EPISODE 91

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with people who have made decisions about using themselves to lead, or teach leadership as the case will be today, in difficult times and in difficult situations. Regular listeners are going to know my guest. It's Joanne Murphy. Joanne, you are the first three-time member of the Swamp. You're starting to get a little mucky here, but we're dang glad to have you.

Joanne is a professor of Inclusive Leadership at Birmingham Business School and a lot of other things related to leadership, and I'm going to kick that around in particular some issues in Northern Ireland. But before we get into all that, Joanne, I want to welcome you back to the podcast and the Swamp. It's great to have you.

[0:01:02] JM: Hey, Rick. I am just delighted to be here. I had actually forgotten that it was three times. I had forgotten the second time, but that was amazing, obviously. Hopefully, I'm going to be seeing Professor Keith Grint soon again. So, if anybody didn't listen to that episode, Keith is definitely worthwhile listening to you. I don't know about me, but definitely him. It is brilliant to be back and chat to you again.

[0:01:26] RT: Okay. You come to me with a gift. I'm going to say this straight up, a gift of a book that is about policing in Northern Ireland. We're going to get into that. But my first question is, what provoked the book? This is a serious book. It's got some length to it. What provoked it that caused you to spend this much time and energy and write it this well to get it into the world?

© 2026 10,000 Swamp Leaders

[0:01:50] JM: Oh, well, thank you so much for that and it's a great question. I mean, this is an area that I've been working on for a long time, and I suppose that's interesting in itself, because as and anyone that knows me knows I'm not a criminologist. It's not really my central focus. My interest and my focus is organizational development, organizational dynamics and of course, in an overarching sense, leadership more generally.

Whenever I was doing my PhD in Trinity College Dublin, it happened to coincide with this incredibly significant international process, which was about building peace in Northern Ireland. One of the central organizational processes at the heart of that building peace endeavor was the transformation and reform of policing and justice. Only because I was really interested in organizational change in leadership did I do my PhD on that central process of change and transformation around policing. But I'm not someone who is centrally focused on policing. It was just that it was a really brilliant case study of change, and what it also represented and I think this is of increasing interest to us within the organizational space, or the leadership space was a concern for change, which occurs, and I suppose now what we call, it wasn't really invented then as a term, but now what we know as extreme context, or extreme environments, because and I'm sure we'll get into this, the process of change within policing in Northern Ireland really could not have occurred in an environment which was more difficult, or at times distressing for those involved in it and leading it, but it was also absolutely central to building peace.

Without the policing change, you wouldn't have had a successful peace process. That's what got me interested in it, even though ironically, the criminological elements of it which is so fascinating for other people isn't my focus.

[0:03:54] RT: Okay.

[0:03:55] JM: I should say, this piece of work really was developed and designed, because we are now 25 years into that period of change. That gives people some indication of how old I am in terms of looking at this, because it's a real giveaway. As I have been looking at this process at various stages in various ways over that 25-year period, and that seemed to be a really, really good idea to do a central piece of work, which built some an assessment of where we are with that change process now.

© 2026 10,000 Swamp Leaders

[0:04:29] RT: I'm glad you say this upfront, because that makes a lot of sense to me in terms of a way for people who are in a somewhat similar position that you are, or these police officers, let's make it more to the point, but the transitions in, what you're pointing to is a lot of these transitions take a lot longer than what people think they do. I think it's useful that you're coming at it with that longitudinal length of time that adds that robustness to the data that you've got. And I would say, equally important the specific insights that you learned about what had to happen in some of the things that didn't work out and how they had to adapt in order to pull it off over that length of time, so that's what we'll get into.

Would you also just let people know a little bit about you as a Northern Ireland person? Because you lived in this world as a human being before you're an academic doing research. What was it like to live in Northern Ireland during that period of time?

[0:05:25] JM: Yeah. Well, I mean, this is a great question. I suppose it comes up for anyone who lived through the kind of Northern Ireland that I was born into, that I lived in. I was born in what was defined 1972 and what was defined as the worst year of the troubles. That was the year where there were more killings, more bombings, more disruption, more devastation than really in any year before or since. For anybody that grew up in that environment, I think the overarching memory is simply the brutality of it, that death was an everyday occurrence. People saw it on the news. It happened up the road.

I was lucky and that I didn't particularly live in an environment that was very badly affected, but I went to school somewhere that was. I would travel in and out of a time that really suffered and where a lot of people really suffered. It was a rural community as well, and that I think was quite a different experience to people who grew up in Belfast and Derry. But these things absolutely and categorically define who you are. I mean, it's what's made me interested in extreme context definitely. I'm sure that that's the case. I know of other academics who do work on dark leadership who come from Northern Ireland.

I know a lot of people who's interested in these very difficult environments is sparked, because they have personal experience with them. But I think the thing that most carefully categorizes it for me is the fact that when you're in an environment where people are being killed, the killing doesn't end with the killing. It goes on and on and on three generations. I mean, I'm just going to

© 2026 10,000 Swamp Leaders

mention this, because it just struck me in the past few days. A few days ago, there was the death of a wonderful, wonderful man called John Kelly. John Kelly was a campaigner for Truth and Justice for his brother, Michael Kelly, all his life. His brother died, I suppose, 55 years ago now in Bloody Sunday in Derry. John Kelly just died himself a few days ago. I remember meeting John Kelly. It was just such an extraordinary important thing.

He spent his whole life trying to get truth and justice for his brother. He was only 17, I think, when he was shot dead. I suppose for me, I think one of the things about the experience of Northern Ireland is that you realize that war produces and reproduces itself over time. Conflict does that. If we're ever going to get past that conflict, then peace has to produce and reproduce itself again and again over time as well.

For me, trying to understand the placing story and the placing narrative is about seeing how the good parts, the positive parts, the peace building parts can be successfully produced and reproduced in an organizational sense. I suppose the other big thing, the other big interest of mine in terms of my background is that I really, I think, appreciate and understand the role of organizations in conflict environments. Because organizing doesn't stop. Organizing just continues through.

Whether it's about the delivery of public services, or whether it's companies trying to continue to produce their products, or shops still opening to sell people goods, and people have to lead and manage in those environments, that keeps going. I think it takes enormous courage and resilience and sustainability in order to be able to do that. That's another big interest of mine. Those categories my research now. I mean, that's what my research does. It looks at those environments and it looks at how people lead and manage through them.

[0:09:12] RT: Joanne, for the listeners, I'll say you and I've known each other for a little while and I've read a lot of what you've written. One of the things I want to say to listeners is your capacity to keep the humanity in the writing of stuff that is generally speaking, by most people, rather dry is a real asset to consuming and understanding and learning and growing. That's just a talent that you've got. It's a gift to the reader, because it becomes accessible, I think, both cognitively and emotionally. That's a potent dynamic to be able to link together.

© 2026 10,000 Swamp Leaders

I want you to give us – you've used this phrase twice, extreme context. We talked about it before we started recording. But I think it's important to give listeners who may not have an understanding of the specificity of that phrase, because I think it's useful for what's to follow in our conversation. What do you mean when you say extreme context?

[0:10:01] JM: Yes. Extreme context is an environment where, and there's been – I won't get into the act. There's some clear academic definitions of it, but it's setting those aside for a minute. An extreme context is an environment where there is a level of risk to the people within that environment. Sometimes that risk is immediate. Sometimes it comes and goes. Sometimes it's continuous. Then sometimes, it's actually at quite a distance, but it's looming over them. If you think about one of the reasons why we talk about police organizations being an extreme context is because the risk is constantly there, but it ebbs and flows depending on what those people are doing at that time.

The other thing is it doesn't – it is difficult to quantify in that when a police officer goes to an incident, they are never really for certain able to identify what level of risk they are at at that point. For them, there is massive levels of uncertainty within that environment and not in itself ratchets up the extremity of the context in which they are operating. I don't know if that helps.

[0:11:06] RT: Yeah. There's a high degree of unpredictability in that work. I'm struck, as you said, that these people not just in Northern Ireland, but everywhere in the world show up every day and put themselves in that place. I don't think we sometimes have a good grip with that being an everyday occurrence for these people.

All right, so let's talk a little bit about the actors in this process, because it's the police, it's the acting group, but there's an evolution from one culture and naming of the group to another naming. We're going to talk about that if things going to come up the conversation. Would you set a orientation point about the group before and the group after? Then we can jump from there.

[0:11:44] JM: Yeah, absolutely. At a very basic level, during the Northern Ireland conflict what was generally known as the Troubles, and that's a period which we generally identify going from about 1969. Again, there's no real agreements on dates in terms of when it starts and when it

finishes. But roughly 1969 to the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 1998 which is generally seen as the end point of the conflict. During that period of time, the police organization in Northern Ireland was known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary. That was an organization that itself had evolved over a long period of time. Before partition in Ireland, it would have been part of the Royal Irish Constabulary. Then after partition, it became the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

That was an organization which from the foundation of the Northern Ireland state in 1920-1921 would have been very much largely Protestant in makeup. For anyone who doesn't know about Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland is what we would traditionally call a divided society. It is a part of the United Kingdom which was created from the partition of Ireland in order to create a dominant Protestant majority group, with a Catholic minority group. That at the beginning of Northern Ireland, that would have been around 70-30. Those numbers are now very close to being 50-50, so that has shifted and changed over time. I'm this is a lot of shorthand here just to get through –

[0:13:27] RT: That's fine.

[0:13:29] JM: - a hundred years of history, it would be generally accepted that that dominant community exerted authority and power in a way which was unhelpful to the Catholic minority, and that were very significant issues around discrimination, particularly in relation to voting, in terms of the allocation of public services like housing, in relation to jobs and the allocation of jobs and employment.

That resulted in something which will be familiar to your American listeners what is called in the Northern Ireland, in Northern Ireland in the same way and the United States, the civil rights movement. Almost co-terminus with the American civil rights movement. So, a lot of communication really between the two, Martin Luther, King John Lewis is hugely significant figures, inspirational figures in Northern Ireland. Civil rights movements started in the 1960s. That was very significantly repressed by the government of Northern Ireland and specifically the police service, the royal Ulster constabulary at the time. That ended up, and again, I'd be careful here about causation, because it's a complicated thing, but that moved into a much more violent phase at the end of the 1960s with the establishment of the provisional IRA, or the provost who were a new organization coming out of the official IRA, which was a legacy body.

© 2026 10,000 Swamp Leaders

The provisional IRA then took it upon themselves to run a campaign against the British state. This is, I think, what's important for our conversation, one of the key agents that they saw as agents of the British state were people who were in the royal Ulster constabulary. At that point, the royal Ulster constabulary was only somewhere between 10% and 7% Catholic. You have a predominant Protestant population, which makes up by far most of that organization and a very, very small Catholic cohort within that organization.

The provisional IRA spent a lot of time targeting members of that organization, especially Catholic members, and 302 members of the royal Ulster constabulary were murdered by the provisional IRA over the period of the conflict. Obviously, in terms of the whole conflict about three and a half thousand people were killed by republican paramilitaries, like the provisional IRA, loyalist paramilitaries and of course, the British state as well.

[0:16:02] RT: Okay. As you've already said, there's a lot period of time that this is all unfolding and we don't have that amount of time. Let's bring in the change agent function, because something happened there and it created another kind of policing organization. Would you take us there? Because I think it's in this transition from one to the other, where your work starts to really show what's important to people.

[0:16:25] JM: Yeah. This is really this key point. After the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, one of the key issues in terms of the agreement was the reform of placing injustice. Now that was really difficult. In fact, it was so difficult that it wasn't actually dealt with explicitly within the agreement itself, because people didn't feel that they would be able to get agreement on it. What happened was that that was – that one of the provisions of the agreement was the establishment of an independent commission looking at a placing change. That commission was headed by somebody who's quite well known in Britain and globally, Chris Patten, who had been for any of your listeners who do any work in in Asia, would have been the last British governor of Hong Kong. Chris Patten is very well known for that and very well known for his role in placing change.

The Patten commission set itself up and it came up with a very extensive report and very extensive recommendations. I suppose, this is where the organizational story gets more difficult,

because part of those recommendations, and I think really difficult recommendations for the organization was that the RUC, the Royal Ulster Constabulary would lose its name and it would be called the Police Service of Northern Ireland. It would also lose its badge, so it would have a new badge, it would have new emblems. It would have what we would call a voluntary severance scheme.

A severance scheme where members of the constabulary who did not want to engage with the change process would be able to leave on extremely generous terms. I have to say, now this is 2001, so this is way in advance of the financial crisis. Those terms, when I say generous, I really mean generous. They would be able to leave. As part of that transition process, recruitment would begin, but recruitment would be on the basis of 50% Catholic recruitment. And remember, part of this is about bringing up numbers of Catholics. So, 50% Catholic recruitment and 50% other. Not 50% Protestant, 50% other.

Now that in itself was a huge statement, because that had to get specific agreement from the European Union, because it contravened all sorts of equality legislation in relation to employment. Those, now they were enough. There were hundreds of recommendations really in terms of this process, but those were the central ones. The reason why I mention those is because if we think about what this actually means for members of the organization, you've been in an organization maybe for a long period of time at whatever level, sometimes senior, sometimes still relatively junior ranks.

You've watched your colleagues being murdered and killed beside you, you've carried their coffins at funerals. Very often on their gravestone, at their grave is the emblem of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and sometimes the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and all that is taken away. That name no longer exists and that emblem no longer exists in relation to the organization. This was seen by very many members of the police service at that time as an absolute betrayal of what had been given as they would have said in the course of trying to protect justice and protect peace.

Of course, in terms of the peace process, there was some very active political parties on the nationalist end that would have said, policing change is absolutely central. The RUC were a

© 2026 10,000 Swamp Leaders

biased organization. They did not police without fear, or favor, and they have to go. There was a whole set of negotiations which resulted in the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

It's important to say that the RUC was not disbanded, because very frequently, people talk about the RUC being done away with. It wasn't disbanded, or done away with in any sense. It was incorporated into the new organization. That is where our interest, I suppose, sits. Because then, that means that you got to be involved in a very significant process change, and the change starts overnight. It starts overnight in November 2001. At midnight, the organization goes from being the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. At a very symbolic level, people are literally going outside police stations and taking down the old signs. That was a very, very difficult thing for that police and community.

[0:21:10] RT: Yeah. Now we walk into your findings in your book. But I have one question before we get there and that relates to Chris Patten, at least from my perspective. Obviously, well regarded as a credible authority figure for creating community, if you will, wherever he was. How did he, and whomever was with him bring the RUC people along to even get to that date in November and to begin to do these things? Because it seems to me, there's some work there that could not have been very easy. They got documents, they got papers, they got stuff, but it's a human contact. A little bit about how they pulled that off.

[0:21:49] JM: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, Chris Patten, even the appointment of Chris Patten was really interesting. I mean there were a number of people on the commission, but Patten as the head of the commission was very much this person to camera in terms of what was happening. Patten himself had been the last governor of Hong Kong. He was a grantee of the conservative party. Remember, it's the labor party that's in power at this point in the UK. It's not the conservative party. He is in the House of Lords.

I think it was a feeling that he was trusted by people on the right in Northern Ireland, that he may have some – that people within the Protestant community, within the unionist parties may trust him, because of his conservative background. Ironically, he was regarded as being a good choice in terms of the Catholic community, because he's Catholic, because he's actually Catholic. He was somebody who saw – I mean, it's a very human decision. Someone who sat between those two worlds in a way.

He was brought in and the commission itself spent a great deal of time, I think it was something like seven or eight months taking submissions, going out around Northern Ireland, having public meetings, speaking to people about the reality of what policing is, what policing could be, the challenges of placing the pain from both communities around placing, because the Protestant community, I think, where the vast majority of police people had been drawn from felt very, very nervous and very, very hurt by the changes that were coming.

The Catholic community who by and large had no confidence within the current policing arrangements, they also were very keen on a change, but were nervous that a change would be a real change, that it would be something substantial that they could actually begin to have to have some confidence in. Patten had a very significant role in creating an open and transparent process and allowing people to have their views and opinions of what placing can be in a society so properly recognized.

[0:23:59] RT: One question before we get into the lessons. Roughly how long from that moment down the road before people started to notice that this could work? There's all stuff happening, but how long?

[0:24:12] JM: Yeah, on the 4th, of November 2001, the visible thing happened. The RUC name went. The crests on police stations and on uniforms went. Now at that point, there was no crest. There was a name. There was some general agreement on a name. Interestingly, again, these are very human – I mean, this is what we know but organizational change in leadership. These are not processes which are not about human beings. They are essentially about human beings. There was some suggestion initially that the organization might be called the Northern Ireland Police Service. But strangely enough, when they shortened that to the acronym of NIPS, nobody liked it. And so, had gone down. God loved them. The prison service, the Northern Prison Service got landed with NIPS. The police decided that they were the large organization and they were going to see the name Police Service of Northern Ireland. That's how they ended up with the PSNI name.

Yet, there was this period of time between the organization existing as a new organization and these few days where people went from being members of one organization to be members of

another, and certainly in our research and I should say, that the book, which reaches out this week on this is co-authored by my brilliant colleague, Dr. Jess Bonnan-White who is a criminologist and can speak very much to the criminological elements of this process. But this kind of process, this liminal space in terms of the organization went on for months, until the graduation of the first recruits in, I think it was April of 2002. When they graduated, they were able to graduate with a new agreed badge and a new uniform. You had this liminal space, where the organization had to keep going, keep delivering services, but was between one thing and another thing in some ways.

[0:26:10] RT: There's something, too, about the totems of what we would say in North America, the totems, the icons, the physical symbols of things being part of the transition, bringing a closure, because you take them off the building, take them off the uniform, then you replace them with the new. That always strikes me as gets oftentimes short-shifted in a more normal organizational setting. Now, you can change the company logo a little bit. But not enough attention is paid to the significance that that carries in supporting the rest of the transitional process.

[0:26:41] JM: That's actually, just on that, just before we leave, that's a very important point, because one of the initial recommendations of the Patten Commission in terms of managing that change internally was not just a change in uniform and a change in badge and a change in name. It was what they called a clean walls policy. People had to take down anything in the organization that related to the old RUC. The only things that they were able to keep was their own photograph of their passing, I pray it. So, you see these passing out things, policing instead of military organizations. They were able to keep their passing out, pray it.

The only other thing and this is quite poignant in police stations was the picture of fallen comrades. All the place officers who had been killed, and there's a montage which you still see within police organizations, police stations in Northern Ireland of the police officers who have been killed in the past. Obviously, there's been a number of police officers killed since. But that clean walls policy became very controversial, because people were being asked to take down memorials from say, at mementos perhaps, from British army regiments that had visited, they were being asked to take down photographs of the royal family. You could only keep your

photograph of the royal family if you were in the photograph. If you met the queen and you had a photograph of you and the queen you could keep that up. But otherwise, it had to be gone.

There were all these what were really management, first line manager decisions, and there were lots of when I interviewed people who were in leadership positions at that time, pretty junior leadership positions, they would talk about officers coming in the day after the name change in the old shirts with RUC T-shirts underneath their new shirts, just refusing to engage people keeping caps, placing caps in their office, because it belonged to their dad, or belonged to their uncle, or they had some – There was a lot of policing, that kind of policy in terms of those clean walls. That cultural element and I will speak about that more in a minute, that was really significant from the first moment.

[0:28:54] RT: Yeah. Okay, so let's go there. In the book, by all means clean up my language here, because as I was reading through it, I was really struck by these eight lessons that came about in the process of your work and that was actually occurring in the transition from the RUC to the PSNI. Because they strike me, A, they had to be really stress tested in that environment. If they work there, they could work anywhere. But they also seem, B, always present in a transition, and C, most people and organizations don't know these.

I think, my view is you're about to give people a gift and organizations about how they can actually navigate some of this stuff as leaders and transitions. You can take as much, or as little time as you want, but give some context, I'll just read out the top line and then you can explain it to people, if you would. Okay, and I don't know Joanne, if these are in any particular order or not, but I'm just going to go in the order that the book has them. Number one is what stabilizes you can also trap you.

[0:29:51] JM: Yeah. I mean, I think that's so interesting, isn't it? I think that really was the overall lesson of this piece of work for me. Because whenever I was looking at it, at one level I was interested in the political process, so how you move an organization from one place to another place and all the complexities of that. But what I realized is that while for me the transition in terms of policing in Northern Ireland, it's still not complete. We talked with this more, the cultural change, while it is significant and while it definitely exists to a very large extent. I would say that that cultural change is incomplete. Until that cultural change can be completed, the PSNI, the

Police Service of Northern Ireland will never get the levels of Catholic recruitment that they really need.

The paradox of this and this is I think what that lesson relates to is that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is by far the most successful institutional outcome of the Northern Ireland peace process. It has been stable. It has in general developed very significant legitimacy in both communities. It's made some progress in terms of Catholic recruitment. It's not there yet, but it's getting there. It has had its problems, but it has been relatively a very signed environment, generally led by people with pretty good judgment. There's been a few difficulties, particularly recently. But in general, it has survived a maelstrom of challenge. Unlike a lot of other outcomes of the peace process.

Yet, what allowed it to do that was the stability of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The what they had to move away from and they really did have to move away from it, that also provided what we would call academically, the deep structures, the institutionalization, which protected them from the maelstrom of challenge around them at various times. That, I think, is the great irony of this.

[0:31:51] RT: Okay. Number two, don't treat a wicked problem as a crisis.

[0:31:55] JM: Yeah.

[0:31:56] RT: You may have to give some listeners the definition of a wicked problem to begin with before you get there.

[0:32:00] JM: Yeah, so this is really interesting, isn't it? We talk a lot about team and wicked problems. Team problems are problems which are problems which are difficult. They are complicated, but they're not complex. I always say to people in this, organizing the Olympics is a team problem. It's very difficult. It's going to cost you a lot of money. No doubt, you're going to be pulling your hair out at various times. But guess what? It's been done before. Not only has it been done before, it's done every four years with greater, or lesser degrees of success.

The most important thing is there's an end point. There's a point where you get to have your glass of champagne, the clothes and ceremony, hopefully, the fireworks all go off and that's it. Done. A wicked problem is a problem which is not just complicated, but which is also complex. There are very many stakeholders in that problem. Very often, those stakeholders don't even agree on the nature of the problem, never mind the solution to the problem. There's no stopping point. So, there's no glass of champagne. The problem never finishes in terms of getting to the end point of a problem. The problem is one of those problems that can only really be addressed if the people affected by the problem get involved in trying to make the problem better. You're only really shifting it to a better place. You're never fully fixing it.

Wicked problems, the obesity crisis is a wicked problem. Issues like poverty are wicked problems. People who are homeless, or unhoused are wicked problems. Those are things that we're all grappling to deal with at a societal level. Of course, for people like me, conflict, political social conflict, the ethno-political conflict is a wicked problem. The Northern Ireland process, the Police Service of Northern Ireland it sits within this context of a wicked problem. The thing and again, we mentioned Keith Brent earlier. If people are interested in this, his work is the work to look at, because he's the guy.

[0:34:00] RT: I agree.

[0:34:01] JM: He really is. I couldn't recommend his work more. But what Keith would say is, we talk about team problems, we talk about wicked problems, but there's also this crisis problem, a genuine crisis. Crises, genuine crises are time limited, they have short decision windows, and they respond really well to command in the same way that team problem responds very well to good management organized in the Olympics, and a wicked problem, you really need leadership, what we would call leadership, that key distinction of leadership that goes beyond management, or command.

The problem is people very often want to interpret a problem that requires difficult leadership, hard leadership. It's hard to do with just command, which is easy. Easy to command something, isn't it? If you're the leader, just to say, “Make it so.” But that doesn't fix the wicked problem. That I think is one of the key lessons of this. Sometimes you have to engage in the difficult, horrible,

very confusing, unsatisfactory nature of leadership, where sometimes you're asking questions, not given answers, rather than just taking a command position.

[0:35:14] RT: Yeah. I would toss into your explanation there too, that one of the useful reflections at this point is what's my own contribution to the thing I'm trying to solve? Because I probably –

[0:35:24] JM: Yes. Absolutely.

[0:35:25] RT: I am probably a contributor to the mess and –

[0:35:26] JM: Part of the problem.

[0:35:27] RT: If I can't yeah face that myself, I can't expect the others to face their parts either. Okay, number three, change comes in – I love this phrase. Change comes in punctuated phases and it can go backwards. When I first read that I thought, what is she talking about? Then I read it and I started to understand it, but it's really good.

[0:35:45] JM: Yeah. Well, the thing is, change isn't necessarily something which is always positive. It's not something which necessarily follows along a trajectory. It's not water flowing downhill. It's something which is much more – which ebbs and flows much more. One of the things that was pretty obvious looking at this big, big process change, and it should be said that the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland security sector reform process, something which is now used as a template all over the world in terms of security sector reform and change. I know they use that in the US Naval Academy. I know it's been used in lots and lots and lots of other troubled contacts as well. It's something which is of real interest to people. But we do not see continuous change in it. We see periods where there is very significant episodic shift. We see this initial period, where you have the big structural processes, where you have real attempts at cultural change.

Then we see long periods of stasis, where actually, the cultural change in particular slipped backwards, because it's not getting enough attention. Again, it's that idea of leadership and a wicked problem. It has to be continually attended to. You can't take your eye off it. You have to

be focused on it. Now we know that about developing productive and respectful cultures within organizations, but the same thing within the PSNI case is about managing a change process in the way that it requires to be managed. That is continuously and not letting it slip.

[0:37:19] RT: Given that in the transition of the police culture, how did they develop enough people to understand these dynamics that you're identifying here, so they could tend to them as the process wasn't folding? Because my assumption is they didn't necessarily have those requisite skills, because they'd never gone through a transition of this magnitude. How did they teach them up, coach them up to have enough understanding to see it, diagnose it, and then figure out a move to make.

[0:37:48] JM: That is a really, really good question. There's multiple things that were done. The first thing is, I mean, this process internally in the organization didn't happen on its own. There was very significant external involvement. There were brilliant mediators who worked with them. There were people who were going in and working with the organization pre-transition to say, “These are the difficulties, this is where you really need to think about reform, this is where the change needs to happen, this is how you are perceived by elements of the external environment.” These external stakeholders a few times took very significant risks to work with the role of the constabler as it was then.

The other thing you had, I think in fairness to them in the early days, you had leadership which understood what needed to happen. They didn't necessarily like it. There is an argument that can be made that they did as much as they could to preserve the old organization, but they understood that it was required. At that time, the chief constable, the first chief constable was a guy who'd been in the RUC all his career called Ronnie Flanagan. Ronnie Flanagan, Sir Ronnie Flanagan as he is now, really consummate leader. He had carried the coffins. He absolutely understood what had happened in the past. But he was also prepared to put himself out there. He was prepared to lead from the front.

I know when I was interviewing people around the time of the transition originally, people would say, “Well, we didn't like it. But if Ronnie was prepared to do it, we were prepared to do it.” We don't like to talk about specific individuals. Undoubtedly, individuals matter and his leadership in such a command and control environment was very, very important. The other thing is and it

relates to the command and control elements that exist within placing organizations generally, is police officers generally do as they're told. If you give a police officer an order to do something, they generally do it. Not all organizations are like that, unfortunately some people would say.

It's a big thing for a police officer to disobey an order. That is one element of those organizations that I think we don't quite – If we're not part of them, we don't quite understand the way we should. The other thing which is really interesting is that the thing that always strikes me about policing organizations and I've worked with a few now is that they are very entrepreneurial. They'll generally try to find a way to do things. If you think about detectives and those type of skills, they're generally trying to think outside the box. That creates environments, where you actually have a lot of innovation and creativity unexpectedly sometimes.

[0:40:37] RT: Yeah. Okay, let's take a couple more of these. The past is a live organizational force.

[0:40:42] JM: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. The past, I can't remember who said it, but the past isn't gone, it's not even past. I mean, the past is here. It's among us. We live it. I was in New York last Christmas and we went to see Waiting for Godot, which is just absolutely fabulous. There's a line in Waiting for Godot, “All the dead voices, to be dead is not enough for them.” That's it. The dead, it's constantly there. You have these organizational ghosts. Sometimes they're people, sometimes they're things, sometimes they're the history that they're still alive in people's heads.

One of the things that was, I think, still really interesting about policing is that the past is still alive. It's alive, because the organization went through huge amounts of trauma, as well as inflicting quite a bit of trauma itself. It's alive, because those people to some extent, members of the organization have inherited that trauma, because that trauma has been, as we know, within organizations, cultures are produced and reproduced in the same way that trauma has been produced and reproduced. Stories are told. People are talked about events, are talked about.

While even now within the Police Service of Northern Ireland, you have very few people who were part of the RUC, those stories are still there. That memory, that organizational memory is

still present, to some extent, we would say that almost that memory has been prosthetically attached to the new organization in a way which is not helpful. The past never goes.

[0:42:18] RT: Goes away.

[0:42:19] JM: That is something which really has to be thought about if people are embarking in organizational change processes.

[0:42:25] RT: Yeah. It reminds me of the work of William Bridges in *Transitions*.

[0:42:29] JM: Yes, absolutely.

[0:42:30] RT: Where the transition begins with endings, rather than beginnings. How ill-equipped and unaware we are at most facets of our life to tend to the ending before we get going.

[0:42:41] JM: That's such a good point.

[0:42:42] RT: This next one is a flip of that, I think. Removing the old identity does not create a new one.

[0:42:47] JM: No.

[0:42:48] RT: There is something about being purposeful about how you're trying to manifest the new identity that you're creating in the world.

[0:42:54] JM: Absolutely. I think that is something which the organization 25 years later are only beginning to grasp now and begin to deal with now. While there was an attempt to move away from the RUC and that identity, that identity of conflict policing has never been, I don't think in a way that really made a difference, a conscious attempt to create a new identity for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, what we might call a spirit core. If you look at other organizations, if you look at policing in the New York place, for example, the NYPD, very clear organizational identity. If you look at the metropolitan place in London, very clear identity. En Garde corner, the

Irish place, I mean that identity couldn't be more fixed and attached to community and the Irish state.

Look at the PSNI, that identity building process has not really yet – certainly haven't completed. It's probably only really beginning to start now. We are talking about extended time frames. It takes maybe much longer than we actually fully appreciate in order to create a new clear identity for what that organization is.

[0:44:06] RT: Okay. So, let's end with this one. This is I think probably right in your slipstream. Context picks the leader and the context changes.

[0:44:14] JM: Yeah. I mean, again, we don't like to talk about individual leaders. But within something like policing, you do have individuals here in senior positions within the organization. At times, undoubtedly different environments call for different types of leadership. It's very interesting in organizations which are so focused on symbols. We talk a lot about the symbolic elements of leadership. For organizations that have symbols of things that are really important and significant, the type of leadership that they present is really important and significant as well. For the PSNI you can see that at various points in their history when they felt that they were in positions of difficulty, the leadership.

Again, the PSNI don't appoint chief constable. The chief constable is appointed by an external body, the police authority, or the policing board, sorry. The leadership which they have appointed tends to reflect the environment that they think they are in. We mentioned Ronnie Flanagan. By any standard, someone who would be regarded as a strong leader, someone who was a champion of the organization, someone who was a champion of what the organization had been through and what he wanted it to become. At the minute, the current chief constable came in during a period of really significant crisis, huge crisis for the organization, and I think he is modeling his behavior on that Ronnie Flanagan template, because he understands that there is a need to stabilize the ship to a very large extent, and he's probably not wrong in that.

Very interestingly at a symbolic level, in terms of the leadership, the current deputy chief constable is in a very interesting symbolic position, because he was in that very first patent cohort of trainees. He was in the first small group of officers who joined the PSNI and who

graduated into a new organization. He and his cohort should embody what the new organization means as well. It's interesting in terms of context and people.

[0:46:21] RT: Okay. I'm going to go back. You've used the phrase twice and you introduced me to this phrase, liminal space. But I think it's valuable to bring this into the conversation, because it's actually a resource that people who are leading groups through transitions could benefit from, but most people don't understand it. Would you describe it, where it comes from, what it means and how to use it a little bit?

[0:46:44] JM: Yeah. I mean, I'm a big fan of this idea of liminality and liminal space and these liminal gaps. Liminality is a big feature in any research around anthropology, or anthropological ideas. All of us understand liminality, because the liminal space is the space where something is changing. It's the process of transition. For example, if you're getting married, so if you think about the marriage ceremony itself, that's a liminal space. Before it, you're not married. After it, you're married.

[0:47:16] RT: My daughter just got engaged two weeks ago.

[0:47:18] JM: There you go. There you go. She's in this. It's not so interesting, so she's in this liminal space at the minute, where she's not married yet, but she's no longer not attached. It's very interesting. Human beings are actually drawn to this process of liminality. You think about these transitional things that we create for ourselves and for our families and for our environments. Why is being 18 a big thing? Why did being 18 somehow become a huge thing personally in your family, societally? Why does it unlock things? Why does being 21 have any real significance, rather than 22, or 19? Why do we create these thresholds, these threshold moments?

The problem with liminal space is that liminal space is also characterized sometimes by chaos, by a lot of dynamics which can be uncomfortable and uncertain for people. What you need, and there's been a lot of work on leadership development. Gareth Edwards and some of his colleagues have done some brilliant work on this, the idea that leadership development is itself a liminal space. If you're moving people through liminal space, you need a guide to get you through that space, which is very often the facilitator and a process of leadership development.

There's another being in that space as well. That being sometimes is the trickster, and the trickster likes the chaos, likes the confusion of liminality. You need a guide to move you through and you need to be aware of the trickster. Within change processes, we see sometimes guides and we see really good leadership as a guide, but we also see these dynamics that trick people and confuse people and create and sometimes trap them within that space as well. I think that's a really interesting way to think about change, because you got to at some point, exit that liminal space, because that's a tough place to be.

[0:49:21] RT: Yeah. When you're describing the trickster, immediately popped to mind was Yoda in Star Wars.

[0:49:26] JM: Yeah. This is it. This is what we do as human beings, we create. At some point, we understand this at the subliminal level. We create these characters as well. Yeah, it's fascinating.

[0:49:37] RT: All right. So, we're coming to the end here, much to my regret. What's the work left to be done in this dynamic that's going on in Northern Ireland?

[0:49:47] JM: Yeah. I mean, this is really the big question. I mean, you've touched upon a lot of this already. There's still not a clear, cohesive identity for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and that is undoubtedly an unfinished piece of work. There is still not the type of legitimacy that you would expect to result in significant Catholic recruitment. Catholic recruitment was at a high in the first few years, 23, 24 years ago, but that has dropped off slowly, slowly, but significantly at this point. That is a real issue, because part of this process was about creating a police service which was equally representative of both communities.

The big challenge here, and this is where it goes beyond an organizational process and becomes a much bigger societal process again, is that in order to move policing to where it would be in any other society, that's a societal challenge. The police can do a lot, and the police have done a lot. I would, all of us would argue that they still need to continue to do that. But in order to get more Catholics into policing in Northern Ireland, to complete the change process that was so central to those early days, society also has to get involved. We can no longer stand

back from policing and hope that someone, that the police will fix it. There's a limit to what the place can do. Moving beyond that is critical.

[0:51:18] RT: Okay. What did we not talked about here that you think is useful for listeners to hear?

[0:51:23] JM: Well, I think, Northern Ireland's small place. The police service is an organization of about 7,000 people. That may seem fairly insignificant in the grand scheme of things globally in terms of leadership and change, but this is a really iconic process of change, which has, and we've covered them very significant lessons more generally for people engaged in change itself. It's also very significant in environments we're policing more generally, and I think about some of the recent controversies in the United States and the defund the police movement, and some of the huge issues in the UK around confidence in policing. There's a lot that can be learned from the experience in Northern Ireland. Again, because it is an extreme context and the one interesting thing about extreme context is that they're actually not much different from what happens normally.

In a normal context, it's just the dynamics are much more visible. The things we've seen in Northern Ireland are happening in all sorts of organizations all over the place. They're just not as obvious, and that's what makes the case really helpful.

[0:52:32] RT: Okay. I'm going to ask, you if you would, to give listeners three moves they might make in the context of what we talked about. But before I do that, you mentioned at the outset that the book was coming out. I'm going to put links in the show notes about the book and things like that. Can you just do a little plug for the book, because I think it's really valuable resource that people might want to get their hands on. When could they do that?

[0:52:55] JM: Yeah. The book is called *Policing Northern Ireland: Leading in Conflict and Change*. I have to read that, because I keep forgetting, which is terrible. But for anyone who's written a book, you'll know that the title becomes the least significant thing. Really, which is terrible. The book is published by Routledge. It's available in hardback, paperback, and on digital Kindle format as well, if people tend to read that way. It will be out the week of the 7th of

November. But it's certainly available now for pre-order as well, if anybody is interested in having a look at it.

I've also done some little blog posts on it, if people don't – I understand why nobody wants to read 500 pages of the book, in this world where all of our attention spans are a wee bit compromised. There's lots of other blog posts. I will give you those, Rick, and you can put those for those of us who can only cope with a thousand words. So, yeah.

[0:53:52] RT: All right, you have the last word. Anything you want to say to be complete here?

[0:53:55] JM: I mean, I think there's two things. I think that organizational change is really, really difficult. What we have spoken about in the past are it's just a process change, which is probably one of the most fiendishly difficult that there is that anyone can imagine. But it can also be done successfully. It can be done successfully and it can be done, because people fully engage in the process. While the past is never gone, we know and you talk about this a lot within your work that you have to try to get past the past as much as possible personally, organizationally and societally. That's the only thing that allows us to move on to a new and different future.

[0:54:35] RT: I just want to tag on to what you're saying there about getting past the past. It's been my experience, this is a pretty strong correlation for somebody “who's leading,” who actually has personal experience in their own life of getting past some of the past in their own life, because they know what the journey entails and where the challenges are. But does mouth it, but not have experience with it is probably a non-starter.

[0:55:00] JM: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, again, we've said this a few times. These are profoundly human processes. There's a great deal of pain in this, a huge amount of pain. We have to be able to do that.

[0:55:11] RT: All right, so hold up. We can't end there though. What's the upside? We dealt with the pain. Give two pluses about why it's worth to do this.

[0:55:18] JM: I mean, organizationally, it's critical that we engage successfully in change that we're able to have the abilities, the capability and the leadership processes in place that let us lead change effectively. That's one of the key things that we do as organizational leaders are people who are interested in these processes. We need to learn from what is around. We need to learn from the examples that we have. A lot of this is about pushing forward through difficult, emotional, challenging, intellectually challenging, personally challenging circumstances.

[0:55:52] RT: Joanne Murphy, thank you so much for staying in this work and doing the research and your great writing and your teaching for people and leadership. I'm trying to figure out how we can export you over to the United States and send you on a tour around the country, because God knows, we need some of that right now. Thank you very much for being with me.

[0:56:10] JM: Thank you, Rick. It’s been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:56:14] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please, take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

[END]

© 2026 10,000 Swamp Leaders