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## Barry White

### Contribution comes before reconciliation

Tuesday, October 09, 2007

By Barry White

False dawn or fresh start? That is what we are all wondering, five months into the great Stormont experiment, and it was the title of a seminar in Belfast organised by the small but surprisingly influential New Ireland Group, which has seen so many of its ambitions realised after 26 years of lobbying.

The featured speakers were Raman Kapur, director of Threshold, the mental health agency, and William Verwoerd, grandson of the architect of South African apartheid, who has renounced his family's politics and now works at Glenree Reconciliation Centre, near Dublin.

If anyone knows the answer to the crucial question, how to make sure the present peace process solidifies, and doesn't degenerate into the usual violent stand-off, it should be them.

Inevitably, the main debate was on whether we are ready for some form of truth and reconciliation investigation, to face our trauma and put it behind us. And if we are, what should it be like - and what, if any, conditions should be imposed?

Verwoerd is on record as wanting both the violators and the victims - not all the men of violence were terrorists, remember - to spend time together, to learn about each other's humanity, before being confronted in a reconciliation meeting. (The BBC's effort, under Archbishop Tutu, wasn't a success, though it helped some.)

He regards it as unreasonable to expect former paramilitaries to be confronted across a table and to react positively and truthfully with their victims' families. Ideally, he'd want them to have time to interact at a basic human level, away from civilisation, before opening up in public.

It was obvious that he was struggling with the general emphasis on the need for guilt to be acknowledged rather than repair, and for the violators to accept that wrong was done. It meant they would have to accept that they were criminals which, for many who had fought for a cause, meant betrayal.

The South African's advice was not to get bogged down in such demands. When people were allowed to tell their story, without being judged, they could see the consequences of their actions.

Or would they? John Robb, the surgeon and ex-senator who has been pondering these things for the last 35 years, recalled how, on TV, one of the IRA's killers on Bloody Sunday, 1970, remembered shooting two British spies with a salutary "May God have mercy on your souls". He was able to live with himself by concocting a false image of their humanity, but his family had to live with that falsehood and prejudice, which damaged them and future generations.

There were many who didn't survive the experience of killing in the name of politics. Robb had heard the story, in Kerry, of a former Gaelic "great", from the 1920s, who died an "introspective wreck" and another

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who became "a bit of a loony". The needs of the violator, he concluded, needed to be acknowledged as well as the violated.

But, although the mood of the seminar was quite positive, believing that a fresh start was as likely as a false dawn, most speakers thought that without acknowledgement that wrong had been done - not just that each side had suffered - little progress would be made.

That would mean all who were involved at any level in violence accepting that they had defied the will of churches - "on bended knee I beg you" - two states and most people.

If a truth and reconciliation process could achieve such a confession, on all sides, it would provide a sounder foundation for a lasting peace. If it didn't, or doesn't seem likely to, maybe it would be better to forget the whole idea. The South African experience, which followed a definitive political conclusion, was a mixed blessing.

The paramilitaries, on both sides, are having a lot of difficulty owning up to their part in keeping the conflict going. At some point, it would be great to see their representatives acknowledging that their "war" was never justified, and could have been resolved by politics - long before Teebane, the Shankill butchers, Enniskillen and Omagh.

But if that doesn't happen, and we have no choice but to live with imperfection, trying to eliminate our built-in prejudices, we'd better make allowance in our Stormont budgets for more mental health facilities. The tensions that the DUP-Sinn Fein deal has generated are almost as great as any actual violence - and, as someone at the seminar said, the political process has moved well ahead of the peace process in many paramilitary-dominated communities.

With a South African present, it was impossible to ignore the question of the hour - how did they arrive at a universal national anthem for rugby internationals, avoiding alternatives like Ireland's Call? In a land with 11 official languages, they use five, including English, in a hybrid anthem/ ANC hymn, starting in one key and ending in another. It works!

#### Rates debacle

The review of domestic rates has disappeared off most people's radar screens, until the next increase. But those in the know expect pensioners to benefit most, putting up the savings and incomes limits and maybe imposing a separate cap. Expect a statement soon, with arrears approaching a scary £100m.

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
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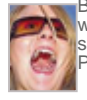
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