

Truth

A Sinn Féin Discussion Document

Truth

Sinn Féin calls for a focussed debate and political engagement with all relevant parties on the timing and purpose of truth recovery processes. The potential for success would be considerably enhanced in the context of political stability, with the Assembly, the Executive and North/South bodies all in operation.

This document will be distributed to both governments, other political parties, campaigning groups, NGO's, and the community and voluntary sector. Sinn Féin welcomes the thoughts and suggestions of others

While accepting the genuine doubts and fears around the issue of 'Truth', it is clear that many victims and survivors of the conflict believe that some formal collective examination and acknowledgement of the past is necessary for them to find closure.

The idea of truth recovery processes is based on the concept of 'transition', from conflict to peace or from one government to another. At its most basic, a truth process is meant to mark the end of one difficult era and the beginning of a new and better one.

Truth processes

There have been at least 21 official truth processes around the world since 1974. Each has been unique. These include:

Truth and Justice Commissions - Haiti and Ecuador

Historical Clarification Commission - Guatemala

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions - South Africa and Chile

Others processes were conducted in post-reunification Germany, El Salvador, Bolivia, Chad, Argentina, Uganda, Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

What is a Truth Commission?

1. Truth Commissions focus on the past.
2. They investigate patterns of abuses over a period of time, rather a specific event.
3. Their official status gives them access to official sources of information and a greater likelihood of uncovering information concealed by the authorities.
4. A Truth Commission is a temporary body, typically in operation for six months to two years, and completing its work with the submission of a report.

Do Truth Commissions work?

The evidence is inconclusive. The experience has been that expectations of truth commissions are almost always greater than what they can eventually achieve. Others have testified to a sense of empowerment, confidence, closure and security.

The best-known examples took place in South Africa and Guatemala. Both have been criticised, not least by Human Rights groups and victims organisations. It should also be recognised that truth recovery processes have a potential, at least in the short term, to inhibit rather than enhance the equally necessary process of reconciliation. Both processes, truth and reconciliation, are, in Sinn Féin's view, necessary. Closure, arguably, like forgiveness, comes at a personal level.

Other Truth Recovery Processes

A Truth Commission is but one of a number of possible approaches to truth recovery, commemoration and healing. Other methods, including storytelling, monuments, education and training, public commemoration, memorial funds, community and intercommunity interactions should be considered as ways of dealing with the legacy of the past. Judicial processes can also provide some of this.

These include judicial inquiries, independent international inquiries, inquests, tribunals and so on. Effectiveness, however, in serving the objective of truth recovery requires full co-operation and disclosure by all relevant individuals, organisations, institutions and governments.

Ireland

The parties to the Good Friday Agreement agreed that it ‘is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation’. This led on to the Bloomfield report, which on the issue of ‘Truth’ went no further than saying that ‘the possibility of benefiting from some form of Truth and Reconciliation Commission should not be overlooked’.

The Bloomfield Report itself is a subject of ongoing adverse criticism by victims groups in the nationalist constituency. Sinn Féin shares many of these concerns.

In 2002, Healing Through Remembering, a joint project of the Community Relations Council and NIACRO published a report on the issue. They had set up a 19-person board comprising victims representatives, ex-prisoners, church people and NGO representatives. They invited submissions and held consultations with a wide variety of groups.

It recommended the following ways of ‘coming to terms with the past’:

- Network of Commemoration and Remembering projects;
- Day of Reflection;
- Collective Storytelling and Archiving Process;
- Permanent Living Memorial Museum;
- Acknowledgement (by all protagonists in the conflict as a necessary first step before considering a larger truth recovery process);

- Healing Through Remembering Initiative (i.e. a body to monitor the implementation of the other recommendations).

This reflects the diversity of views around the whole area of truth, justice, healing, closure and remembering.

Since then, there have been sporadic, if vague, calls for some form of truth process.

Republicans have been consistent in our support of campaigns by relatives for full and open disclosure in their quest for truth and justice. Experience suggests, however, that the search for truth will not be satisfied by any one event no matter how innovative or radical.

Notwithstanding these reservations, it is clear that the issue of ‘truth’ needs to be addressed.

Truth Recovery processes for Ireland

Mindful that truth recovery, however it is approached, will be challenging, controversial and, indeed, traumatic, we feel that there are some important general principles and values, which should underpin any process. These are:

- All processes should be victim-centred. Victims have a right both to acknowledgement of their pain and to contribute to a changing society;
- Full co-operation and disclosure by all relevant parties is essential to the success of any truth process;
- There should be no hierarchy of victims;
- All processes should be politically neutral;
- It is crucially important that any panel/commission would be international and independent;
- An objective of any process should be healing - both for victims and for society in general;

- Consideration should be given to the South African formulation that the purpose of a truth process is to examine ‘the causes, nature and extent’ of the conflict;
- All processes should be informed by a desire to learn the lessons of the past so that mistakes will not be repeated;
- The focus of any truth process should not be restricted to combatant groups. Other institutions require scrutiny so as to recover the truth. This includes the media, judiciary, state institutions, civic society etc;
- Humility and generosity should inform the parties seeking to reach agreement on this issue. It should not be about getting one over on one’s opponents;
- A common aim should be to enable society to build the peace.

Truth Recovery: A public debate

Sinn Féin is mindful of the difficulties the myriad issues involved in truth recovery hold for all sections of our society and for people on the islands of Ireland and Britain.

We offer these thoughts and our willingness to discuss the issues involved with all interested parties as a contribution to a public debate on this issue.