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The folly of partial truth recovery

Despite the outrage over Eames Bradley's compensation for the Troubles' victims, that is not the most hurtful part of the report



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The publication last week of the Eames Bradley report on how do deal with Northern Ireland's troubled past was, as Robin Eames himself noted on [BBC Northern Ireland's Hearts and Minds programme](#) on Thursday, a poisoned chalice from the outset.

Both men were determined to come out of that process with something real, not a bland or abstract measure that would achieve an easy consensus and then be pushed into the long grass. Their recommendation that a blanket £12,000 payment to the families of all victims was intended to recognise and reinforce the fact that suffering throughout the Troubles was universal.

It's a bold and truthful statement. But it's a political and highly partial too. It is truthful in that the deaths of every victim of the Troubles caused their loved ones untold anguish. And that anguish hardship knows no political boundaries. The IRA man who spent 15 or 20 years on the run or in prison while his family carried on without a father in the house. The Loyalist paramilitary shot dead in front of his daughter and her classmates coming out of school.

For their families these were tragedies of the highest order. But by taking a simple, comprehensive approach, the report puts the loss of these men's lives on the precisely the same footing of those they may have tortured, maimed and killed. That's the primary insult which gave rise to what [Mairtin O'Muilleoir](#) describes as Sturm und Drang of the protests in the Europa. The injury perhaps comes in their recommendation that a legacy commission be set up.

Around the time of the establishment of this commission Brian Rowan, a veteran journalist of the Troubles, noted that Eames and Bradley had [an opportunity to take a rather nasty "bull by the horns"](#). By which he meant:

...the Eames/Bradley group should invite the IRA army council, the UVF and Red Hand Commando brigade staff and the UDA inner council to send representatives to a specially convened conference.

Those who can speak for the police, the Army and the security services should also be there, as well as representatives of the relevant governments and political parties. The conference should take as long as it needs to establish what the parties to the conflict are prepared to contribute in answering and explaining that past.

Needless to say, no such proposal, nor anything remotely like it, has been included. The proposed legacy commission provides no such public means of determining who is and who isn't willing to disclose their part in the dirty war of the past.

The fatal flaw, as my colleague [Pete Baker](#) noted at the time, is that:

the groups he's pointing to as being necessary participants in that conference include those responsible for the amnesiacs deal - and those who would have a vested interest in continuing to tip-toe round the past.

So in terms of the central structure recommended by the report, the burden will almost entirely fall on those were acting in the interest of the state. Yet as Professor Paul Bew pointed out, the state is only responsible for a small proportion of the deaths.

It is true that they draw out some individual issues that had been swept under the carpet. In the launch of its preliminary report, Bradley noted:

In all our consultations it is unclear if Republicans truly appreciate the depth of hurt that exists in the Unionist community.

Republicans claimed they were targeting state forces in the guise of RUC/UDR members. Unionist communities, particularly in rural border areas, saw such tactics as deliberately killing fathers and eldest, or only, sons to drive Protestants from their homes and land. We have heard many stories from these communities who describe their experiences in this way – as at best raw sectarianism and at worst ethnic cleansing.

Eames-Bradley never possessed the remit or the power to recommend full disclosure of past events. Even the focus on state violence entails a continuation of already weak provisions currently in place.

The Irish, as Niall Ferguson has noted, have a peculiar bent for

... conferring patriotic sainthood on everyone from the famine-starved of the 1840s to the hunger strikers of the 1980s. The Serbs have a similar ability to keep the bitterness of the past alive.

Yet, as experience shows, partial disclosure of the truth of the past is not only less than satisfactory, it is also highly amenable to political manipulation. By those lights, Bradley and Eames's sincere effort to draw the bitter poison of the past to the fore are doomed when so much of it will remain partially hidden. Meanwhile, £12,000 can neither dispel the pain of the past nor force the many victims groups to just shut up and go away.

Only the continuing triumph of politics over self-perpetuating and self-destructive violence can do that; the battle to preserve the partial sanctity of the past will continue long into the future.

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