central public and political institutions elsewhere then and now. Should more institutions have addressed the levels of distrust between themselves and citizens as a response to making them ‘fit for purpose’, a more restorative societal culture could be developed (Wilson 2009:10).

Final Comments

Change in policing in Northern Ireland does not and could never depend on a single project, nor was this the goal of PODS. The core concept of the project was to begin to model the conditions under which people who had been part of a bloody and deeply-rooted conflict could begin to imagine and explore a future for themselves and their enemies together.

The PODS project sought to acknowledge that conflict engages people at every level: rational, political and emotional. Attempts to move beyond conflict must therefore engage people at all of the same levels: purely political or purely rational models of conflict resolution will always be unstable. Politics and bureaucracy have been slow to recognise this fact, relying almost entirely on governmental fiat and law to eliminate enmity. For a police service, the instability of violent emotion is too threatening to be left alone to quietly erupt.

The method which emerged was the evolution of a learning community based on critical dialogue in which the commitment of Mediation Network and Future Ways to inclusion was embodied both by the willingness to work closely with police officers and, at the same time, pay sharp attention to maintaining relationships with the outside world, including the hardest critics of the police in Northern Ireland. Throughout, all participants understood that the success of the project depended on refusing the classical choice of being either with the police or with their opponents and seeking to explore what might be meant by being for both the police and their opponents.

Learning communities start from members’ questions and experience, acknowledging that nobody knows all the answers at the outset. They are fundamentally exploratory and open-ended, in search of insights in support of their specific aims and objectives. For police officers, whose profession traditionally rests on certainty, this was not necessarily instinctive. Nonetheless, the RUC in 1997 agreed to take a risk with the Mediation Network and their Future Ways partners. Both elements of the opening dialogue had to commit to learning about each other in order to re-imagine a future for policing in Northern Ireland.

The presumption of many public service institutions in the UK and Ireland– that they can take for granted or presume the basic moral and cultural compass of the society they served – can no longer be



taken for granted as society becomes more and more diverse. Public Service institutions that want to connect with the whole public must also learn from all those they serve. The alternative is to use ever greater force and a dismissal of the constant claims of exclusion by others as simply misplaced.

In Northern Ireland the path of force and exclusion around community relations and nationality issues has proved itself arid in the extreme. In spite of the fears which were associated with meeting the enemy, then and still now, there is an urgent need to design and protect the contexts and conditions under which difficult conversations can be had and core issues addressed, all in the service of inclusive and intelligent answers for the modern community. PODS was an attempt to create such a space. In everything, PODS was entirely dependent on the prevailing political climate. When the project was uncomfortable, the incentive to step back was countered by the desire to continue for political reasons. Fortunately, for us, the prevailing climate continued to work in our favour throughout the project. While this is true, PODS also provided a vehicle where emotional reactions were accepted, challenged, explored and integrated, generating a new humanity in police circles around difficult topics and important issues.

According to Walter Wink “We trust violence because we are afraid and we will not relinquish our fears until we are able to imagine a better alternative.” (Wink, 1992:231). The success or failure of PODS should be measured according to how far it contributed to the capacity of all those concerned with policing in Northern Ireland to begin to imagine a better alternative.



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