Creating Extremists for Love and Justice

Thanks for those kind welcoming remarks. I'm delighted to be here, and who could resist a conference called "Creative Extremists", especially when inspired by that wonderful quotation from Martin Luther King that appears at the top of the program – "will we be extremists for love or hate, for justice or injustice", for a *civil* society in my own understanding of those words or a society characterized by permanent divisions and a hollowed-out democracy? You know, better than I do, how difficult and challenging this work can be, how many barriers and reversals lie along this road, and how much courage and self-examination are required to develop a new sense of who we are and where we are heading in the future, separately and together. Meeting this challenge requires, not just the courage to imagine a different future, but the willpower to roll up your sleeves every day and do the hard, practical work that helps to make it happen.

King's teachings resonate powerfully against the background of this challenge, though he was not the first person to frame the issue in these terms. That honor belongs to the writer Lilian Smith, who in 1956 gave an address in a room just like this in Montgomery Alabama, to the Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change called "The Right Way is not the Moderate Way", and this is what she said: "so you have been extremists, good creative loving extremists and I want to tell you I admire and respect you for it. In times of ordeal and crisis, only the extremist can meet the challenge. The question is not "are you going to be an extremist? The question is "what kind of extremist are you going to be."

Dr King then used her insights in the famous Letter he wrote from Birmingham Jail a few years later. "Here I stand," he said, "between the forces of complacent apathy and bitter violence", a choice that is familiar to all of you I'm sure, and the choice he made was, in his own words, "middle-of-the-road extremism, the more excellent way of love and non-violent protest."

So what does this have to do with civil society and the non-profit sector, or with the future of volunteering, or with the hard realities of politics as they are practiced in *our* day and age? Over the next 30 minutes I hope to show you that King's teachings provide the key that unlocks the civil society puzzle – the puzzle of how voluntary action in a diverse and sometimes divided society can help to achieve a sense of common purpose. King shows us how *certain kinds* of voluntary action - deeply engaged in politics in the broadest sense and motivated by the call of universal values - can unite the forms, norms and practices of civil society to great effect in the contemporary world.

When they hear the words "civil society" most people automatically think of the third sector or the non-profit sector, and there's nothing wrong with that – volunteers and voluntary organizations are the most visible and obvious manifestations of civil society and they play an incredibly important role here in Northern Ireland and everywhere else they allowed to express themselves, not just through service-delivery but through advocacy, community organizing and the promotion of new ideas and social innovations.

But as we now know from research and experience, the secret to success does not lie in the number of volunteers or the size of the third sector as such, or the amount of non-profit services delivered or the number of jobs created in social enterprises. If those things were accurate indicators of societal success then the United States would be right at the top of the national rankings, and not the country with the highest rates of income inequality, incarceration and violent deaths in the industrialized world, some of the lowest standards of health, wellbeing and life expectancy, and conditions near to gridlock in the political system.

Many of us would like to believe that voluntary associations carry with them the DNA of a better world – they are microclimates, if you will, for developing values like tolerance and cooperation, and the skills required for living a democratic life. The truth is that here in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the third sector is home to all sorts of different and competing values and beliefs, and the norms and loyalties we want to develop are fostered in all the places where we learn and grow, and where our dispositions are shaped, which means in families and schools, workplaces, colleges, and universities, political institutions and the media, and not just in voluntary associations. So to understand the real significance of civil society we have to turn to two other traditions of thinking.

The first is civil society as the '*good society'*, the definition that originated way back with Aristotle, who saw it as a *kind* of society, not a *part* of society, identified with ideals like political equality and peaceful coexistence that required resolution by and between many different institutions. In this sense civil society is a shorthand for the kind of society we want to live in, for a way of living and being in the world driven forward by motivations that are distinct from the incentives of the marketplace and the coercive power of government, as the "beloved community" in the words of Martin Luther King.

The second tradition is civil society as the *'public sphere'* – which simply means all those places where citizens argue with one-another about the issues that concern them and negotiate a constantly-evolving sense of the 'common interest'; the home to new forms of democracy based around greater citizen participation and deliberation; and the place (somewhat Utopian some might say) where power resides not in the officials who issue commands but in the citizens who follow them, unless and until they cede authority to their elected representatives. In this sense, civil society – as a set of capacities, and politics – as a set of processes – become united in the public sphere.

The concept of a 'public' – a whole polity that cares about the common good and has some capacity to deliberate about it democratically – is central to civil society thinking. The development of shared interests, a willingness to cede some territory to others, the ability to see something of oneself in those who are different and work together more effectively as a result – all these are crucial attributes for effective governance and the peaceful resolution of our differences.

When all politics are polarized, public policy problems become embedded, even frozen, in polities that cannot solve them. The alternative is to encourage the simultaneous

preservation of aspects of our *existing* identities we see as positive and the pursuit of a new, *cross-cutting* sense of public belonging. That's the only way for societies to move forward in peace and pluralism, the two conditions required for successful problem-solving and authentic democratic politics, built around a shared, long-term vision of the future. In this sense, civil society becomes the place where we can "meet as strangers and not draw the knife" as the writer John Keane puts it, the place where we recite each-other's poetry, vote for those who do not look the same as us, and celebrate – rather than fear – difference and diversity, the hopeful image of Northern Ireland in the future and not of Sri Lanka or Jerusalem today.

So taken together, civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for – the good society, a means to achieve it – through voluntary action, and a framework for engaging with each-other about ends and means in the public sphere, since we will never agree on all the details of the good society, still less how to get there. To take a small but significant example, should "peace walls" be taken down and forgotten or left standing and celebrated?

We need all three of these understandings, and we need to know how they fit together in each particular context. How does a strong civil society produce a society that is strong and civil? The answer to that question that emerges from many different historical and geographical experiences lies in a *certain kind* of voluntary action that is politically-engaged in the broadest sense, and motivated by universal values of love, compassion, co-operation, solidarity and sharing.

We usually think of these things – especially love and politics – as diametrically opposed – you can have one or the other but never both - but it was King's great achievement to unite them in one reflexive process which he called "the love that does justice." In this process, personal transformation and social transformation reinforce each-other: we have to develop both the personal qualities that are required to practice politics in new ways, and the political institutions that can reward and nurture the qualities and values we see as most important for a successful, collective future. By doing this, we can liberate ourselves from the constraints of our narrow identities, from the practice of politics as business as usual, from the use of democracy to impose majority views, and from the social Darwinism that aims to impose market competition on public life and the not-for-profit sector. Instead, our life's mission, King said, is to 'translate love into justice structures', to find ways, in other words, to infuse the material world with a different rationality that opens the way to genuinely boundary-breaking solutions.

It may seem strange to think of love as the basis for any activity outside the family, but of King wasn't talking about romantic love or love of and for our children. He was talking about unconditional or unlimited love that knows no boundaries of kin or affiliation, expressed through non-violent action, interdependence, equality and human rights for all. Like Gandhi and others before him, King saw love as the only force capable of achieving and sustaining large-scale social progress without internalizing the fear and insecurity that underpins oppression in all its forms, and so starting the self-defeating cycle afresh.

He saw that this could become the source of a radically different form of politics that does not try to bury or distance its opponents but looks for opportunities to welcome and engage with those who have a different view, and to struggle with them towards some form of imperfect, continually-evolving consensus. And this is exactly what characterizes the few successful episodes of liberating politics the world has witnessed over the last forty years – from the civil rights movement in the United States, to the negotiations which led to the end of apartheid in South Africa, to the peace process that is ongoing here in Northern Ireland. "On March 11th 2009" wrote Robin Wilson recently on the website openDemocracy, "large crowds in Belfast and other cities across the region attended lunchtime rallies organized by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. There was the universal language of human solidarity and principled hostility to all violence. And that, in the end, will prevail," just as it is prevailing in Lochview, Ballinderry and other , though not all, communities, here and abroad.

This is what is happening now in the United States, inspired not only by a very different President, Barack Obama, but by a new generation of activists and non-profit groups who know that they can 'win with love' as they put it, without sacrificing any of their goals or principles, a love that seeks not to accumulate power, even in the face of oppression, but to transform it so that 'victory' means more than a game of revolving chairs among narrow civic and political interests. The decision to grow into a new shared identity, even as we keep hold of elements of who we already are, is always an act of deep personal courage, and therefore of love for the world. The strength to stay the course when the going gets tough, when the inevitable backsliding begins, when the forces ranged against you seem overwhelming – this also comes from love.

The radical equality-consciousness that breaks down all distance and hierarchy is rooted in love, a love that respects the necessary self-empowerment of others, eschewing paternalism and romanticism for relationships of truth and authenticity, even where they move through phases of conflict and disagreement, as all do. This is a love that encourages us to live up to our social obligations as well our individual moral values, connect our interior life worlds to public spaces, encourage collective judgments and create open networks of self-reflective and critical communication.

Love releases us from fear and insecurity, and our diminished sense of self. Love gives us optimism and hope, an expansion rather than contraction of our critical faculties, openness instead of closure, because – as Paul Tillich reminds us – the first duty of love is simply to listen. We may never share a common vision of ends and means in politics and the public sphere, but we can all be committed to a process that allows everyone to share in defining how these differences are reconciled. Can love really be the wellspring of new forms of civic and political engagement that can eventually create a new public sense of self, an opening into a different collective future?

We don't know the answer to that question, but we can turn the question around and ask whether the new experiments in civic politics that are *already* in operation around the world provide a healthier alternative to the status-quo. Do they nurture and encourage the "habits of the heart" as Robert Bellah described them in his studies of civil society in

America? Do they produce a fairer political consensus and lead to better outcomes for minorities and majorities over time? Can we organize the civic and political worlds so that people can be true to their deepest beliefs while living in peace with others?

The first part of the answer to these questions lies through new forms of politics that allow everyone to participate in debate and decision-making in a meaningful way, without confusing "voice with vote" – in other words, without trying to *replace* the functions of representative democracy with an even messier civic equivalent in which voluntary groups join the formal competition for political power.

These new forms of politics have blossomed across the world during the last ten years. They include deliberative opinion polls and public dialogues around contentious issues, new accountability mechanisms like municipal scorecards and public hotlines for complaints, experiments with devolution which have sprung up everywhere from Scotland to Indonesia, and 'participatory budgeting' - one of the first innovations that has been imported *from* the developing world (in this case Brazil) - *to* the industrialized world, including the UK and the USA, where 31 out of 50 states covering 70 per cent of the US population now permit citizens at least some say in local government budgeting and budget accountability processes. Not surprisingly, this has resulted in increased allocations to health, education and social security, thereby delivering genuine improvements in people's lives, thereby encouraging them to become more active citizens, since only from security are people willing to reach out and make new connections with others. Lacking that security, disenchantment with devolution quickly sets in, at least in the years immediately following a political settlement.

The second part of the answer lies in finding better ways to strengthen the links between civil society and political life in non-partisan ways, since experience shows that it is those non-profits with the broadest and deepest networks and connections to institutional political actors like parties and parliaments that are most able to engage new institutions for citizen participation and thus create new public sensibilities. In India this goal is being pursued through what's called 'non-party politics' at the local level, in which candidates are nominated by social movements and NGO coalitions and not by the established political parties, in South Africa by coalitions like the Treatment Action Campaign which play some of the functions of the Opposition against the background of one-party rule by the ANC, and in Brazil and the Philippines by electing civic leaders directly into office.

Here in Northern Ireland I know there are discussions about a "platform for change" in order to "underpin a pre-electoral platform for new governing coalitions," an idea that has already been tried with some success in Poland, Chile and Indonesia through civic forums. I know this idea is controversial, but these forums do not compete in representative politics, they complement the formal system and help to address its inevitable failings, and that's a crucial point in assuaging the fears that face many elected officials when confronted by the of diffusion of power through civil society that takes place under these new forms of democracy.

Third, we need to understand and adapt to the structural changes that are taking place in civil society itself as a result of professionalization, marketization, and shifts in funding, especially at a time of financial crisis, since these changes may weaken the links I've described between voluntary action and principled, public politics. I'm thinking of the widening gaps that are appearing in many societies between non-profit intermediaries and those on whose behalf they claim to act, the weakening of broad-based alliances and coalitions as non-profits are forced to compete with each-other instead of to co-operate, and restrictions on more radical forms of civic action by governments under the banner of national security.

The structures of civic life and the public sphere can themselves become fragmented along religious or ethnic lines, but this is not an argument against strongly-bonded voluntary organizations. Civil society needs strong bonds in order to offer solace, security and protection to weaker or smaller communities, and to provide a firm foundation on which bridges *across* those interests and identities can be built. As I've said before, we don't have to give up who we are in order to become part of a larger, public project; we simply have to meld different elements of our shifting identities together in new ways through a variety – through an ecosystem – of different kinds of voluntary organization and relationships.

Finally, we should not confuse civility with politeness. Originally civility defined the qualities of the good citizen, and those qualities included argument, opposition and protest as well as the openness and flexibility required to reach consensus – the balance of 'straight back and soft front' that loving politics requires, in a phrase increasingly in use in America. Nor should we allow compacts between the voluntary sector and government to erode the independence, diversity and sheer bloody-mindedness of volunteers and voluntary organizations, even though compacts are clearly the best way to handle relations between the two. Politicians (present company accepted) tend to love civil society only until it disagrees with them, but we all benefit from a strong and independent voluntary sector, and a free and vibrant public sphere.

The model we should aim for is what the Brazilian activists call "critical friendship", the loving but forceful encounters between equals who journey together towards the land of the true and the beautiful. Difference, let's remember, is the natural condition of all healthy societies. How we deal with difference is the crucial issue, and I think the kind of civic politics I've described in brief represent one good way forward.

Martin Luther King lived and died for his belief that the synthesis of love and justice, social and personal rebirth, civil society and politics would deliver "the beloved community" of which he dreamed, knit together by compassionate understanding, heartfelt communication, and bonds of human intimacy. But he also knew that creative non-violent action might not prove to be the dominant instrument of social change in the future. Writing in the aftermath of September 11th 2001, Stewart Burns reached the following conclusion in his book about the Civil Rights movement, "To the Mountaintop": "will we inherit a future brokered by self-righteous terrorists, official or

unofficial, and many masses of disempowered consumers alienated from the word and their own souls, terrified to their bones? We who claim the legacy of Martin Luther King must cling to the raft of nonviolence, in word and deed, in passion and compassion, as determinedly as he did during the last years of his life."

That is what it means to be an active citizen. That is what it means to volunteer your efforts for something larger and greater than your own immediate interests and identity. That is what it means to build a true, lasting and authentic civil society. That is what it means to create extremists who fight for the common good through the fusion of love and justice, civic and political action, the old and the new.

Thank you for listening. I wish you the very best of luck in every aspect of your work.

Michael Edwards
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