

'Remembering': Victims, Survivors and Commemoration

What are Victims' Groups?

Background on the Victims' Groups Established in Response to the Conflict in Northern Ireland

by Dr John Nagle (2007)

Introduction

Such is the range of issues they cover, the services they provide and constituency they represent, that the victims' groups, which were established in response to the conflict in Northern Ireland, defy easy categorisation. What is clear, however, is that their number has proliferated during the post-conflict transitional stage in Northern Ireland. They have become more conspicuous too, as some groups have either cultivated or been forced to adopt an extensive media and political profile. This background paper provides some information on the range of victims' groups and the services they provide, as well as illuminating the context in which they have developed and mobilised in recent years.

The British State

Prior to 1997 the issue of victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland was very low on the British government's political agenda; there appeared to be a British state policy of almost complete silence regarding victims in Northern Ireland. This inertia was confirmed by a government minister, Des Browne (2003): "in all that time [thirty years of conflict] there were no policies in relations to victims". In 1997 the silence was broken by the state when the then Northern Ireland Secretary of State requested that Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, a former public servant, "examine the feasibility of providing greater recognition for those who have become victims in the last thirty years as a consequence of events in Northern Ireland" (Bloomfield 1998: 8). Bloomfield's report ('We Will Remember Them'), which was released in May 1998, consulted a wide range of opinions regarding how to commemorate and acknowledge those who had died or suffered as a result of the conflict.

A more complete discussion and analysis of the policies devised and implemented by the British State can be found in a [paper](#) by McDowell (2007) and a follow-up [paper](#) by Nagle (2009). What this paper demonstrates is that the British state has actively sought to set the victims' agenda from 1997 through to today. The level of financial assistance for victims' groups, though often criticised for being too small by groups, is substantial. From April 1997 to March 2007, the British state has furnished, by its own calculations, £43,962,152 on organisations they identify to be involved in providing support for victims.

The British state has thus progressively taken a leading role in setting the victims' agenda. The reasons underlying this level of involvement are ostensibly multi-faceted. On one level it stems from the perceived legal obligations of a responsible nation state. It is widely held internationally that protecting and upholding victims of injury is one of the basic political duties of the state, and if a government fails to attend victims and their injuries it is failing in its responsibilities (Biggar 2003). Some analysis has shown that victims are less likely to suffer from illnesses, like PTSD and depression, if their status is recognised and supported.

On another level it can be seen as deriving from its desire to bolster sustainable peace building. How societies deal with victims' related issues is seen as a barometer of its progress in trying to entrench peace. This perspective is primarily informed by the widely held belief that only by successfully confronting the legacy of the violent past can this "bolster national attempts to 're-establish' society, and as such this can have a healing and restorative dimension" (Hamber 2006). Although piecemeal, the British state has initiated at the behest of some victims' groups a number of investigations and tribunals into its possible role in the deaths of a number of individuals (particularly Pat Finucane,

Victims' Groups

The British state, through official opprobrium and the application of resources, has therefore provided a context for the recent mobilisation of victims' groups in Northern Ireland. The relationship between the British state and victims' groups, however, is not so straightforwardly complimentary. Many victims' groups have rallied and mobilised on the basis of protesting against aspects of British state policy in dealing with victims. Some of these victims' groups have also managed to form alliances and networks with non-victims' groups as they have mobilised on a civil rights agenda by claiming a whole ethno-national group are 'victims'. Some victims' groups have therefore become embroiled in much wider political debates beyond issues concerning the delivery of services to individuals or the commemoration of victims. This politicisation of victims' groups can be seen best in the way some victims' groups are aligned with nationalism or unionism.

In this section we only consider a small, specific range of victims' groups: those that have been aligned, though not exclusively, to either Irish nationalist or British unionist politics. This leaves out from the discussion a considerable constituency of groups who are often less publicly visible and cannot be categorised in terms of political affiliation. These groups, though wide-ranging, typically focus on providing counseling services, befriending, trauma relief and forms of cognitive therapy. In compiling the [list](#) of victims' groups it was decided to categorise organisations according to the community background of the individuals and associated groups with which they worked or represented. Hence the categories of nationalist, unionist, and cross-community. The following sections concentrate on those groups which would be perceived as being mainly nationalist or unionist although some of them may not be exclusively so.

Nationalist Victims Groups

Notably, many nationalist victims' groups pre-date 1997, the point in which the British state becomes more interventionist in the victims' agenda. These groups include, for example, Justice for the Forgotten, the Loughgall Truth and Justice Campaign and Relatives for Justice. The major dynamic for the mobilisation of these groups during the 1990s was to highlight and uncover the level of collusion between the British state and loyalist paramilitaries in the deaths of nationalists. For instance, the website of Relatives for Justice elaborates: "The issues of accountability, truth and justice are paramount for all those affected by State and State sponsored violence." (www.relativesforjustice.com; 2007)

A number of other nationalist victims' groups have emerged since 1997 in order to draw attention to specific cases of British state involvement in the killings of nationalists. These groups include the Ardoyne Commemoration Project, The Bloody Sunday Trust and Firinne/Truth. The range of work and services provided by these groups is extensive and wide-ranging. While some groups place emphasis on advocacy work – particularly on advocating measures and initiatives designed to bring the British state to account for its alleged role in killings – other groups have prioritised forms of 'storytelling' and 'truth-telling', in which victims are provided space to give testimonies of their suffering. Occasionally there have also been public demonstrations of nationalist victims' groups. An example of this was the 'March for Truth' which took place in Belfast on 12 August 2007. Featuring a number of victims' groups, the march and rally sought to illuminate collaboration between the British state and loyalist paramilitaries. Not just confined to victims' groups, the march also featured nationalist politicians and parading bands. A rally to culminate the protest featured Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Féin, who stated:

"The objective of this march and rally is to draw attention to collusion and British state violence, a policy which resulted in many thousands of victims who were killed or injured or bereaved, and the administrative and institutional cover-up by the British government and its state agencies." (Andersonstown News, 14 September 2007)

Unionist Victims' Groups

Prior to 1997 there appears to have been very few unionist victims' groups in operation. Between 1998 and 2000 at least ten unionist victims' groups were quickly formed. Whereas nationalist victims'

groups mainly focus on nationalist victims of state violence and loyalist violence, unionist victims' groups almost exclusively deal with victims of republican violence. The factors which have contributed to their mobilisation appear, however, multifaceted and complex.

One reason for this complexity is because, as Donnan and Simpson (2007) note, unionism appears to have historically been more defined by confidence and democratic triumph rather than on notions of victim hood. In contrariety, some unionist victims' groups have come to stand for the perceived current status of contemporary unionism as a whole. A further strand of complexity can be seen by assessing that many unionist victims' groups identify the actions of the British state during the peace process have exacerbated their suffering and that they have claimed to mobilise to protest against specific aspects of British state policy. This appears particularly complex if we consider that on the one hand the interventionist policies of the British state in the victims' agenda has provided the resources required for their mobilisation; on the other, unionist victims' groups have organised with others on the basis that the British state has worsened their plight.

An example of this apparent paradox can be seen in the development of the unionist victims' group FAIR (Families Acting for Innocent Relatives). Formed in 1998 FAIR have made reference to how the Memorial Fund, an initiative by the British state, to provide recognition and support for victims of the troubles in Northern Ireland, provided them with material resources and acknowledgement. Simultaneously, FAIR have argued that the British state has failed to listen to unionist victims. In a press conference in 1998 FAIR's press secretary sought to explain why it was this precise moment the group was formed: "people may ask the question 'why after 25 years?' We are asking the same thing, why 25 years? Why have we had to wait 25 years?" (Belfast Newsletter, September 22, 1998). The answer to his rhetorical question was that the prime motivation for FAIR's emergence was caused by the state's policy of releasing republican prisoners, the downscaling of British army presence in Northern Ireland and the reform of the police service. For FAIR these initiatives present an injustice: that the perpetrators of their victim hood (Irish republicans) were not, in their eyes, fully brought to justice and their protectors (the state security services) was subject to institutional reform.

Significantly, FAIR and other victims' group managed to broaden out links and networks with other unionist groups, especially political parties and the Orange Order to protest about a range of grievances viewed as endemic to unionists. This coalescence is forged through the notion that not only are unionist victims of the 'troubles' adversely affected by the policies of the British state, but that all unionists are discriminated against in the political dispensation. In many ways, the unionist victims' mobilisation has been framed by participants as a civil rights movement. The early mobilisations of unionist victims' groups in the late 1990s therefore sought to provide resonances with civil rights movements of the past. The Long March of 1999, for example, which was a 117 mile march from Derry to Portadown was termed by the organisers as a march for unionist human rights, evoking comparisons with the African-American and Northern Irish civil rights movements of the 1960s. A unionist politician, Frazer Agnew, who acted as a spokesperson stated:

"We want to show who are the real victims in Northern Ireland . We aim to highlight that Protestants have legitimate grievances which have been ignored. This is not just about the right to march. This is about the right to live free from intimidation, abuse and discrimination." (Belfast Telegraph, May 26, 1999).

A Protestant member of the clergy, Rev. Stephen Dickinson, subsequently added:

"The Protestant community is battered and bruised. We feel like strangers in our own country and we feel ignored, mistreated and betrayed. We believe this project is going to stir the heart of Ulster Protestants that their cause is just and right." (*Belfast Newsletter*, June 17, 1999).

That victims' groups became aligned to a broad political agenda has not been without acrimony. FAIR, the most high-profile and active unionist victims' group, split in 2000. A number of members, most notably FAIR's, secretary, left to form a new victims' group citing the need for a new approach free from political controversy. A spokesperson for the new break-away group, NAVER/SAVER, stated: "I feel that FAIR has got dragged into the political arena". Another new member stated that in contrary to the political focus of FAIR, "we feel we want to do more for individual victims, to give them a brighter future, to have better facilities and more for the young and the elderly". The leader of FAIR, Willie Frazer, replied that he would continue to emphasise "justice and human rights" (*Belfast Newsletter*, July 21, 2000). The Long March also came in for criticism. A unionist politician, Frazer Agnew, who had taken part in one of the stages of the Long March stated that the march "was like emotional blackmail ... I believe innocent victims are being exploited for political ends" (*Belfast Telegraph*, September 25, 1999).

Conclusion

This introduction provides a context for the emergence of many of the politically aligned victims' groups, both nationalist and unionist. While the post-conflict transitional stage often provides a scope for victims' groups to become a core facet of sustainable peace building, simultaneously the uncertainty caused by political transition as well as the conflict between realpolitik and justice, can see victims become more prominent in political debates. Although the British state since 1997 has broken its earlier policy of regarding victims as a low priority by providing unprecedented levels of support for victims, including encouraging the formation of victims' groups, the political maneuvering and trading during the post-conflict phase has angered unionist victims' groups for what they perceive as giving 'concessions' to those responsible for their suffering. For many nationalist victims' groups, on the other hand, they have mobilised to make the British state fully accountable for what they accuse of its role in the deaths of nationalists.

Victims can thus sometimes be manipulated by political organisations who target victims for their own ideological ends (Cap Gemini Ernst and Young 2001; Hamber 2006). Research (Deloitte and Touche 2001; Morrissey and Smyth 2002) has found, as Hamber (2006: 133) notes, "a continued high jacking of the so called victim issue, both in terms of individuals and in terms of defining one 'community' or the other as the 'real' victim".

This is fuelled by some nationalists and unionist groups who participate in what Burma (1999) has called an 'Olympics of suffering', in which competitors compete for 'superior status for their particular psychic suffering'. One pertinent reason for why this state of affairs exists is that despite diplomatic successes regarding reducing almost completely the level of politically motivated deaths in Northern Ireland, the conflict transition phase could be said to be one where the sphere of culture and identity has more than ever become the pursuit of war through other means. In other words, nationalists and unionists are presently engaged in a cold war and the discourse of victimhood fulfils a number of emotional (Hamber 2006) and political functions. Politically, many of the more macro diplomatic negotiations between nationalists and unionists have not been fully resolved; perpetuating 'victimhood' and 'minority community' is therefore a powerful trope that can be utilised to try to gain more economic and political concessions on the basis of deserved need and at the expense of the less deserving enemy oppressors.

Note

See the ['glossary'](#) for definitions of the terms that are used in the victims' debate in Northern Ireland.

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