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Politics

How do we deal with the past?

Ministers clash in debate over the legacy of the Troubles

Thursday, August 09, 2007

By Noel McAdam

DUP and Sinn Fein Ministers clashed last night over how Northern Ireland should deal with the legacy of the Troubles.

DUP executive minister Edwin Poots told a mainly nationalist audience in west Belfast that it was time to make the choice to move on from the past.

And the Arts and Culture Minister said he did not see what the March for Truth rally - an event planned for this weekend, supported by Sinn Fein and designed to highlight British state involvement in murders - could achieve.

Mr Poots became the latest senior unionist politician to take part in the annual West Belfast Talks Back debate on a panel which also included Sinn Fein minister Caitriona Ruane, Irish Senate member and commentator Eoghan Harris and Policing Board chairman, Sir Desmond Rea.

The DUP minister came in for criticism from some audience members after saying he suggested it was time to move on from the 1980s and 90s.

"We are now in a new era in Northern Ireland," he said.

"It's long past time that people decided they should move on and leave the past behind," he added.

Mr Poots said many of the families of the 1,800 unsolved murders during the troubles had made the choice to move ahead and look for a better future for their children.

But Education Minister Ms Ruane, said she fundamentally disagreed with Mr Poots.

"If we do not understand the past, we are condemned to repeat it," she said. She said that while many working-class nationalists and loyalists had gone to jail, there were British soldiers and police officers who had a licence to kill and did not go to jail - in fact in many cases, they were decorated, she said.

Audience members asked Mr Poots if he would give the same advice to move on to the Orange Order and realise many families needed to uncover the truth of what happened to loved ones.

John Finucane, son of the murdered solicitor Pat Finucane, asked Mr Rea if he believed the Finucane family was "chained to the past". Mr Rea said he recognised the hurt of the Finucane and countless other families and believed the new body co-chaired by Anglican Primate Robin Eames and his former board deputy, Denis Bradley, was the right way to go forward.

Mr Harris drew groans and some jeers from the audience, which included Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams, when he said it seemed people in west Belfast were prepared to march for one side only. Mr Poots said Mr Adams had not been prepared to deliver for former First Minister David Trimble but had "done it" for Ian Paisley.

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