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Opinion

Difficult task of linking truth and search for justice

Wednesday, July 04, 2007

The announcement of the formation of an Independent Consultant Group set up by former Secretary of State Peter Hain is a welcome sign that the Government recognises dealing with our past is one of the great unresolved issues of our peace process. If the conflict is not to be repeated by future generations, it is important that we examine this issue and find a way to deal with the past that helps build a better future for us all.

However, as an organisation which has been working in this area for over seven years, Healing Through Remembering (HTR) has concerns about the approach to this complex issue. For this reason, we have written to the Consultant Group - which will be headed by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley - inviting them to meet us. Here, I will touch on some of the challenges that lie ahead, not only for the group, but also for others in society.

The group will find that they have not been presented with an easy task. As a Government-commissioned body, they will have access to resources which we - as an independent organisation that neither takes funding from Governments nor is designated for victims' services - do not have. However, the hurdles to this work are not necessarily in terms of resources.

This is an emotive topic. For many, even discussing options on dealing with the past is a painful experience. There is also an enormous amount of distrust - one of the legacies of the past that must be addressed, but which paradoxically makes it even harder to do so. Many feel unequipped to engage, and issues of hierarchy loom large due to the differences in capacity to even debate the areas of this work.






Like the members and staff of HTR, the group will need to consider both their own individual background and views, and their collective make-up. This impacts not only how they consider the task and the challenges before them, but also how others view them, and thereby engage with their consultation. Unlike HTR, they will have the added burden that they are commissioned in their work by a Government that is itself a party to the last decades of violence. Their final report may well make uncomfortable reading for some, not least those who have commissioned it.

It is unfortunate that the debate regarding their formation seems to be linked to the financial cost involved in the on-going inquiries into events in the conflict. They will need to look, not just at the complicated issues of truth, acknowledgement and justice, but also to consider alternative ways of dealing with the past. It struck HTR that the embargo for the press release announcing the team was at one minute after the end of June 21, a day on which HTR had invited individuals to reflect privately on the conflict. We are inviting feedback from individuals and groups on the merit or dangers that this day presented so as to inform any decision on holding a future Day of Reflection. As well as a Day of Reflection and processes of Truth Recovery and Acknowledgement, HTR is also exploring the ideas of a living memorial museum, a network of commemoration initiatives and a collective storytelling process as ways of dealing with the past.

While the needs of victims must be central to any solutions for dealing with the past, it is also important that the issue is not seen simply in terms of victims and perpetrators. This is an issue for all of society. Unless we consider what caused the conflict to start and to grow, we have little real chance of preventing a recurrence of violence in later generations. There are hard questions to be asked, not only of those engaged in the violence, but also of institutions and organisations, including, for example, churches, political parties, media, health services, education and housing organisations.

This is also a challenge for those with political power: to ensure they do not consider that this issue is being dealt with and therefore can be ignored in favour of less contentious areas of their work. A watch must be kept on this issue and the work of the group; the conclusions will have implications not only for us, but for generations to come.

Roy McClelland is chairman of Healing Through Remembering, a cross-community organisation focused on dealing with the past

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
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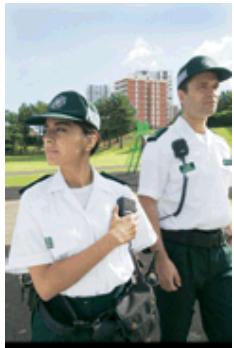
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