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News story

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis MP, Oral Statement: Wednesday 14th July 2021

Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past

From:

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Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the way forward in addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland's past.

The Troubles did see a terrible, extensive period of violence that claimed the lives of some 3,500 people, left up to 40,000 people injured, and caused untold damage to all aspects of society in Northern Ireland.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998 sought to move Northern Ireland forward, setting a bold and visionary path that would guide all the people of Northern Ireland towards a shared, stable, peaceful, and prosperous future.

It is wonderful to mark, in this centenary year, just how far Northern Ireland has come.

While Northern Ireland is undoubtedly today a fantastic place to live, work, and visit, the unresolved legacy of the Troubles remains.

It continues to impact and permeate society in Northern Ireland. The past is a constant shadow over those who directly experienced the horrors of those times. And also over those who did not, but who now live with the trauma of previous generations.

It is clear that the current system for dealing with the legacy of the Troubles is not working. It is now a difficult painful truth that the focus on criminal investigations is increasingly unlikely to deliver successful criminal justice outcomes, but all the while it continues to divide communities and fails to obtain answers for a majority of victims and families.

This is borne out in the figures. The Police Service of Northern Ireland are currently considering almost 1200 cases - which represents a fraction of the 3,500 deaths. These would take over 20 years to investigate using current resources. More than two-thirds of Troubles-related deaths occurred over 40 years ago, and it is increasingly difficult for the courts to provide families with the answers they are seeking.

If we fail to act now to properly address, acknowledge and account for the legacy of the Troubles, we will be condemning both current and future generations to further division, preventing reconciliation at both the individual and societal level.

Mr Speaker, that is why I am today laying before this House and publishing a Paper that proposes a series of measures to address the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland.

These proposals are being considered as part of an ongoing and important engagement process, which I announced alongside the Irish Government at the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference last month. As set out in the framework, which we published at the same time, this engagement process is committed to involving not just the UK and Irish

Governments and the NI parties, but also all those directly affected by the Troubles, experts and members and committees of this House and the Other Place.

The objective of this engagement is to deal with legacy issues in a way that supports information recovery and reconciliation, complies fully with international human rights obligations, and responds to the needs of individual victims and survivors, as well as society as a whole.

This is a hugely difficult and complex issue, and many have strongly-held and divergent views on how to move forward. But I hope that we can all agree that this issue is of the utmost importance to the people of Northern Ireland and beyond. It is critical that all involved continue to engage in a spirit of collaboration, in order to deliver practical solutions on this most sensitive of issues.

This Government reaffirms its commitment to intensive engagement in this spirit and we are committed to introducing legislation by the end of this autumn.

The measures set out in our Paper include three key proposals:

- A new independent body that would focus on the recovery and provision of information about Troubles-related deaths and most serious injuries. This body would be focused on helping families to find out the truth of what happened to their loved ones. Where families do not want the past raked over again, they would be able to make this clear. But for those families that want to get answers, the body would have full powers to seek access to information and find out what happened.
- A package of measures also includes a major oral history initiative, consistent with what was included in the Stormont House Agreement. This initiative would create opportunities for people from all backgrounds to share their experiences and perspectives related to the Troubles - and crucially, to learn about those of others. Balance and sensitivity would be of central importance, and a concerted effort would be made to engage with those whose voices may not have been heard previously.
- A statute of limitations, to apply equally to all Troubles-related incidents. We know that the prospect of the end of criminal prosecutions will be difficult for some to accept, and this is not a position that we take lightly. But we have come to the view that this would be the best way to facilitate an effective information retrieval and provision process, and the best way to help Northern Ireland move further along the road to reconciliation. It is a painful recognition of the reality of where we are.

As I say, these issues are complex and sensitive. That is why they remain unresolved 23 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. We also understand the importance of the Stormont House Agreement and remain committed to its key principles.

In particular, we acknowledge that any proposal that moves away from criminal justice outcomes would be a very significant step that will be extremely difficult for some families to accept.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was a bold step to address the past. There have been other such bold steps such as the decommissioning of weapons and the limiting of sentences to two years.

However it is increasingly clear to us that the ongoing retributive criminal justice processes are - far from helping - impeding the successful delivery of information recovery, mediation and reconciliation that could provide a sense of restorative justice for many more families than is currently the case.

This Government is committed to doing all in its power to ensure that families from across the United Kingdom do not continue to be let down by a process which leads only to pain, suffering and disappointment for the vast majority.

As part of this, we will deliver on our commitment to veterans who served in Northern Ireland. We will provide certainty for former members of the security forces, many of whom remain fearful of the prospect of being the subject of investigations that will hang over them for years to come, even though the vast majority acted in accordance with the law, and often at great personal risk.

We are also unequivocal in our commitment to delivering for victims and survivors. Time is crucial, and as it moves on we risk the very real possibility that we will lose any chance to get the vital information that families want and need. They have waited long enough, and a focus on information would offer the best chance of giving more families some sense of justice through acknowledgement, accountability and restorative means.

We need to progress our understanding of the complexity of the Troubles and in so doing, seek to reconcile society with the past, as we go on to look forward together.

This Government is determined to address all aspects of Northern Ireland's troubled past.

We know from our recent history, particularly with implementation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, that we can achieve more when we are bold, and move forward, together.

I want us all to continue to engage on the shape and detail of the proposals, as we work to address this issue which is of

the utmost importance to the people of Northern Ireland and beyond.

Finally Mr Speaker, I would like to draw the attention of the House to a quote from Margaret Fairless Barber.

I came across it reading the report by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley into Northern Ireland's past.

I think it's worth repeating today in this House.

To look backward for a while is to refresh the eye, to restore it, and to render it more fit for its prime function of looking forward.

I commend this statement to the House.

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