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## Justice and truth are key to resolution of the past

**Jim Gibney**

By Jim Gibney

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The people most hurt, most affected yet most overlooked in the row over whether a war was fought here and whether an amnesty should be considered are the relatives of those killed during the conflict.

To those relatives campaigning for truth and justice, and those relatives who carry the burden of their grief privately, I would imagine it is less important to them how the conflict is described and what mechanism is used to secure justice.

When you look behind the newspaper headlines and the commentary around the words, 'war' and 'amnesty' what you find in some very powerful quarters is an attitude, which has existed for decades, where the feelings and views of relatives especially from a nationalist background and those organisations working on their

behalf, carry less weight than the views and attitudes of those in British government circles and the various armed forces that serve their interests.

Out of this milieu came one of the most vengeful and insulting policies – relatives of those killed were categorised into 'most deserving' and 'less deserving' of society's attention. Out of this cabal emerged what has been referred to as 'a hierarchy of victims'.

According to this British government-inspired and unionist supported script those 'most deserving' of society's appreciation and attention are the relatives of those killed who were members of the crown forces.

Those 'less deserving' of society's appreciation and attention are the relatives of people killed by the crown forces either through collusion with loyalists or directly; and even within this 'less deserving' category are the relatives of those IRA volunteers killed on active service by the British army or RUC; they are rarely mentioned. Organisations like Relatives for Justice and the Pat Finucane Centre, among others, have had to battle against this deep-seated political prejudice which is all-pervasive and which impacts negatively on their work in terms of how those with influence in political and media circles respond to their concerns.

These organisations not only championed the cause of the forgotten relatives of hundreds of people killed through collusion but gave space to the families of IRA volunteers, many of whom were summarily executed, and argued for justice for them.

They also reached out to relatives of people killed from the unionist community whether the family member was in the crown forces, a loyalist or a civilian.

To these relatives organisations justice and truth are indivisible.

In the face of hostility and aggression they have borne their grief and anguish with dignity.

They have made an invaluable contribution to the public debate as have some relatives from a unionist background about how the legacy of the conflict, the past as it is now called, should be handled.

This contribution has been characteristically generous and magnanimous to those responsible for killing their loved ones.

On Monday a number of relatives' organisations advanced this debate by calling for an international independent truth commission as "the only way to bring truth to the greatest number of families".

They made it clear that the focus of such a commission should be on truth and acknowledgement rather than prosecutions. They are persuaders not coercers seeking a voluntary process aimed at encouraging organisations to cooperate and are not seeking a witch hunt of individuals.

They called on all combatant groups – British, republican and loyalist – to cooperate.

The recently-appointed Consultative Group on the Past, chaired by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley, would do well to study these proposals and reflect on how these relatives organisations approach this very sensitive area.

The Consultative Group is clearly not responsible for penning the sensational headlines around 'war' and 'amnesty'; it is however responsible for thinking that their work requires 'off the record' briefings on such an emotionally charged subject.

The Consultative Group has an opportunity to change the partisan context within which the search for a resolution of the past has so far been sought.

It should be guided by the needs of relatives irrespective of the circumstances in which their loved one died.

A vow of silence until their work is completed should seriously be considered.

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