

## L20: PETER KEARNEY INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: Peter Kearney [pseudonym]
Interviewer: Dr Fearghus Roulston
Interview summarisers: Dr Hilary White and Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded as a single audio file with no section breaks

L20: Peter Kearney	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 02:09:51	Duration: 02:09:51	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Born in Belfast in 1955 into a Catholic family. One of six children, he has ‘very fond memories’ of his early life in the Markets area of the city. The family moved to a ‘mixed area’ on the Lisburn Road when he was five, at which age he was already conscious of religious and denominational differences. His mother was a waitress and his father edited a trade magazine. Both were ‘observant Catholics’, but not ‘particularly pious’. Nor were they particularly political; says his father was a Labour supporter and that ‘it certainly wasn’t a republican household’. He attended a Christian Brothers’ primary school, which had ‘a fairly rigid regime’.			
10:00–19:59	Despite this regime, he enjoyed school and says the teachers were good. It helped that he was ‘top of the class’ and therefore ‘a sort of golden boy’. Passed the eleven-plus and went to St Mary’s, a Christian Brothers’ grammar school, in 1966. By the time the Troubles started he was already interested in politics and had his nationalism ‘kind of inculcated’ by the Brothers. He was also interested in trade unionism and socialism, to the extent that being ‘on the left meant more to me than being a nationalist’, as he explains.			
20:00–29:59	Became a supporter of the NI Labour Party and canvassed for it in the 1970 general election, at which point Labour was fully supportive of civil rights and political reforms in NI. While ‘the Provisionals were becoming a force’ at this time, they were still ‘a sort of community-based organisation’. Explains that because his family ‘never went anywhere’, his experience of the Troubles was very localised, confined to the majority Protestant area in which he lived, where there weren’t ‘any real problems’. Recalls his mother taking him to watch the local Orange parade in July: ‘we could actually wave at neighbours that we knew who were marching in their sort of regalia and bowler hats’. He retains an abiding ‘fondness for marching bands’. Says there was ‘no tension about what was going on in the background, people avoided the subject rather than mentioned it’. The same applied to his friendship with a Protestant boy, with whom he ‘never really talked about’ the escalating conflict.			
30:00–39:59	At school, however, questions about ‘what was going on’ and ‘who was responsible’ were openly discussed. Says he rarely saw British soldiers in south Belfast and they never came into the school, nor did the RUC. Attended some People’s Democracy demonstrations, which he found ‘exciting’, but the fact that it was ‘a student phenomenon’ robbed it of ‘strength and depth’. Canvassing with Labour, he met trade unionists for the first time, people from ‘both traditions’, who were ‘deeply affected’ by the growing sectarianism. Explains that he moved to St Malachy’s College to do his A-levels in 1971.			
40:00–49:59	He enjoyed the new school, but ‘it was a strange couple of years’, with Bloody Sunday and ‘various acts of civil disobedience’. He was one of four elected sixth formers who met with NI ministers, two of whom abruptly exited when one student asked ‘why his father’s shop had been burned down while the B-Specials [...] looked on’. On another occasion the brother of one of his friends was shot			

	<p>dead by the UDF on his way to school, the family having been targeted because their father was 'a high profile Catholic'. Such episodes convinced Peter that 'sectarianism was gaining the upper hand' and that his future in NI was bleak. This, coupled with a desire to broaden his horizons, led him to apply to universities 'anywhere in England, Scotland, but not Queen's'.</p>
50:00–59:59	<p>Went to Warwick University and lived in Coventry, where he became 'very involved in trade union matters' through the local Labour Party. Voices his admiration for the enduring English tradition of fighting for workers' rights and social justice, as exemplified by some 'municipal socialists' who had 'a big effect' on him. Became involved in the National Organisation of Labour students, but soon tired of the factionalism and 'all the berating each other at conferences'.</p>
01:00:00–01:09:59	<p>Explains that he became 'slightly notorious' among student activists for refusing to support the armed struggle in NI. Recalls passions running 'very high' in England after the IRA launched its bombing campaign in England in 1973. Says the only time he experienced 'direct anti-Irish feeling' was after the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974, when he was refused entry to venues in Coventry because of his accent. Discusses the widespread ignorance among English people of their state's involvement in Ireland and the sense of cultural superiority that often accompanies such ignorance. Explains that he still visited NI while at university, but made fewer visits as the years progressed. Mentions that many of his friends also left NI, but all of his siblings stayed, apart from one brother.</p>
01:10:00–01:19:59	<p>After graduating, he worked in Coventry for a while, then spent a 'gap year' travelling in Europe. His ambition was to find a job in journalism, but there was nothing in the midlands, so he moved to London, where a friend from Belfast lived. Within weeks Peter found a job as a junior reporter on the <i>Uxbridge Gazette</i>, which he 'really enjoyed'. During the national strike in 1978 he became 'heavily involved' in the National Union of Journalists. In 1983 he joined the Greater London Council, having become friends with the GLC member for his area, Labour's John McDonnell, who offered him a job with the press office.</p>
01:20:00–01:29:59	<p>Explains that at this time the GLC was well funded and developing initiatives to counter racism, sexism and homophobia, so it was a 'wonderful' time to be there. Discusses the different shades of political opinion about the NI conflict in the GLC and its support for Irish cultural initiatives in London. Claims that the GLC had policies that at the time were deemed 'completely radical or ridiculous', even by the Labour Party, but which 'are now commonplace and accepted, and they get no credit for it'. During this period he became more conscious of his NI identity, which led him to socialise in Irish pubs and develop an interest in Irish music and in 'cultural issues attendant to [...] Irish life in London'.</p>
01:30:00–01:39:59	<p>Discusses his unease at the partitionist, 'county-based' culture of the Irish community in London. Saw that Northerners 'were not in the mix' and that NI wasn't spoken about in the same cultural terms as the ROI, which he found 'disrespectful'. Became friendly with two NI people from Protestant unionist backgrounds and found he had much in common with them: 'we saw ourselves as Northern Irish first, before Irish or British'. Speaks of his growing interest in the specificities of 'what it's like to be Northern Irish' in ROI and in GB. After the GLC was abolished, he worked for local Labour councils in London, but tired of that and moved to Barcelona, where he worked as a freelance journalist. Moved back to London, got married, had two children, worked as a local councillor and then moved to York, where his wife got a job running a charity.</p>
01:40:00–01:49:59	<p>Mentions the York Irish Society and its progressive cultural outlook, exemplified by its willingness to see NI culture as encompassing 'more than just the Troubles'.</p>

	<p>Recalls his local pub landlord refusing to serve him the day after the IRA mortar attack on Downing Street in 1991. Says he followed the peace process 'avidly on TV' and was convinced that the talks would fail, only to be 'completely overjoyed' when they resulted in a historic peace accord. States that NI 'is still home' for him at a deep level, in a way that is different from 'home' meaning the 'house where your family are', which is currently in York, but which can change over time.</p>
01:50:00–01:59:59	<p>Reveals he had 'a kind of midlife crisis' that led him to enrol in a creative writing course at the University of Limerick with the intention of writing a novel. Recalls taking a course on migration there and saying that, as a NI person in England, his move will not be officially recorded as migration, even though 'it is migration' in his view. Thinks 'a united Ireland is in prospect', but bemoans people's inability to appreciate the nuances of cultural difference between the ROI and NI. Reflects that a century of partition has created 'cultural divides, not just political ones', with different media services, sports affiliations and so on. Says that moving to England has given him an appreciation of 'a different kind of England than the one that might present itself to people who've [...] not lived here'.</p>
02:00:00–02:09:51	<p>The English people he values are those who are tolerant and broadminded, not 'British imperialists'. Believes that he would not have had this awareness had he stayed in Belfast. Expresses embarrassment about 'what's happened in England because of Brexit, which is an absolute disaster', and concedes that the country feels far from 'tolerant' or 'liberal' right now. States that, having lived away from NI for so long, he feels that he no longer has the right to opine on its politics, though he continues to follow developments closely.</p>