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Too much baggage to go on a truth-seeking Troubles flight

(Patrick Murphy, [Irish News](#))

If the past is a foreign country, there are many among us who wish to travel abroad – but recent developments would suggest that the flight to the land of the past is already over-booked.

The PSNI has the Historical Enquiries Team. Gerry Adams marches for truth.

The Eames/Bradley initiative talks to anyone who will listen. We have (or have we?) a victims' commissioner.

The Bloody Sunday Inquiry is far from over and many politicians have called for everything from more inquiries on past events to new definitions of perpetrators and victims.

With that many on board, the process may never get airborne. Those travelling claim to seek either the truth about what happened during the Troubles and/or a mechanism for dealing with its legacy.

The first is impossible.

The second is unnecessary.

It is understandable that everyone who lost a loved one should seek to establish what happened. But if we do it for one, we must do it for all.

The essential difficulty with truth is that there is no neutral language for handling it.

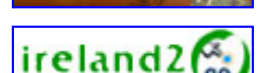
If people died as a result of a republican car bomb, were they killed or murdered?

Who determines the truth of that statement?

The only truth is that they died – and we already know that.

An additional challenge is that those who claim to seek the truth appear to believe that all violent activists here had an aircraft-type black box in their pockets, for future analysis of

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their motives and actions.

We can never establish the truth because we can never establish all the facts.

For example, if a loyalist shot a Catholic, is the truth simply the identity of the killer/murderer?

Should it include the person who drove the car? What about those who hijacked it or stored the weapon or disposed of bloody clothing? What about the man who bought the murderer/killer a drink in the pub afterwards?

Is the truth one person or 20?

Presumably paramilitaries did not keep minutes or records of their actions and decisions, so there are no archives to delve into. Thus we will never know of planned killings that were abandoned, even though they too form part of the truth.

In this context of general uncertainty the debate appears to have three in-built restrictions – to whom, when and where does the search for truth apply?

To date it has focused on those who fired shots or detonated bombs.

It has not included those whose actions or speeches may have influenced others to engage in violence.

If war is an extension of politics, much of the truth lies with politicians on all sides.

Their calls for investigating the past would have added credibility if they offered to begin the process with themselves.

The time limits set for investigation generally reflect those imposed by the Historical Enquiries Team: 1968 to 1998. This ignores, for example, the 83 people killed/murdered since 1999.

On what basis can we exclude them – or, indeed, those killed/murdered by the UVF in 1966? The myth surrounding the debate to date is that we need to describe what happened during the Troubles.

But the real need is to explain – and that explanation goes well beyond 1968.

The investigation also needs to extend outside the north.

In Britain, for example, senior judge Lord Denning upheld the conviction of the Birmingham Six. He claimed their imprisonment showed what a civilised country Britain was.

Since he practised more violence than they did, the late lord seems worthy of a place in our search for truth. What about those who bought him a drink afterwards?

And we should not forget the need to establish the real bombers' identities.

At the other end of the scale we might reasonably seek the cooperation of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi for supplying arms to the PIRA. And then there is an endless stream of senior British intelligence officials who could shed a lot of light on what happened.

Since we are never going to see this gathering in a Bloody Sunday-type inquiry, we run the risk of finding odd fragments of truth from the past, which serve only to justify the politics of one or other group in the present.

That is why we do not need to handle the legacy of the past. What exactly are we handling? Despite that, the flight to the past is ready for take-off. It might never get off the ground. The problem is not just the number of passengers on board, it is all the baggage they are likely to bring.

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