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Thursday, June 26, 2008

A painful coming to terms



during the Troubles.

Photograph: Darren Kidd

The Commission of Victims and Survivors' four commissioners. From left: Bertha McDougall; Brendan McAllister, Mike Nesbitt and Patricia MacBride, whose brother and father were killed

The challenges facing Northern Ireland's Commission for Victims and Survivors, particularly from the unionist community, were evident at two rival victims' events held in Enniskillen and Belfast. **Bryan Coll** met those attending

THE LOGO for Northern Ireland's Commission of Victims

and Survivors (CVS) is an imaginative piece of design work. The three letters of the group's abbreviated title form a human shape with curled arms, poised as if to give a rather awkward-looking hug.

The corporate graphics point to the potential of the organisation, which carried out its first public meetings over the last two weeks, to help heal some of the deep trauma caused by the Troubles. But despite its good intentions, many victims of the Troubles, especially unionists, are running away from the commission's open arms.

In David Park's widely-acclaimed novel *The Truth Commissioner*, Henry Stanfield, the man appointed to oversee a South-African style truth and reconciliation commission in Northern Ireland, reflects on both the apparent simplicity and sheer enormity of his task: "Now the world doesn't care any more because there are bigger wars and better terrors. All that remains is this final tidying up."

As was evident at the commission's public meeting in Enniskillen last week, "tidying up" the Troubles is extremely complicated, given that views on what should be tidied are often radically different. The venue for last Thursday's meeting was the Clinton Centre, an art gallery and conference venue, built on the site where an IRA bomb killed 11 people on Remembrance Sunday in 1987.

After the presentation of the commission's 16-page initial work programme, Alan Baird, a local Ulster Unionist councillor, objects to the commission's broad definition of victimhood. "I believe there should be a hierarchy of victims", he says. "Had the terrorists who planted the bomb only yards from here over 20 years ago died in the explosion, would they be on the same level as the innocent people who were killed?"

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Sitting four chairs away from Baird, Bernice Swift, project manager of Firinne, a Fermanagh-based campaign group for victims of state violence, tells the commissioners of the need for an independent truth commission in Northern Ireland.

"It is definitely part of dealing with the past," says Swift, who believes people killed by security forces during the Troubles have been excluded from public discussions on victims. "History has to be documented to make sure that what happened doesn't happen again."

In the front row, listening attentively, is a female delegation from a trauma centre in Omagh.

"I still find it difficult to talk," says one woman, whose husband was one of eight people killed in an IRA bomb attack in Teebane, Co Tyrone in 1992. "It's only in the past four or five years that people have felt they can speak about things like this."

On paper, Brendan McAllister, one of the four commissioners in charge of the commission, is well-placed to find common ground between such divergent views. McAllister spent 10 years as director of Mediation Northern Ireland, an organisation that trains community mediators to work in conflict situations in the North and abroad.

"The task facing us is to try and create as much consensus as possible," he says. "Our preference would be to act as an enabler for victims' groups rather than articulating our own positions."

It's little surprise that McAllister is choosing his words carefully.

In a short introductory biography released after her appointment, Patricia MacBride, one of McAllister's fellow commissioners, described her brother, an IRA member killed by the SAS in 1984, as a volunteer who died "on active service". The description was heavily criticised by some unionists.

"It is a disappointment that people in some quarters have difficulty in trusting this new initiative," says McAllister. "But we need to understand what lies underneath these reservations."

On the same day that the commission met in Enniskillen, Belfast's Waterfront Hall played host to the International Victims of Terrorism Conference. Despite the similar-sounding names, many of those attending the latter event are among the most vociferous opponents of the fledgling victims' commission.

The two-day event at the Waterfront was organised by Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR), a support group based in south Armagh that represents mostly Protestant victims of the Troubles.

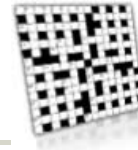
Speakers from Israel, France and the United States addressed around 250 delegates on the first day of the event, sharing their experiences of terrorism and encouraging unionist victims of the Troubles to increase their public presence.

As most audience members, and many speakers, had been injured or lost family members in terrorist attacks, the conference adopted a broad view of terrorism, stepping out of the Northern Irish context to examine criminal justice, human rights and definitions of terrorism in other countries. But when discussions returned to Northern Ireland, universal views give way to narrower definitions of victimhood.

In an address entitled Terrorism - our Experience, Welsh-born sociologist Dr James Dingley told conference delegates: "Loyalist [paramilitaries] were nasty but insignificant. They did not have significant community support. The IRA was the main terrorist threat." Dingley levelled his harshest criticisms at Sinn Féin, the British government and human rights organisations.

"The British government has no interest in Northern Ireland whatsoever, they'd quite happily be rid of you," he told the conference. Dingley was the only speaker in the afternoon session to receive a standing ovation from part of the audience.

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Beside the entrance to the Waterfront Hall, FAIR director Willie Frazer is busy greeting delegates, each of whom he knows by name. He is one of the most prominent victims campaigners in the North, but remains wholly opposed to the work of the commission.

It's a stance that has won him support from many disillusioned victims of republican violence, particularly those living in rural areas.

"It if wasn't for Willie, we would have no voice at all," says one woman, collecting her conference programme.

Frazer has also been a vocal opponent of powersharing and the Consultative Group on the Past [CGP], another body examining the legacy of Troubles. "We have the ability to look after ourselves", he says. "Don't try and tell us that we need consultants to find out what we need."

Frazer, who lost five members of his family to IRA violence, says the aim of most FAIR members is to secure criminal prosecutions for the deaths of their loved ones, many of whom were killed in the 1970s. In a joint address last month, Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, co-chairs of the consultative group, warned victims that securing criminal convictions for past atrocities would prove difficult. "Truth and justice are not mutually exclusive, but neither are they always attainable," they said. According to Willie Frazer, it is the perceived dampening of expectations by appointed figures that has fuelled the anger of many Protestant victims. "We may never get justice, but that doesn't mean we give up the right to have it," he says. "That's what we're being asked. It means the deaths of our loved ones were for nothing."

Although Frazer's unrelenting stance has won him the backing of most Waterfront delegates, other unionist victims' groups complain that dissenting voices such as FAIR are drowning out individuals willing to engage with the victims' commission. Alan Madill, spokesman for the South East Fermanagh Foundation, a campaign group also made up of mostly Protestant victims, believes unionists must put aside their objections to individual commissioners if they are to benefit from the commission's eventual recommendations.

"If you don't engage with them, you can't complain that you've been left out and that you haven't got what you wanted," says Madill. "We have to think of the people who need help and divorce politics from the picture."

Eating lunch outside the Waterfront conference hall is Rita Crawford-Morrison, whose daughter and son-in-law were among the 12 people who died in the IRA bomb attack on the La Mon hotel in 1978. When it exploded, the bomb created a fireball that resulted in many of those killed being burned alive, their bodies charred beyond recognition.

"Everyone thinks their bombing was worse than the others," says Crawford-Morrison, surveying the room of elderly delegates eating sandwiches and drinking tea. "But at La Mon, the people were just incinerated. And for what reason?"

To date, there have been no convictions for the atrocity and Crawford-Morrison is doubtful that work done by the victims' commissioners or the consultative group will result in the bombers being brought to justice.

Despite her pessimism, she and her husband attended the first public meeting of the commission last week.

"It was very well conducted," she says. "I had expected more rowdiness."

Walking back into the auditorium for the afternoon session of the FAIR conference, Crawford-Morrison reflects on what she hopes the victims' commission might deliver. "It's 30 years since La Mon," she says. "All we can do now is honour their memory."

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