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David McKitterick: When digging up the past only harms the future

The Omagh families have no absolute right to a final say on what should happen in the justice system

Friday, 19 September 2008

Of course the people who lost loved ones in the Omagh bombing should have the right to find out what happened on that sunny summer day in 1998 when a Real IRA bomb ripped apart their families and their lives. Of course they should be able to discover the whole truth; the guilty should be put behind bars; there should come a day when it can credibly be said that justice has been done.

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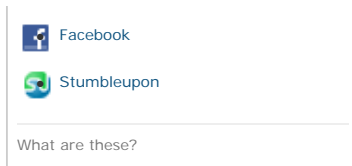
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The history and the circumstances of Northern Ireland mean, however, that these things are unlikely to happen. It is too complex for that, involving too many intricate issues of politics and security. For just as there are few moral absolutes in Northern Ireland, so the Omagh families have no absolute right to have the final say on what should happen in the justice system.



This is a difficult and painful thing to articulate, given the terrible suffering these people continue to endure. Omagh is regarded as a special case: the authorities, for example, helped fund the civil case now making its way through the courts. The call of some families is that this should be followed by a full-scale independent judicial inquiry to examine every aspect of that day.

Omagh originally seemed a particularly stark example of a despicable terrorist attack which claimed many innocent lives. The murderers are as guilty as ever but a series of official reports, and now this week's Panorama programme, have turned up much disturbing material.

Gordon Brown's establishment of a review of the Panorama revelations was a sure sign that security agencies have a case to answer. It may also have been a device to ward off the calls for a full public inquiry. Governments have a reflex against setting up such inquiries, not least because, in cases like this, it is pretty obvious they will turn up damaging revelations about a secret world which functioned with little accountability.

Here there are additional arguments against doing so, principally based on the awful example of the Bloody Sunday inquiry. When Tony Blair set that up – in 1998, the year of Omagh – no one knew it would become the largest and most complex public inquiry in British legal history. Its report may or may not be ready by the end of this year. It heard nearly a thousand witnesses who uttered more than 14 million words. It has cost almost £200m.

Yet its findings, whatever they may be, are unlikely to satisfy all the Bloody Sunday families. Those who firmly believe a deliberate massacre was planned and carried out will probably denounce the report as just another cover-up.

The duration and cost of the Londonderry inquiry means that no one believes its like will ever be seen again. The law has already been changed to impose much stricter limits, including rigorous restrictions on what intelligence material can be scrutinised.

A number of inquiries are already going on under these new rules. The case against further Bloody Sunday-type exercises has been made largely in terms of time and money, but the issue raises deeper issues about Northern Ireland's future as well as its past.

The question of how to deal with the troubled past has for 10 years and more been grappled with at conferences and seminars, in books and papers. An official committee is currently at work, but after all this time there is absolutely no public consensus on how to proceed.

Some say the time has come to draw a line under the past; others that this would simply cause deep wounds to fester and worsen rather than heal. There are many possibilities short of full-scale proceedings: Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein, for example, has remarked that that an apology about Bloody Sunday would have been sufficient.

The debate on all this involves not just officialdom but also relatives of some of the 3,700 Troubles casualties, for there are up to a hundred victims' organisations, many of them holding strong views.

In the past year, however, a new factor has come into play. The cause of justice and the rights of the bereaved are hugely important, but there is a new context, that of the fledgling powersharing government in Belfast. This is where moral absolutes clash with realpolitik. The debate on the past now takes place not in a vacuum but against the backdrop of a political institution which, as yesterday's deadlock in Belfast showed, is struggling to achieve stability.

Omagh may well hold more secrets that could undermine the new political system. The Omagh people want their rights, and few would want to deny them these. But the challenge is how to reconcile these with the rights of a wider society which longs for political equilibrium and lasting peace. Given the agonising choice,

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it would probably prefer to protect its future rather than unearth more of its troubled, and troubling, past.

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Jack, WHAT are you on about. ? What has Mc Kitterick said that has so riled you. ? Did you even read what he has written or are you just on a rant. ? The article is about Omagh, the cover up and the chances of future truth.

Posted by Sean O Brien | 19.09.08, 15:46 GMT

I am an ex-catholic who was born, raised and lived in the Republic of Ireland.

David McKitterick might not utter such rubbish if he knew what a shower of drug dealing murdering Marxists the IRA really are.

The IRA used the catholic church as a convenient cover for their true aims a united marxist Ireland. If the catholic church actually believed a word of what they preached they would have ex-communicated the lot of them.

The dogs on the street know that they were behind the Northern Bank robbery and that they are behind most of the drug dealing in Ireland.

Posted by Jack Lynch | 19.09.08, 13:55 GMT

Such enquiries, like all the government reports and enquiries over the last decade, do not exist for justice, decency, or the good of the state. The enquiries are commissioned so the government can give large sums of money to the people who conduct the enquiries; usually friends of theirs.

This corrupt government will continue to syphon off money to their friends for as long as it is able. The next government will do the same; will the press tell the truth, or simply support a corrupt system?

We often look at the African states where people starve yet corruption ensures a few do well. This is a worldwide situation, and will hapen in this country, as long as we have democracy controlled by the media.

Looking at Ireland, wasn't it journalists who stirred up hatred towards the Irish prior to the famine, with ridiculous stories that the Irish threw their children on fires?

Posted by Robert Price | 19.09.08, 11:44 GMT

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