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Platform Piece on Victims Issues by Derek Hussey

E-mail to a friend *May 29th, 2007 Derek Hussey*



This week has marked the eighth anniversary of the Omagh bomb - one of the most horrific days in the history of Northern Ireland.

The geography of Northern Ireland bears witness to the depth and extent of conflict. Names that ought simply to map out locality instead catalogue atrocity - places like Omagh; Enniskillen; Darkley; Greysteel.

Communities have experienced tragedy throughout Northern Ireland. Many of these communities still experience a collective legacy of pain and suffering which society must deal with.

This is a vast challenge which must be faced up to. However, government policy on victims' issues has been allowed to drift.

Commissioners, reports, investigations and consultations have all come and gone in the past number of years - yet we still lack a clear strategy, or even, understanding on how to deal collectively with the events of the past 35 years.

People like Sir Kenneth Bloomfield and Bertha McDougall have made invaluable contributions - but the core problem remains. And that core issue - of how we define who is a victim and who is not - demands clarity.

We should not expect that the solution can be provided by any one individual or commissioner - the answer lies in the thoughts and views of the people of Northern Ireland.

How have those opinions been articulated? How have the political class approached this issue?

The Government in its draft legislation stated that a victim is "someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident". And the 2003 Joint Declaration stated that that there is "no hierarchy of victims".

This is the view of government. But what about local representatives? For example, the SDLP describes a victim as: "Any individual whose life has altered its course as a result of the bitterness and division in our society and who believes that the alteration was negative."

In my view, the practical outworking of these statements are too loose to be workable, too fragile to bear the weight of equity required.

Constructive debate is vital to support the whole project. And while I value their contribution, I wholeheartedly disagree with the SDLP's view.

Consider both the government and SDLP perspective, then consider: how would the families of those murdered by the Shankill Butchers,

or those murdered at La Mon, Enniskillen or Omagh would react?

For example, could the application of the SDLP's vision include Michael McKeivitt or Torrens Knight as a victim? There can be no equivocation between the victim and the victim maker.

Perpetrators of violence are not victims of the Northern Ireland conflict. It is only right that account be taken of responsibility and criminal culpability in determining society's collective approach.

Can those who operated outside the framework of civic society, who acted beyond the scope of acceptable, civilised values, who operated beyond law and order, who sought to remove from others the most fundamental of all rights - the right to life - be classed as 'victim'?

This process must be built on principles of fairness, equity and understanding.

All agree that the state has a duty of care to victims of crime. But we need to be careful of government policy that chooses the path of least resistance.

The apologists of violence may seek to sanitise the horrors that were perpetrated on people here. But those who seek to justify and edify the victim maker must not be allowed to influence policy making.

Who would disagree with the application of agreed principles to ensure the process has the moral authority to be effective?

I am mindful that while this debate continues, for many, pain and hurt continues on as a very real aspect of daily life. It is imperative that resolution happens sooner rather than later.

If we are going to do our best by those who suffer then we have a responsibility to ensure that the conditions that created victims and conflict do not arise again. The Ulster Unionist Party will engage with all who share the vision for a peaceful, more tolerant and inclusive Northern Ireland.

I believe that the victims of the Troubles deserve no less.

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