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Monday, January 26, 2009

Silence the apt response to harrowing victims' stories

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SKETCH: The Troubles may be over, but as a fringe meeting that focused on miscarriages of justice showed, the burden of the bereaved and victims of injustice remains, writes **Dan Keenan**

"EVERY MINUTE of every day my mind goes back to my child. Every minute of every day my mind goes back to that shed." Barely audible and choking back tears Briega Quinn, mother of murder victim Paul Quinn who was beaten to death in a Co Monaghan farm building, made the most striking, the most poignant and the most effective speech in three days of debate.

She told how 12 men, she believed from the IRA, took iron bars and proceeded to break

every bone in her son's young body.

He cried for help but no one heard and no one came, she said.

Those men may as well have inflicted their beating on her. Her indescribable pain was evident and the rapt audience shared it in silence.

She is sentenced to enduring that pain with no hope of remission until her son's killers face justice, she said.

It says something that such a brave and telling speech was devoid of all the tricks that are normally pulled to enhance a speaker.

There was no script, no spin, no bright lights, no musical theme, no advance publicity. Devoid of all conference trappings, Mrs Quinn, looking drawn and all but broken,

addressed a fringe meeting in a side hall normally used for dances. Empty dance halls, like cold hearths, seem particularly soulless. But her words filled it and, despite the harrowing story they told, warmed it.

The fringe meeting was designed to highlight miscarriages of justice. The panel included Gerry Conlon of the Guildford Four and Paddy Hill of the Birmingham Six – both of whom suffered long years in jail for IRA bombings they did not take part in.

Brieger Voyle represented the Ballymurphy families bereaved by the massacre inflicted on them in three days following the introduction of internment in 1971.

She spoke simply and clearly about the actions of soldiers who shot dead 11 people in the west Belfast estate, the summary executions, the deaths of a parish priest and the mother of eight. Those killings left 47 children without a parent.

Members of the same regiment went on to shoot dead 14 more people in Derry just five months later. Raymond McCord, a loyalist and an Orangeman, spoke about the murder of his son and of the manner in which the state acted to conceal the truth surrounding it.

Their stories were as different as the characters who told them. But one thing bound them all together. The Troubles may be over, but the burden of them remains. For those who have suffered, the past continues in the form of a living present. They are condemned to spend each day tethered to injustices which are as fresh today as they were decades ago.

Those of us who have not suffered in such a way can only guess at what they endure and how they do it.

The demands for inquiries and truth commissions, the commemorations and the campaigns do not come from people wallowing in divisions and hatreds of the past. They come from those burdened by monstrous injustices and they want to be freed from them.

Sometimes good conference speeches are received with tumultuous applause. But perhaps the very best of them provoke only silence.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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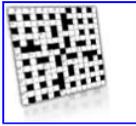
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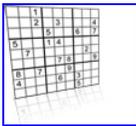
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