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Army parade cannot airbrush murder legacy

Jim Gibney

By Jim Gibney The Thursday Column

06/11/08

The consequences for the people of this island nationalist, unionist, republican and loyalist of English interference in our affairs was the backdrop against which the centre of Belfast became a contested space last

Sunday morning.

The street confrontation was sparked off, not by any decision taken by the inhabitants of Belfast. Not for the first time in Ireland's long and tragic history of conflict the people who live here were directly affected by a decision taken elsewhere, by people who more than likely live safely in Britain where the legacy of their decision will have little or no impact on their lives.

However, the people of Belfast and beyond were plunged into a maelstrom of dispute and emotional turmoil over the past month because someone in the British Ministry of Defence decided to parade through the streets of Belfast, with a regiment of occupation returning from the streets of Baghdad and Kabul where the British army visited on those inhabitants what they visited on nationalists and republicans during the war years here.

The insensitivity and indifference of those behind the parade was felt most acutely by those relatives whose loved ones were killed directly by the British crown forces or indirectly by loyalists through collusion. Many of them were on last Sunday's protest march clutching to their breasts treasured photographs of their murdered loved ones.

Mark Thompson, the director of Relatives for Justice (RFJ), one of the main groups leading the relatives' campaign for the truth into state killings, told the media at Sunday's protest that relatives' organisations are ensuring that the record of killings and collusion by the crown forces "was not air-brushed from history".

Over the last decade organisations like RFJ, the Pat Finucane Centre, Justice for the Forgotten and An Fhírríne have painstakingly kept state killings on the public agenda.

Their patient and determined approach has given confidence and strength to a community, many thousands strong, who were marginalised and demonised by sections of the political and media establishments to the point where they believed that the state would never be made accountable for its actions.

Today the relatives' organisations are much more confident of achieving their objective of an International Independent Truth Commission to oversee the truth recovery process and an independent body to deliver it. Their confidence stems from the momentum that has been built up behind the demand for truth.

They believe they have effectively challenged the hurtful argument contained in the Bloomfield report, published in April 1998, which suggested there was a hierarchy of victims – those killed by republican organisations and loyalists and those killed by the Crown forces. According to this script the relatives of the former are less deserving of society's support and sympathy than the latter.

Significant progress has also been made in the debate for an independent examination of the past, for example,

the setting up of the Saville Inquiry into the Bloody Sunday massacre; the public enquiries into the deaths of

Rosemary Nelson, Billy Wright and Robert Hamill and the devastating report by former Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan into collusion between Belfast loyalist Mark Haddock and the RUC-PSNI Special Branch.

The setting up of the Lord Eames-Denis Bradley Consultative Group on the Past is a further indication that dealing with the legacy of the conflict is now at the centre of the political stage. This is also reflected in the announcement by Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams that Sinn Fein supports an independent truth commission.

Today there is little doubt anywhere that the British government, through its armed forces, ran loyalist murder gangs who killed hundreds of innocent Catholics. That was not the case a number of years ago.

However, there remains understandable concern about the British government's commitment to a truth recovery process given the delay in Saville's report, their refusal to hand over files relating to the Dublin-Monaghan bombings and their inexcusable opposition to an independent investigation into the killing of Pat Finucane.

This stance highlights the need for independent arbitration because the British government is compromised over its role as both perpetrator and facilitator.

Truth recovery will be best served by all relevant parties to the conflict fully participating in it. Those families affected need and deserve this.

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