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By Steven McCaffery
Friday, 26 September 2008

The election of IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands as MP for Fermanagh/South-Tyrone in 1981 remains a divisive issue for the area's Protestant community decades later, a study has claimed.

A Church of Ireland report entitled Whatever You Say, Say Nothing interviewed

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Protestants living in Clogher Diocese and probed their experience of the Troubles.

What are these?

The report recommended more be done to deal with the continuing legacy of pain in Co Fermanagh's Protestant community, which felt it was being wiped out by the IRA during the Troubles and which remains uncertain of the future.

The report gathered the views of individuals living in border areas and delved into complex relationships within Protestantism and between Protestants and Catholics.

Some of those interviewed pointed to a fragile peace between the minority Protestant population in Fermanagh (35%) and the majority Catholic population (65%), but warned a neighbourliness based on delicate compromises avoided addressing unresolved issues of power, hurt and history.

"The question of whether or not there had been a concerted campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' in the Border regions was for most interviewees an accepted fact," the report found.

"Many people were able to articulate various detailed accounts of how this occurred in practice, identifying the individuals and families directly affected and in some cases going further and identifying those they believed — often citing this as 'common knowledge' — had carried out the acts of violent terrorism."

The report added: "What was in no doubt was the vicious finality and painful legacy visited upon the few and observed from a distance by the many.

"One person was unequivocal: "It wasn't 'the Troubles', it was violence!"

"Another commented: "When you reflect on what happened to the Border Protestant people during the Troubles it's amazing that the population remained as settled as it did."

The study was funded by the Irish government and International fund for Ireland to help develop Protestant communities in cross-border areas.

But the Church report found that elements of political history remain a sore point. In 1981 the IRA prisoner Bobby Sands led a hunger strike that eventually saw 10 republicans die at the top security Maze prison.

The decision to stand Sands as a candidate in a by-election for the Fermanagh/ South-Tyrone Westminster seat provided an outlet for nationalists who were sympathetic to the hunger strike and angry at the refusal of the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to negotiate a settlement.

But the Protestant community saw the vote as support for an IRA terrorist.

The report said: "Another powerful and lingering issue for a number of people is the vote of their neighbours in 1981, which saw Bobby Sands — a convicted IRA activist and hunger striker — returned as MP and elected representative for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

"It was a substantial vote — 52%, against (unionist candidate) Harry West's 48%. Many Protestants and unionists saw it, both then and now, as a clear and unambiguous vote of support for the retention of the 'armed struggle' and the purging of Protestants from the land.

"They couldn't understand it then and they still can't. The collective 'nailing of the colours to the mast' was stark and shocking, but made things very clear — whatever about our previous neighbourliness, whatever about our friendly and co-operative arrangements, all of that is now over.

"In the eyes of some, any pretence of trust and co-operation between the communities



Bobby Sands, who died on hunger strike



was, and remains, just that; pretence.”

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Remember Me

 Good man Liam with people like you around the world will definitely be a better place. What an utterly reprehensible post....

Posted by Ian | 26.09.08, 11:21 GMT


 I can fully understand people standing up for what they believe in & even being prepared to die for a cause but i find it hard to get my head around a military leader who is willing to lead his soldiers into death not on a battlefield but to actually starve themselves to death???

If ever there was a pointless exercise this seems to be it & if you look at all the best trained armies in the world how many train their soldiers to kill themselves???. Surely the whole point of being a 'soldier' in an army is survival of the fittest & not to roll over & die for the enemy?.

I live outside of Northern Ireland & struggle to see the whole point of hunger strikes whichever country they are instigated in & this one puzzles me more than any other. What makes it even more baffling is that people elected this guy knowing that he was determined to kill himself?.

Im neutral to Northern Ireland politics but this whole issue seems ridiculous & should be forgotten ASAP by both sides!

Posted by Alex | 26.09.08, 10:54 GMT

 I dare say that if Bin Laden was caught and went on hunger strike over what he perceived to be continued "western oppression", that many's a Muslim (blinded by brainwashing and propaganda) would worship him even more feverently, particularly if he popped his clogs. There are parallels here.


Time heels. These people will forget all about Bobby Sands sooner rather than later.

Posted by mickey | 26.09.08, 09:09 GMT

 "The Protestant community felt that it was being wiped out by the IRA"

The very reason the IRA was formed was because Nationalists/Catholics felt the exact same way about the British wiping them out. It's not nice when the shoe is on the other foot is it??

Posted by Liam | 26.09.08, 09:07 GMT

 What a pointless exercise. More public funds wasted. Lets waste the same money on a study in to how Catholics have felt living here since this rotten anti-catholic, anti-Irish protestant british state was established...perhaps not, let us continue to live the lie that Unionists are the sole INNOCENT victims, the B_Specials and RUC and lest we forget, the UDR, were all defenders of both communities and that Unionist culture is the one TRUE culture and should be enforced upon all others who disagree.....get real, what a pointless exercise....no-one within the Nationalist community living in those areas gives a damn how Unionists felt and still don't..why should they after all who was it now that said

"Many in this audience employ Catholics, but I have not one about the place".....and where was he from!!!!!!!!!!!!

Posted by *nigel69* | 26.09.08, 09:04 GMT

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