

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Bloody Sunday - Assessment by the Government

Guidance for Press Contacts

Q. What is the purpose of the Assessment?

A. The purpose of this report was to assess the new material which emerged around the 25th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday regarding the events of Bloody Sunday and to examine, in that light, the Widgery Report.

Having considered the new material under three headings (Summary, New Material? and Significance), the Assessment analysed the text of the Widgery Report against deductions and conclusions offered by the new material which we deemed fair and reasonable. This approach allowed for a direct, immediate and detailed comparison of specific information in the new material as it related to specific points in the Widgery Report. The Assessment effectively deconstructs Widgery in the light of the new material. Only a full reading of the analysis can fully reveal the extent and depth of the flaws in Widgery.

Q. When was the Assessment handed over to the British Government?

A. In June 1997.

Q. Why did you not publish it then?

A. We believed that, given the complexity and sensitivity of the issues involved, the British Government should be free from the public pressures of publication to carefully consider our Assessment and come to their own conclusions.

Q. Why publish it now?

A. Sufficient time has elapsed to allow the British Government to consider its contents. The Taoiseach made a commitment to publish and he believed that it would be appropriate to publish in or around the anniversary.

Q. Why publish it at all?

A. In the public interest. If the Government devotes its time and energy to considering an issue of great public, not to say historic, importance, its considered views ought to be in

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From the point of view of relatives of the victims, the Government believe that it would be appropriate, for an alternative official view to be put on the record.

It might be added that the dialogue about Bloody Sunday plays an important role in bridging the very different interpretations which each side tends to put on events in Northern Ireland. We need to see a convergence of our differing interpretations of past events and to come to terms with them.

If and when we satisfactorily resolved the issue of Bloody Sunday, the cause of truth and justice will be well served. It should be remembered that Bloody Sunday was an event which at the time fundamentally altered the view among nationalists about the role of the British Government in Northern Ireland. It is seen not just as a wrong but as a catastrophic wrong. Until the truth is known and acknowledged, that wound will never heal. Bloody Sunday will remain a restless issue bedevilling the development of trust and confidence between Ireland and Britain.

Q. What is the core conclusion of the Assessment visa-a-vis Widgery?

A. The Assessment concludes that

> "....the Widgery Report was fundamentally flawed. It was incomplete in terms of its description of the events on the day and in terms of how those events were apparently shaped by the prior intentions and decisions of the authorities. It was a startlingly inaccurate and partisan version of events, dramatically at odds with the experiences and observations of civilian eyewitnesses. It failed to provide a credible explanation for the actions of the British Army, particularly the actions of 1 Para and of the other British Army units in and around Derry. It was inherently and apparently wilfully flawed, selective and unbalanced in its handling of the evidence to hand at the time. It effectively rejected the many hundreds of civilian testimonies submitted to it and opted instead for the unreliable accounts proffered by the implicated soldiers. Contrary to the weight of evidence and even its own findings, it exculpated the individual soldiers who used lethal force and thereby exonerated those who were responsible for their deployment and actions."

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Q. What does the Assessment call for?

A. The Assessment makes the following recommendation:

- "[Widgery] must be replaced by a clear and truthful account of events on that day, so that its poisonous legacy can be set aside and the wounds left by it can begin to be healed. Given the status and currency which was accorded to the Widgery Report, the most appropriate and convincing redress would be a new Report, based on a new independent inquiry.

- "The terms and powers of any new inquiry would need to be such as to inspire widespread public confidence that it would have access to all the relevant official material and otherwise enjoy full official support and cooperation, that it would operate independently, that it would investigate thoroughly and comprehensively, and would genuinely and impartially seek to establish what happened on Bloody Sunday, why it happened and those who must bear the responsibility for it."

Q. What is the most damning piece of new material?

A. Opinion may vary on what is the single most damning indictment of Widgery. The Mullan thesis of lethal British Army sniper fire from Derry's Walls and the revelations of that implicated British soldiers altered their statements - alterations not revealed to Counsel for the next of kin - are both particularly damning. In both its extent and its methodology, therefore, the Widgery Tribunal was deeply flawed.

The allegations of Para AA, if proven, would be particularly damning vis-a-vis the actions of 1 Para.

From another perspective, so replete with flaws is Widgery that his treatment of any one of the victims of that day is sufficient to undermine confidence in his approach, judgement and conclusions.

However, more broadly and in contrast to the approach and style of Lord Widgery's Report, the different aspects of the new material and the overall picture of events they offer tend to be mutually supporting.

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It is important to restate the new material and Assessment must be taken as a whole in which each piece helps to create what is in detail and overall a credible and reasonable critique.

Q. How much of what you have handed over to the British Government is actually new?

A. As the Assessment itself points out, care has to be taken in using the term new. For example, the Tribunal but not Counsel for the next of kin were aware that the soldiers who fired altered their statements. This has only recently come to light but its power as an indictment derives from the fact that the Tribunal knew this and effectively concealed it from Counsel for the next of kin. This meant that the highly adversarial proceedings were inherently unfair to the Counsel for the next of kin.

Perhaps the "newest" material relates to the growing body of evidence that some of the victims died as a result of British Army fire from Derry's Walls. This area of activity was excluded by Widgery from the geographical limits he imposed on himself vis-a-vis his Inquiry. The Inquiry did not therefore address an area of British Army activity that seems to have resulted in at least three of the fatalities on that day.

The Asssessment used some 100 eyewitness statements which had been handed over to the Irish Government shortly after Bloody Sunday. This helped shed new light on detailed aspects of some events but did not substantially change the picture of events as described by the eyewitnesses in Don Mullan's *Eyewitness Bloody Sunday*.

Q. Has the Government arrived at any conclusions about what happened?

A. That was not the purpose of the Assessment. However, anyone reading the Assessment and comparing the new material to Widgery can make their own informed judgement about what happened. What the Assessment could not shed light on was why it happened. The answer to that undoubtedly lies in British archives and the memories of those involved on the British side.

Q. Does the Government want those responsible prosecuted?

A. The Government has made clear that its approach is based on the primary goal of establishing and acknowledging the truth of what happened.

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Q. Has the Government considered the implications of pushing for another concession to nationalists at this delicate time politically.

A. The issue of Bloody Sunday is *not* a concession to nationalists. It is an issue of truth and justice that has remained unresolved for 26 years. It must be considered on its own merits.

Bloody Sunday is about absolute values that must be respected on all sides and that we must adhere to - truth, justice, confidence in and respect for the law and the institutions of state.

Resolving the issue will show the way to resolving other issues from the past that, left unresolved, have merely added to the mistrust and suspicion that have thwarted the development of honest and open relations within Ireland and between Ireland and Britain.

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