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## Brian Rowan: To know all about the dirty war can bring its own risks

Thursday, 17 July 2008

The role of informers in Northern Ireland's dirty war remains a story of half-truths. Brian Rowan wonders if the pieces of the jigsaw will ever be completed

Full disclosure has its repercussions and no community would be left unscathed." That comment, some weeks old now, is about informers and was made in a speech by the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on Northern Ireland's Past.

It was said for a purpose, something of a warning — a hint at what is hidden inside this particular can of worms.

"The scale of the use of informers throughout the conflict corroded the fabric of our communities and the constant pressure now exerted for information about informers to be revealed only serves to further

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undermine the well being of communities to a degree that could be poisonous. We all need to reflect on this matter," Denis Bradley said those few weeks ago.

What are these?

No one expects those informers, loyalist and republican, to be paraded on our peace stage, to be shamed after the 'war'.

That would be 'poisonous'.

Nor are we the first to struggle with this issue.

It was something Graeme Simpson, a man of international experience in peace building and reconciliation work, talked about in Belfast recently. Mr Simpson worked with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and now is a director at the International Centre for Transitional Justice in New York.

His message, to an audience brought together by the group Healing Through Remembering, is that dealing with the past and its many issues happens not in a 'moment' but in a 'process'.

The role of informers is one of many questions — this particular question being a matter for the state.

"The one thing that I should say as a precursor is that there are no absolutes and that the fragility of a peace process will determine how much you can do at what moment, and I do think we need to think about these as processes and not moments," Graeme Simpson said.

"So, there is the potential for sequencing," he said, "where you actually take on these things when society is more ready and so you can move forward with some of these processes and delay grappling with some of the others until there is a slightly safer space.

"I don't think it's we do or we don't," he said. The question then: is what to do and when to do it?

The issue of informers is important, not their names, more the positions they held, the knowledge they had and how the information they provided to the Special Branch and the Security Service was used.

Equally important is the information they did not provide, and then there is the question of the orders they themselves gave or knew about in their paramilitary roles.

All of this strays into the ground of national security and takes us inside the dirty war.

We are told it is not in the public interest for such information to be disclosed and yet, if it is not, you are reduced to a half truth or partial truth process.

The exploration of the past is not just about the IRA and the loyalists. There are questions for many others.

The informers became part of a war play.

It is a story not just about what was prevented as a result of information they provided, but also what they didn't tell and what was allowed to happen.

Mark Haddock has moved to stop the media from reporting his new identity when he is released from prison. This is Haddock of the UVF, paid thousands of pounds by the Special Branch and described by a past official of the Police Ombudsman's Office as "a serial killer". Haddock is a tiny piece in a much bigger jigsaw, and the picture, if ever completed, will tell a poisonous story.

The informers, we are told, saved lives. But what was the human cost of protecting them inside their organisations?

Will that question ever be answered?

To do so would disturb the narrative of the past 30-plus years.

UVF informer Mark Haddock was paid thousands of pounds by Special Branch

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