

How Should We Remember? The Work of the Northern Ireland Victims Commission

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield

I want to speak from two perspectives.¹ First, as one of those who has in the past, by action and inaction, contributed to the need to build peace and reconciliation. We will never advance until there is widespread acceptance that no one is entirely without guilt in the situation which had developed here. We were, of course, shaped - some would say deformed - by our inheritance and upbringing. We have lived in a society where too few have been free-thinking spirits, forming their political and religious judgements by rational and detached analysis. I worked for some 40 years in a career where it was necessary to try to stand back from one's own tastes and preferences. Did I always succeed? I doubt it. It is, perhaps, rather like that moment in a high profile trial when the jury is instructed to put something quite ineradicable out of its collective mind.

However, I do not suppose it was because of this perspective alone that I was invited to speak today, but rather because for some six months it was - to use a phrase from my published report - my 'painful privilege' to pick my way through the wreckage of all too many hopes and lives seeking to find acceptable ways in which the suffering of the victims of our violence could best be recognised and acknowledged. I underlined the word 'acceptable'. It did not feature in the terms of reference given to me by government, but did feature in the working instructions I gave myself. As I was to say repeatedly in the course of the Commission's work:

We have had victims because we have had violence. We have had violence because we've had division. It would, therefore, be perverse to the brink of obscenity to consider forms of recognition which could only add to division.

Some, I know, thought that this was mission impossible, and were not slow to tell me so. Better forget about it all, they said: draw a line and close the book. I had to address the question *should we remember?* And my answer was *yes*. Not only because we could not, would not in practice, forget, but for a welter of other reasons. These are the need to learn from disaster so as not to repeat it; and the need to ensure that the record of these thousands of infinitely valuable human lives should not simply be blotted from the record. Now, I do not propose to repeat the substance of my report today. Many of you, I hope, will have had the chance to read it, and the media very comprehensively conveyed its main thrust. Indeed, since the media sometimes come under the lash on these occasions, let me say that I think they handled the issues in my report professionally, sensitively and comprehensively.

What I want to do this morning is to say a few words first about what I might call disputed territory and then about common ground, concluding with some observations on how we might best move matters forward.

I was, of course, very well aware that in terms of my own background and experience, I would not necessarily be immediately accepted by everybody as a truly independent and objective Commissioner. Some of those I met very candidly told me so. And although I was very pleased by the overall reception given to my report when it was published, there was also a note of criticism that I had perhaps side-stepped or evaded what might be called wider 'truth and justice' issues. Some, for example, would clearly like me to have recommended firmly the establishment of a South African type of Truth and

Reconciliation Commission. Others would obviously have liked me to recommend wide-ranging further inquiries into disputed deaths in controversial circumstances.

I want, first of all, to make it clear that throughout my Commission's review, my door was open to anyone, regardless of political affiliation or community origins, who wanted to see me. I was prepared to listen, and indeed did listen, most carefully to all representations made to me. Secondly, since I had the rather invidious distinction of being a single Commissioner rather than the Chairman of a body of people, I made a resolution that those who expressed views to me should be able to speak to government through my report; that I would convey as accurately and honestly as I could any strongly-felt representations made to me. But I was not, of course, an investigatory body, a court of inquiry or a detective agency. I could honestly report that particular views were sincerely held and forcibly expressed; I was in no position to judge whether they were soundly based.

Some, I know, would have been very happy to see me recommend a truth and reconciliation commission in the hope that it could relieve many of these uncertainties and establish some wholesome truths. I would certainly have been failing in my duty if I had not acknowledged in my report that in a number of societies, including South Africa, a mechanism along these lines had been felt to be helpful. As far as I am concerned, that idea, that possibility, remains on the table. But I believe it would now have to be addressed in the wider context of what I hope and pray will be a developing political reconciliation. A commission could only emerge as a useful, a non-divisive, a healing, and again - to use that word 'acceptable instrument' if those who are to carry our future forward agree that it can serve such a purpose. In South Africa, after all, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission emerged from the balanced political negotiations. And it seems to me if I have not misunderstood it - to express a sophisticated trade-off between the search for truth on the one hand and the possibility of amnesty on the other.

On the wider ground of my report, I want to emphasise that certain issues should not be rushed. This may surprise some of you, because commonly the authors of reports to government believe that nothing could better serve the public good than the immediate implementation of all their recommendations. In this case I believe that the questions of a memorial scheme such as a trust fund for the families of victims - or a memorial project - such as a garden and/or a suitable memorial building dedicated to appropriate purposes - need and deserve some further reflection. Timeliness and acceptability are the significant criteria here. Already some interesting issues are emerging. I placed emphasis, in suggesting some sort of memorial trust, on dealing with the problems of children and young people in the families of victims. While I would not wish to deviate from this as a crucial objective, the point has been very reasonably made that in the case of some of the earliest outrages of the Troubles, all members of the family at the centre of events will now have reached maturity. This may point to the need for some wider objectives alongside serving children and young people. Then we are still waiting for a reaction from various interests outside the government. I do hope, in particular, that the churches will give some constructive thought to the suggestion of a memorial day and a unifying symbol to mark it. As many of you may know, my own thought was that the flower of the gorse or whin bush might be a suitable emblem.

I have said that certain issues should not be rushed. But others should be high up the agenda. Here there may be a risk of delay because we now live in a transitional period before the prospective hand over of substantial devolved powers of government to a locally elected executive. In some cases there may be a tendency not to take decisions which could and arguably should now be left for local determination. But I believe some of the recommendations for practical measures to help the victims brook no delay, and that local politicians would almost certainly be comfortable with early and constructive action.

Here I want to say how very pleased I was by the Government's very constructive and swift initial response. Adam Ingram has been appointed as Minister for Victims here in Northern Ireland, and now John Wilson has been given a similar role in the Republic. I had the opportunity to present my report in person to the Prime Minister Tony Blair, and to discuss the question of victims in the Republic with the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. So here is my agenda for early action:

1. Comprehensive consideration of the potential of voluntary and community groups to take effective and helpful action in their various localities, with a view to assessing their future programmes and funding needs.
2. Establishment of the needs of victims as an accepted subset of the public expenditure priority 'targeting social need'.
3. Comprehensive action based on my own report and the admirable work led by the Social Security Inspectorate to improve counselling and other services through better training and in other ways.
4. Decisive action to deal with an over-stretch in treating pain and trauma.
5. A review of the economic circumstances of victims, including in particular the impact of the compensation system.

We must acknowledge that the last named issue is a very complex and difficult one. Huge sums of public money have already been paid out; governments everywhere are notoriously reluctant to revisit settled claims; and the last thing I would wish to do is to raise hopes and expectations only to have them dashed. It could be that no more would be possible than to effect some improvement for the future. But I certainly believe strongly that this is an area requiring objective and wholly independent review.

The early signs are encouraging. Mr. Ingram has assembled a central unit capable of carrying the issue forward. And I am more than happy that this will include Mary Butcher, my indefatigable assistant throughout the work of the Commission, who will bring to the task deep knowledge and sensitivity, and an understanding of the full background to my recommendations. I hope that they will work with others, not only in government and its agencies, but amongst employers and other interests, to ensure that the profile of an issue significantly raised by recent events is not allowed to fall back again.

In conclusion, let me say that nothing, absolutely nothing I have done since I entered the public service over 45 years ago has made such a deep and permanent impression upon me. I have met so many brave people, and also so many dedicated individuals and organisations determined to help them, that I believe some real good can be delivered out of all this distress. Many of the solo instruments for the better recognition of victims are already in place; they now need to have a proper orchestration, with the endorsement at the highest level of leadership in our governments. It is almost unique in my experience of government to find a sum made available before there had been detailed proposals for spending it, and it is clear that Mr Blair's welcome announcement of some weeks ago was no more than a payment on account.

So, to return to the question posed in this second session *How should we remember?* My answer is this. By urgent action to deal effectively with the problems of victims affected, involving not only government but the whole of society; by appropriate forms of memorial schemes and of projects in an acceptable form and in due course; but above all by vowing singly and collectively that we shall cease to inflict such wounds upon our own brothers and sisters.

Notes

¹ Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's chapter is the text from his speech given at the *Dealing with the Past: Reconciliation Processes and Peace-Building Conference* hosted by INCORE on 8 and 9 June 1998 in Belfast.