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FULL TEXT OF ADDRESS BY DENIS BRADLEY

10 November 2008

*FULL TEXT OF SPEECH GIVEN BY DENIS BRADLEY AT
QUEENS UNIVERSITY, BELFAST*

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak here
today.

In particular I would like to thank The School of Nursing and Midwifery at Queen's University,



and WAVE for inviting me this afternoon. Both are doing tremendous work to try to help those who have suffered during the conflict.

Dealing with the past and the effects of grief and trauma on individuals, families and the community means these courses have now a greater relevance than ever. Many of the modules explore topics such as truth recovery; justice and trans-generational trauma. These are themes which our Group has heard on many occasions during our public consultation. I would like to commend the work you are doing and wish you well for the future.

The complexities and difficulties of how we deal with the legacy of our troubled past will come as no surprise to the people in this room today. You work, on a daily basis, with those who do not need reminded of the awfulness endured by many people during the conflict.

In our address in May we outlined many of the issues facing victims and survivors as they try to

cope with their pain and hurt. Those issues remain, and in many cases they become more acute by the day. The Commission for Victims and Survivors is developing and consulting on a draft programme to meet these needs. We welcome that and believe they are best positioned to tackle the everyday needs of victims and survivors.

Outside the victims sector there are many who would wish the past away; who believe that if we simply throw money at meeting the physical and emotional needs of victims then they should be happy, should go away and allow the rest of society to get on with the future. Dealing with the past is not just about victims; it is about our entire society.

If we are to truly deal with our past, of course we must look after the well-being of those who have suffered most. But to stop there, is to stop far short of actually dealing with the fundamental issues that led to our society ripping itself apart over the last forty years. Meeting

deal with our past.

It is also deeply unfair to place the entire burden of dealing with the past on the shoulders of victims alone. All of us in society have to look deep within ourselves and ask what role I have to play in dealing with this issue. Only with a collective response can we hope to build a shared and reconciled future in which we do not create a new generation of victims.

There has been some speculation in the media recently about what we may or may not recommend. Most of the coverage centred on the legal processes being used at present to deal with the legacy of the conflict and how we may find a better way of doing this. Although this type of speculation is inevitable it is also very unhelpful. It is unhelpful because it focuses on one part of the work we have been involved in. It does not represent the whole picture.

It is also unhelpful because it could lead some victims and survivors to question what our report

will have to offer them if it only deals with alternative legal processes. We understand some organisations representing victims have been asked such questions. I would like to take this opportunity to assure everyone that is just one part of our work. I would urge you all to wait for our final report which you will see takes a holistic approach to the past, not a piecemeal approach.

People have said to us – why not just stop everything that is going on – characterized in the phrase ‘draw a line in the sand’. I’m not sure they understand the magnitude of that statement.

Does this mean no more prosecutions? Well that would mean introducing a general amnesty.

Let me state in the clearest terms possible. The vast majority of people do not want an amnesty

– that was the clear message during our consultation. Also the international community is

increasingly moving away from granting general amnesties. There will be no amnesty

recommended in our report.

We addressed the issue of truth and justice in great detail in May. But let me re-emphasize the point that we have heard loud and clear. Some people want the prosecution route to remain open even if the chances of further prosecutions succeeding are much reduced. Equally many families want to get as much information as possible, on the circumstances of the death of their loved one, then they should be given that choice. Getting justice and finding the truth are going to be tremendously difficult.

Some argue that enough money has been spent on dealing with the past and that nothing more should be done. They say that the current processes should simply be allowed to run their course. We disagree with that for a number of reasons. If we base dealing with the past solely on how much it will cost in financial terms then we will be making a huge error of judgment. Of course we are mindful of the current economic climate but the reasons for dealing with this

issue go far beyond financial.

The real costs to our society and for future generations could be far more damaging than a purely financial burden. This is not a time for short term strategy; we have to look to the long term.

Any new approach will be fairer to everyone and will challenge wider society to engage for the sake of the future. We cannot keep going on beating ourselves up over the past. We firmly believe that we must deal with this within a reasonable timeframe. This should be done in one place which has the confidence of all sections of our community.

As individual families are helped to come to terms with their loss and their questions are answered, then this will undoubtedly help create a society that can finally remember the past without it overshadowing the future.

Also the current processes could continue for many, many years to come. We could be dealing with the past, through legal processes, for many years – depending on who you talk to it could take anything from ten to 35 years. That is unsustainable in a society that wants to work towards a shared and reconciled future. As we said in our address in May, we do not believe the current legal processes are the best way to deal with the legacy of the conflict.

So we either find a better way or we let these processes continue for many years to come. We believe we can find a better way; we need to find a better way. That way will not be a Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the lines of a South African model. That was their solution to their problem; what we need is our solution to our problem.

As I have said, the legal processes are only one of the areas that we will report on. Therefore I would like to take this opportunity to highlight to you today other areas that we will address in

our final report.

How we remember the past is very important to many people, particularly the families of those killed and injured. As with many issues in our society there are wide ranging thoughts on how this could best be done. Healing Through Remembering has carried out a lot of work on this.

During our consultation we heard from those who would like to see a national monument detailing those who were killed. I have to say that I am not convinced that that is possible in a society that is still ridden with division. There are, of course, many ways of remembering the past. Many commemorations take place; plaques adorn many streets to remember certain events; and there are many examples of living memorials through storytelling being developed. How to address how we remember the past will form an important part of our report.

The word reconciliation has in some ways become tarnished over the years. It engages some,

makes others roll their eyes, and makes others run for cover. But if dealing with the past has not got reconciliation as its ultimate goal then what is the point. The truth is that we live in a sectarian, segregated and separated society – it has often been said that more walls have been built to keep communities apart since the ceasefires than during the conflict. The cancer of sectarianism has eaten its way into many areas of life in Northern Ireland. We have segregated housing, schooling and leisure facilities. This segregation keeps the old suspicions and hatreds alive and must be challenged by everyone. Every year sectarianism and segregation costs over £1 billion.

What has been achieved is the absence of violence. But as long as the hatred, suspicions and a desire for revenge remains, then the possibility of the return of violence looms over this society.

We have made huge progress but the peace has not yet been won. If it is lost we could all pay a heavy price.

Many people have told us that wider society just doesn't care about the past – they say people are too busy getting on with their lives to concern themselves with such matters. We believe that only when wider society takes ownership of the past will we begin to ensure that it is not revisited on a new generation.

There is a huge challenge for everyone, not just the politicians – but also for the churches, business, unions, educationalists, the media and indeed everyone in society. We must all consider the role that we can and should play in building that shared future.

If we are not careful then all the great work of the last 10 years could be lost. It is an old saying but very apt in our circumstances – ‘those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it’.

THE CHOICES facing us as a society are stark – yet the prize is enormous. The goal of a shared and reconciled future will only be brought about if we learn from the failures of the past and put those lessons into practice.

The greatest shame for us all would be to refuse to face up to, and to learn from, the mistakes of the past. If conflict was to return to our towns and cities in the years to come, then that generation would have every right to look back and ask – what did you do to cement the peace?

Answering that it was too difficult to face up to or that it cost too much or that we could not deal with the victims of the conflict, will all sound like very hollow excuses indeed.

We have been listening, discussing and examining how to deal with the past for over a year now. We will be publishing our report when it is ready. We will not be rushed or pressurized by anyone. However we are, as always, sensitive to the feelings of victims and survivors. We are painfully aware that Christmas, in particular, is a very difficult time for many people who

lost a loved one during the conflict. This will inform our thinking as we plan the publication of our report. No one should therefore be surprised that the report will be published early in the New Year.

That report will give an honest assessment of the conflict and will recommend ways to finally close this violent chapter in our history to in a way that will allow everyone to look forward with real hope. Our report will challenge many people – governments, our political leaders, victims and survivors and wider society. Not everyone will agree with everything in it – that would be unrealistic.

But for anyone to dismiss it because this is just too difficult to deal with, or because it would cost too much, would be the biggest insult to the thousands of people who suffered over the last forty years. If we do not deal with the past and start to lay the foundations now for a

transformed society then there is the real possibility that this will not be the last generation to experience the horrors of conflict. We all have a huge opportunity before us to make sure that the awful events of the last forty years are never repeated.

Finally, I would urge everyone to read our report when it is published. Do not rely on the media to dissect it for you. Do not rely on our politicians to tell you what you should think it means. Make up your own mind on whether our recommendations will lay the foundations for dealing with the legacy of the past and present an opportunity in our lifetime for us to create a better future for generations to come.

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