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FULL TEXT OF REPORT LAUNCH ADDRESS

28 January 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I welcome you to the launch of the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past.

There are many here today who have given freely of their time to be a part of the consultation process, sharing their views, their experiences and their emotions with us. We thank you for that involvement.

From the beginning, 18 months ago, listening, talking and sharing has been a priority for the Group. In the public and private meetings, in the written submissions and in the myriad of conversations, we have listened, and we have tried to absorb so much.

There were official presentations from groups, individual representations, written submissions and dialogue with people from every sector of this community. To put it simply we were overwhelmed by the response to our invitation to contribute to the process. We thank all who were in contact with us and we hope they will recognise in the Report our response to their contribution.

I believe that the last 18 months has seen the most open process of consultation you could imagine. From the beginning we based our work on what people said to us. In a real sense this

Report is a mirror of what we were told. In many instances, within the confidentiality of the consultation, people spoke of matters and consensus they felt unable to speak of in public. We will of course respect that confidentiality. It is realistic to expect politicians to share confidences they cannot divulge in public – and again we recognise that. But I can say that we have made every effort to keep our local political parties abreast of our thinking.

It is perhaps important at this juncture to stress our independence as a Group. The fact that we were established by a British Secretary of State has presented difficulties for some in this community. Nevertheless we have maintained our independence of Government and political parties to the best of our ability.

We would like to thank you for your patience as we developed this report. As you will see it represents a sizeable piece of work. It has not been rushed; we have taken time to reflect on what we were told and we have not bowed to any pressures about when we should publish. We have always said that we would publish when the report was ready.

Denis and I want to pay tribute to the members of the Group, to Reverend Lesley Carroll, Elaine Moore, James Mackey, David Porter, Jarlath Burns and Willie John McBride, to our staff, to our legal adviser and to our international advisers.

It somehow seems appropriate that we are launching this report in this hotel. It was once infamous around the world as Europe's most bombed hotel. It was also home to many of the world's journalists who were here in the early 1970s to report the almost daily horrors as they unfolded. Well it is now renowned for other reasons. It has played host to dignitaries and Presidents and now sits proudly as a landmark in the rejuvenated Belfast.

Sometimes we can take the achievement of the last ten years for granted and forget how far we have come from the dark days of the violence. Our society has made huge progress and we must never forget that. This has been achieved through hard work; by taking difficult decisions; and by challenging everyone in society; by asking what sort of future we want and how that can be achieved.

We now need to take the next step – dealing with the legacy of our troubled and violent past.

This is the final and most difficult challenge for a society moving out of conflict. Finding ways to do this was never going to be easy.

In the past 18 months the members of the Group have journeyed together. We all come from different backgrounds, we came with varying experiences of the conflict, with different political outlooks, but we have accepted our differences. We faced many contentious issues and we knew it would not be easy. But this Report, whether people agree with what they read or not, represents an integrity which comes from honest dialogue and a willingness to think ‘outside the box’.

In the part of the world I come from people still hold wakes. We go to each other’s houses to sympathise about the death of a loved one. In the face of death and bereavement we instinctively know that there is very little can be said and that our words and gestures are very inadequate.

So over the years we have developed a ritual. We shake hands and we say ‘I’m sorry for your troubles’.

We know the ineptness of those words and that gesture. The relative, hearing it from person after person, almost becomes immune and anesthetised. Pitted against the finality and magnitude of death, it is small and pathetic. But it is the best we can do.

The bereaved person, at a deeper level, is in some ways comforted at the acknowledgement of their loss and the recognition of their grief. It is only a gesture but it is also a community of friends and neighbours recognising a shared and fragile humanity, and the acknowledgement is a source of great comfort.

The controversy these last few days needs to be set in that context. It is only that – an acknowledgement, and a small way of saying ‘we are sorry for your troubles’.

But there are some things we can do.

We can address trauma better. We can respond to addiction and depression better. These are the ever-present legacies of our past, the legacies left in the wake of most conflicts.

They must be addressed if we are to give this community any chance of renewing itself and we are proposing a reconciliation forum with a significant amount of money, a bursary of £100 million, to tackle the issues which are now, today, damaging our community.

Sectarianism, Suicide, Addiction – the impact of the conflict on individuals and communities is still being felt and it is moving through generations.

If we do not take action now it will move to the victims not yet born and so the cycle will begin again.

Clearly those who suffered most during the years of violence comprised the victims and

survivors either as groups or individuals. These were those who will carry in their minds and on their bodies, probably for the rest of their lives, the scars of the conflict. They talked of the loss of a loved one, the memories of that loss and they included those who were disabled physically and mentally.

Victims and survivors have basic, every-day needs - the provision of services to meet those needs and the funding for groups who help them avail of those services are just two of the many issues which the Victims Commissioners should focus their attention on.

And the Commissioners must be allowed to do their job without political interference. We have all seen just how political the debate around anything to do with victims and survivors is. It evokes raw emotions. People need to be supported to work through those emotions and helped to move to a better place, if it is their desire to do so. The Commissioners need to ensure that groups which help 'victims' to become 'survivors' are supported into the future.

But the people who describe themselves as victims, who have suffered the most grievously have the right to shout stop. They have the right to say it is easy for you up on that stage to tell us to move on. It is easy for society, now that there is an economic crisis and we are all afraid of losing our jobs to tell us to move on, to move into this new world. But we are left without the justice that was promised and is our right. We are left without the truth that we were told we would one day get.

We have heard those pleas and we have acted upon them.

A massive section of this report sets out a framework whereby the calls for justice, the pleas for truth, or often both, can be addressed.

We have heard your pleas and we say you are right.

And we have proposed the best way that we can construct to deliver justice and truth so that you too can move on.

It is our best attempt at providing a level playing field for all - an alternative to public inquiries, an alternative to the justice system. These are the only tools currently available but they are not fit for the purpose of dealing with our past conflict and allowing us to move forward in a reconciled way.

We have proposed a Legacy Commission which will, during its five year mandate, and through processes of reconciliation, justice and information recovery, promote peace and stability in Northern Ireland.

The Legacy Commission would answer the calls for justice. It would continue the work of HET and the Police Ombudsman and would bring cases through to prosecution where there is a realistic possibility of this. We have always said we would be honest about prosecutions and we make no apology for being so. We do not believe it would be doing anyone a service to continue the fallacy that there will be wholesale prosecutions from cases dating back 30 years, 20 years, or even 10 years.

We think the chances of high numbers of prosecutions from the work of the Legacy Commission are increasingly low. But we have heard your calls for justice and we have kept the potential for that open. We know that this is all that some people have to hold on to. They should not be deprived of this. This is also why we have stopped short of recommending an

amnesty.

The Legacy Commission would also, through processes designed to secure maximum information, answer the calls we heard from many others for more information about the death of their loved one. This is a very human need and we, as a society, must do all within our power to ensure that these needs are met. We must all step up to the mark and give people the decency of some honest answers. This is the only dignity we can offer them.

The Commission would also examine wider themes arising from the conflict that are of concern to people. In our consultation we heard allegation and counter-allegation about the nature and causes of the conflict. For the sake of future generations we must look at the mistakes we have made, learn from them and move on. We owe this much to our children.

Each of these strands of work of the Commission will, along with the work of the Reconciliation Forum and our other recommendations, go some way to meet the many and varied needs that were expressed to us.

We know that one size does not fit all and we are not imposing a one size fits all approach.

But we are recommending a one stop approach.

One package and one framework that people can opt into when they feel it is right for them to do so.

One package that offers many different options for individuals and communities.

We know that our package of proposals is not perfect; we know it is incomplete but at this distance, and in these circumstances, it is probably the best that can be offered.

The acknowledgement payment is only one of 31 recommendations made in this report.

It was one of the hardest decisions and it provoked much soul searching. We knew it would be one of the most controversial things that we would recommend. So why did we do it?

Let me make it perfectly clear. It did not come out of thin air.

We explored reparations in other countries. We took advice from those with expertise within this field. We looked at what our neighbours, the Irish Government did to acknowledge the suffering of their citizens.

This recommendation is also in response to what people asked of us. You may be surprised at the number of people who told us that they received little or no acknowledgement of their loss during all the years of the troubles. In our consultation process victims, victims groups, widows of security force members, politicians and individuals pressed us to make a recommendation which would ensure that their grief is recognised. These people told us how hurt they were that no one in authority ever recognised or marked their loss. They will never stand up in a public meeting. They will never stand in front of a camera or microphone and say that they agree with this recommendation. Nor should they have to.

They fear it may sound like they are putting a monetary value on their loved one. It is not the monetary value these people seek. This is not compensation by another name. It is the acknowledgement of their loss and of their pain. With this gesture we are attempting to use the inept but understood ritual of telling them 'we are sorry for your troubles'.

This small gesture encapsulates a conflict which has lasted 40 years or 400 years and is still as

prevalent today as it has ever been. We are still fighting about who was right or righter, who had moral justification, and who had God on their side. And we are still terrified that if we acknowledge the grief and the moral position of others that it will dilute our own. But as one leading Unionist said to us, 'There is no difference in a mother's tears'.

Maybe this gesture for those outside of our group is too sudden. Maybe we did make a mistake in our timing. Maybe we forgot that we had been at this for eighteen months. If so, we apologise. It is not that we wouldn't stand by the recommendation. We would and we do. But maybe we forgot that we have been at this for 18 months and during that time we had the opportunity to reach that conclusion.

During those eighteen months we have explored the traditions, viewpoints, backgrounds and moral standings of each other. We are eight different people from different places, upbringings and experiences. We remain eight different people with different political and moral views but we can now understand and acknowledge those of the others. It took us 18 months. It may take some people a little longer than others but we would hope that by the end of the five year lifespan of the Legacy Commission all recognition payments that can be made will have been made.

It will take this society a good few years to get to where we have arrived. We have argued all the positions, we have debated all the historical interpretations, we have struggled to embrace positions that we were not initially comfortable with and we have held together. We are not supermen and superwomen. If we can do it, this society can do it. This society must do it.

But, how? Let me go back to the wake.

Very often in the face of death the bereaved person wants to tell you about the life and death of the son, the daughter, the father, mother, uncle or brother. They will talk about their personality, their strengths, weaknesses, quirks, idiosyncrasies and the simple and beautiful things about them. In the face of death and tragedy there is a deep desire to tell a story and to keep that story alive.

This society needs to tell stories and to have them heard, acknowledged and understood. But if we are to do it properly and to do it healthily it is not just our own stories that need told and heard. We have also to hear the stories of others. If it is only our own story we hear and understand then we are in great danger of becoming exclusive, separate and sectarian.

And it is not just individual stories we need to tell and hear and acknowledge. It is the stories of communities and organisations. It is the policing story, the army story, the paramilitary story, the government story. It is also the story of nurses, doctors, firemen, shop-keepers, trade unions, churches and many others. We need to hear and listen to all of the stories. We need to hear the whole story.

In our report we recommend that the telling of stories should be facilitated and encouraged. The stories of the impact of the conflict on individuals and communities need to be told and heard.

The stories of intra-communal difference need to be told and heard.

Remembering across society should be promoted as a means of achieving reconciliation.

We are each and every one of us involved in this story. None of us stands outside. We all make

up a part of the tapestry. Robin and I have never killed anyone and I don't think we ever could or would have under any circumstances. This probably applies to most people in this society. But that does not mean we can wash our hands and say we were not part of the problem. Our attitude, our prejudice, our defence and justification of our own community to the detriment of the other community has played its part. Our empathy to our own history to the detriment of other histories has played its part.

We all need to reflect on our part and tell our story. We need to tell and listen to the whole story. It will only be through hearing, understanding and acknowledging the complete story that we will have the possibility of properly understanding the past and moving into a better future.

One of the great uplifting experiences in this whole process was to see men and women from every background, every political perspective, people who had been sworn enemies sitting in a room together doing exactly this. This report is full of recommendations that support and encourage more and more of this to happen.

Each year, full support needs to be given by Government, the private and voluntary sector, including the churches, to the continuation of the Annual Day of Reflection, which we suggest should be renamed a Day of Reflection and Reconciliation.

At the end of the five year mandate of the Legacy Commission there should be a ceremony to help Northern Ireland remember the past and all those who suffered during the conflict.

The best tribute to those who lost their lives, and those who survive them and live every day with the pain and the memories, is to ensure that it never happens again. We should strive to reach a point whereby we can all declare that we will never again kill or injure others on

political grounds.

A man said on the radio the other day that the initial reaction to the recommendation about the acknowledgement payment is interesting and scary. He said that it highlights the issue we need to overcome if we are ever to move forward. It highlights the whole purpose of this report. It highlights it because it reveals just how easily and quickly people rush to their old positions.

The positions they held before the conflict, during the conflict and are in danger of holding after the conflict has ended. People return to their own familiar, insular, and partial, story. It is safe.

What we need to understand is these partial stories are no longer safe. They, now that the bullets have gone, are what really threaten our society.

Over the last few days our politicians too have perpetuated the politicisation of victims that we refer to in our report. They send out a message that they are allowed to reach a political accommodation but we are not allowed to have a human accommodation. Our political leaders reflect and defend the positions of the rest of us who are not in politics. But they have a special responsibility. We bequeath to them this enormous burden - they can hold us within our sectarian divides or they can push us beyond our comfort zones. They have reached an accommodation and thank God for that. This report recognises what they have done and accepts that it is on the back of what they have done that we can and must build.

Our politicians have been lauded for what they have achieved and rightly so but if the accommodation stays only at the political level we end up with a society that is in relative peace but is still begrudging of each other. Politicians need to give us a vision.

Our First Minister and deputy First Minister need, on the Day of Reflection each year, to reflect

on the past and confirm their commitment to lead Northern Ireland society toward a shared and reconciled future.

This report lays out a road map which will help us reach that vision of a shared and reconciled future and it challenges our politicians to lead us to that vision. If they take the time and the effort to read this report, with an open mind, this report will help them find that vision.

This work is however too important to leave simply in the hands of those who are tasked with political leadership. These uncertain times have demonstrated that normative political arrangements are constantly subject to change. High politics should and must accept its own limitations. Politicians must not be allowed to easily and quickly interpret all of our personally held perceptions on the past. They must not be allowed to fashion our hurt. We must instead invest and work on the stability that can only come from the heart of our communities. A political settlement on the hill is not enough.

An accommodation can be like a bad marriage – it leaves us living under the same roof but can deprive us of ever calling it our home. And we must challenge accommodations where we find them. We must consider, along with the Christian Churches in Northern Ireland whether, through our separated education systems, we are in fact promoting the message that separation is acceptable. Is this the message we want to send to our young people.

As you can see we believe that we can only build a better future by honestly dealing with our past. We must all face up to our past failures as a society. That brings with it a moral duty to create better relationships with each other that will avoid the past being continually used as a weapon to keep alive and feed our collective grievances, hurts and mistrust. We cannot keep re-

fighting the conflict – not in the courts; not in the victims arena; not in the Assembly; not at the interfaces; not in education; we must confront division wherever it rears its head. This constant confrontation is not healthy for our society, not now and certainly not in the future.

As a group we have placed reconciliation, within and between our people, at the centre of our report and recommendations. That is the only way to a better future for all of our society. There is no better future that is not a shared future and there is no shared future without reconciliation.

This will not be easy – it will be challenging for many. It will require us all to dig deep within ourselves. Listening to, and perhaps understanding, the views of those traditionally viewed as your enemy will be difficult for many. But these are not signs of weakness but of great strength and courage. They are foundations of reconciliation.

We are the last Group that will look at this issue. There will be no more Groups established to make recommendations on the legacy of the past.

This report has been built on the views expressed during our consultation. It represents the best opportunity for us all to draw a line under the decades of violence. That line can only be drawn after we have done as much as can be done for those who suffered most.

It can only be drawn when the avenues for prosecutions are exhausted or when unanswered questions which foster greater and continued division, are answered. It can only be done when we all take responsibility for the past and, in so doing, for our future. It can only be done when we create a process that treats everyone wronged in the past equally - then we can all look to the future with genuine hope.

Our society has a lot of reasons to be optimistic, even in these times of economic hardship. All of us now have a golden opportunity to make sure that in the next generation the divisions and hatreds are not passed on; that they do not have to live through the horrors of violence that so many here have suffered - their future is in our hands.

Dealing with our past in an honest and dignified way, as proposed in this report, will build a better future for everyone. It is time to grasp the opportunities that lie before us. It is time to take the final step out of conflict.

Thank you.

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