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How can we ever come to terms with three decades of slaughter?

By Ed Curran
Monday, 2 February 2009

The hue and cry over the Eames/Bradley report was inevitable no matter what its conclusions.

The idea of a Legacy Commission allowing us to contemplate our collective navels for another five year period, to forgive and forget and build a shared society, may be wonderful in theory but it is surely socially and politically naïve in practice.

A Legacy Commission will not determine whether Northern Ireland pulls together or apart. That is down to the political leaders we choose.

By their words and actions over the next months and years, will the atmosphere of peace and reconciliation be weakened or strengthened.

I, like thousands of others, have lived through the Troubles. As a trainee reporter, I recall accompanying this paper's High Court correspondent to witness the murder trial at which Gusto Spence and two other Protestant men were convicted of killing a young Catholic barman on the Shankill Road in 1966.

I remember staring into Spence's eyes as he sat in the dock without any apparent remorse. That for me was the starting point of decades of death and destruction which impinged on all our lives.

Thereafter, some 3,400 lost their lives but there was never common ground in all this horror.

For every family which turned the other cheek, another could not be consoled in the fathomless grief it had suffered. Some were satisfied by the arrest and imprisonment of whoever was responsible for ending their loved one's life.

Others sought vengeance — an eye for an eye — in the brutal world of the paramilitaries. Some still cannot find an answer and many probably never will.

The plain truth is there is no one-size-fits-all answer to our Troubles. There never was and there probably never will be. Sadly and surprisingly, Lord Eames and Denis Bradley have allowed their considerable reputations to be dented by the controversial and contentious suggestion to pay out £12,000 to every victim's next of kin. However, I wonder how practical many of their other suggestions also are?

It was the former Secretary of State, Peter Hain, who announced the consultative group and asked it "to address and make recommendations to support Northern Ireland society in building a shared future not overshadowed by the events of the past."

I fear these two men, albeit acting with deep conviction and service to their society, accepted what could be only be described as a poisoned chalice. They know now, if they didn't before, that there is no simple answer nor even a collection of answers which could possibly find consensus amongst the community.

The fundamental premise upon which this whole exercise has been founded seems flawed. We cannot lay to rest the past because our past is far too complex to ever lay to rest.

If that sounds defeatist then so be it. The harsh truth is that no amount of compensation, no amount of remorse for killing, no amount of apologies will ever be enough for some.

Let us be honest with ourselves. In our society's heart of hearts, there are many who will carry feelings of bitterness to the grave. How can we really lay to rest our ghosts from the past and attain the level of remorse and forgiveness suggested in this report?

Lord Eames and Denis Bradley were asked to square a circle and it should be no surprise that

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they have failed to do that.

What they have done is to produce a voluminous report which paints a vision of a promised land which is hard to match with reality and seems at odds with life in 2009 in Northern Ireland.

We can talk the peace and reconciliation talk. We can occupy the high moral ground. We can engage in wishful thinking suggesting, as this report does, that if we resolve the past, we will not be haunted in the future.

Yet there are killers walking our streets who will never be brought to justice. There are families for whom an apology for murder will never be acceptable. And there are next of kin of victims for whom an offer of money as compensation for what they have lost will be distasteful and unacceptable.

We are asked to believe that a Legacy Commission and Reconciliation Forum will somehow find answers and reach conclusions about the past which have eluded us to date.

Five years on, the Eames/Bradley report asks us to believe our society can draw an historic line in the sands of our troubled times and that Northern Ireland's future will be so much brighter at a cost of some £300m.

I am sorry to be so dismissive of what was clearly intended to be a well-meaning exercise. I suspect the findings of Peter Hain's "Consultative Group on the Past" are destined to be mulled over for months and possibly pigeon-holed without too many of its suggestions being accepted.

That Lord Eames and Denis Bradley took 18 long months to compile this report is testimony writ large as to how difficult it is to find a way through the minefield of our Troubles.



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To link terrorists(no matter what side of the fence they were on) with the official forces of Law and order(or to put it another way, the army and police of a part of Britain.), is just plain absurd. that is only topped by the idea of giving to the families of these same rebels 12,000 pounds each.

I agree that losing a family member is hard on everyone. However, that does not make good, the actions of terrorists. Just imagine paying the family of a condemned murderer, because he is to suffer the consquencies of his crime.

Dr James McDowell
Former resident of Northern Ireland

Posted by *Dr James McDowell* | 04.02.09, 22:17 GMT

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Should anyone doubt Ed Curran's words, perusal of "Lost Lives" by David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney & Chris Thornton and "Great Hatred: Little Room" by Jonathan Powell, will justify his conclusions and the folly of those who believe bigotry can be eroded with "filthy lucre".
The book by Jonathan Powell also clearly illustrates why the politicians presently cannot control the thugs who are exploiting the drug trade in Belfast.

Posted by *Ulsterman* | 02.02.09, 10:15 GMT

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