

TRAUMA RECOVERY NETWORK (TRN) RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON THE PAST-DEALING WITH THE LEGACY.

As the protracted conflict closes we all face the ever present dilemma of how to deal with the legacy of the past. Notwithstanding the mood of political optimism for the NI Assembly, a pulse of mistrust beats very close to the surface of this much welcomed era of cooperation. There is a growing momentum for an agreed determination to support emergence from the conflict and complete the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

Critical questions still burden the aftermath of the conflict in NI:

How do we minimise the likelihood of reoccurrence and maximise the likelihood of sustaining the peace process?

How do we ensure that in so doing, development and participation across our community does not occur in such an uneven way that has key sections feeling isolated, left behind and undervalued?

The growing liberal consensus recently voiced by some prominent public figures argues that focus on dealing with the past and truth recovery processes reopen old wounds, are counter productive in relation to healing and are too costly. Against this many of those who suffered bereavement and trauma and may have spent time in prison or in exile believe that such processes are critical if all of us want to learn from the past and to understand fully the causes of political trauma and how to minimise any future reoccurrence.

It is true that to embark on even the most limited form of truth recovery process is replete with risk. However, the alternative- to do nothing or to pursue only the strategy of Cold Case Review- is likely to accomplish little apart from a desire for retribution in some quarters. Any truth recovery process, whatever shape it may take, must be underpinned by an ethos that does not just focus on prosecution and expose participants to risk of retaliation but rather encourages full and meaningful testimony. It is also important to demonstrate that amnesty should not have anything to do with truth recovery as this in itself could taint the genuine sincerity of involvement and access to the fullest accounts. If there is any amnesty, this should not be tied to any truth recovery process.

So what then are the conditions for sustainable peace?

Harvard Psychiatry Professor Emeritus Judith Lewis Herman, the most eminent international authority on trauma recovery, speaks to the situation regarding the conditions necessary for recovery from politically motivated violence.

Herman's assertions based on well reasoned international research argue convincingly that recovery from trauma is premised on truth recovery. Trauma survivors require a solemn commitment to build the conditions necessary for sustainable peace. Herman's analysis of these conditions outlines three essential components:

- 1. Safety:** that would include the sense of safety from threat and harm, the right to confidentiality, the provision of a safe space and trusted facilitators.
- 2. Space to tell the story:** be heard and acknowledged by all relevant parties, get all the necessary information and start the process of mourning.
- 3. Reconnection to life after the trauma:** that would include assistance for people who have been disabled through the conflict, to enable them to re-embrace life and move forward, and the reintegration of former political prisoners.

In particular she argues that recovery from trauma is best served by revelation of the true circumstance preceding, during and immediately after an atrocity; acknowledgment that terrible things happened and an awareness of the impact held for the whole community by the bereaved, injured and witnesses.

On this basis TRN supports a non punitive and non judicial truth recovery process as the framework for any overall attempt to acknowledge the past and move towards trauma recovery at community and societal level. In addition there is an urgent need to appoint a Victims Commissioner with the resources and energy to regulate the victim/survivor field and reduce opportunities to manipulate and exploit traumatised people in pursuit of political or other agendas.

TRN has as a vision:

“A society where there is a real understanding of what precipitates political trauma and what is required for trauma recovery”.

We firmly believe that in trying to fully acknowledge and deal with the past a truth recovery process must be developed in a comprehensive and strategic way that examines fully the causes of political conflict and in doing so, aids prevention of reoccurrence and breaks the cycle of transgenerational trauma.

