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Daily Features

The Victims: A legacy of suffering

Thursday, March 08, 2007

Victims of the Troubles feel hurt, angry and frustrated - both by what happened to them, and how they've been treated subsequently, says Bertha McDougall, the former Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

The road back to normality will take a long time for us all, she says, but where need arises out of the conflict, it has to be met, no matter who it comes from

When I undertook the post as Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, it was to look at the provision currently in place and to make recommendations to co-ordinate future provision and the associated resources required.

I have always stated that my report should provide a basis for taking forward issues for victims and survivors, but that it would not provide the answers to over 30 years of conflict.

I have felt enormously privileged and humbled in the last year in the way that people have been prepared to share their individual experiences with me, and I am taking this opportunity to reiterate some aspects of the report of which I believe the whole community needs to be aware.

Many individuals, both from the statutory sector and groups in the voluntary and community sector, have provided emotional and practical support for victims and survivors over the years, and that support has been invaluable in helping people on their journey as they cope with their loss.

People who have suffered as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland are attempting to address a legacy of almost 40 years. Realistically, it must be accepted that the road back to normality will take a long time for us all, but particularly for the many victims.

Community

Many people I met right across the community were consistent in their feeling of being discarded and treated as a constant reminder of what we want to forget. Many were frustrated and angry, not just with what had happened to them, but at how they have been treated subsequently.






Many in society can forget that lives have been irretrievably broken and damaged. That many of those injured still live in constant pain. That others have to depend on family members who lovingly and consistently provide them with practical support and care, without complaint or regard to personal cost and the loneliness of caring.

These are the silent victims who have been impacted directly by the Troubles, but who are not reflected in the government statistics of those who died or were injured.

Many would consider the cost in purely financial terms, but the real cost needs to be considered within the context of human suffering, meaning the physical, emotional and psychological trauma inflicted on individuals and society as a whole.

The articles in the Belfast Telegraph last week give some insight into this.

Survivors

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There is a definition of a victim in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, but I have found that there is no consensus on the definition within the community. Therefore, my emphasis throughout my year as Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors was to concentrate on individuals and on their needs, and my goal was to make recommendations that should have a positive impact on their quality of life. For me, that means that where an individual has a need arising out of the conflict, be that a need for counselling, befriending or practical help, that need must be met, regardless of who it comes from. I believe that unless this happens, the individual continues to suffer and the immediate family and the wider community also suffer the consequences.

It is vital that there is open communication with all, as there are many sensitivities in this area, and while at times these may be individual perceptions, they must be addressed. For example, there was concern expressed after my report was published that some individuals had early access to the report. This was never the case, as only the media and the political parties were given advance copies, but such perceptions can cause hurt.

The following summarises the main recommendations for services and funding:

- All aspects of Trauma service arrangements are taken forward through the recommendations of the Bamford Review;
- The Memorial Fund is phased out in conjunction with the development of a new fund;
- A flexible funding structure is established to deal with the evolving and complex needs of victims and survivors and those who care for them;
- The new fund makes an annual payment of £2,000, subject to financial profiling, to spouses bereaved prior to 1988.
- There is a review of the funding provided to victims' and survivors' groups to take account of longer term planning and sustainability.

I believe that if the recommendations are implemented they should:

- Improve the practical provision;
- Enable sustained financial provision for those with the greatest need;
- Co-ordinate the delivery of health-related services;
- Provide continued support through the ongoing work of groups;
- Acknowledge and recognise individual experiences through setting up a forum to address practical issues and ways of dealing with the past;
- Continue to promote the needs of young people through the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors in conjunction with the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

In considering the need for a Victims and Survivors Forum, it became apparent to me that as a society we have not even begun to deal with the issues of the past.

There are many frequent comments about "dealing with the past", but there is little agreement as to how this may be undertaken.

Dealing with the past is a very complex and sensitive issue and it is something that needs to be addressed not just by victims and survivors, but by society as a whole.

Angry

When the term 'drawing a line under the past' is used, many victims and survivors feel hurt and angry, as they perceive this to be saying "forget the past". We cannot forget the past, nor should we, but we need to find a way to deal with the past that will also allow victims and survivors to look to the future, particularly for the young in society.

To deal with the past is likely to require an 'agreed approach' and an acknowledgement that the hurt in our society comes from many different circumstances and that there is no one way forward.

However, when dealing with the past the 'agreed approach' will need to apply to all incidents and cannot be applied selectively.

For many victims and survivors 'recognition', and 'acknowledgement' are at the centre of their concerns, particularly that their suffering and hardship would not be ignored and forgotten.

In all my consultations, a forum was considered to be a necessary vehicle for victims and survivors to have their voices heard on relevant issues. Whatever form the forum might take, it had to be independent, inclusive, accountable, effective and productive - but most of all, it should be practical.

Victims

It should also be acknowledged that this process will be slow and is likely to begin with story telling. The whole process must take account of what victims and survivors want, and key to that process will be the management of expectations as to what a forum may be able to provide for victims and survivors and, equally important, what it will not be able to deliver.

It will not be easy - it will be very painful. But if it can assist in ensuring that never again will so many have to pay such a personal cost, then I believe it will be worthwhile.

I have recommended that, taking account of the state of readiness of victims and survivors, the forum should initially be facilitated through the Office of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and should lead to an independent round table forum.

When I am asked about this past year, I tell people that while it is a strange term to use, I have enjoyed my year as Interim Commissioner as it has been very worthwhile meeting so many people who were prepared to be very open with me about their views.

On behalf of victims and survivors, I have often felt angry, frustrated, sad and hopeful. Angry and frustrated at the way individuals had been treated as they tried to access what they needed, sad at the continual emotional pain so many live with, yet hopeful because of the dignity and compassion expressed by so many.

I cannot change the past for people, but I hope that my report and the recommendations, if implemented, will provide a sound basis to take forward a co-ordinated strategic approach to address the many ongoing issues for victims and survivors.

- Bertha McDougall took up the appointment as Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors in December

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2005, to carry out a review of the current support for victims and survivors of the Troubles and to consider how to set up a Victims & Survivors Forum. In a Judgement delivered on January 15, 2007, Lord Justice Girvan held that the post of Interim Victims' Commissioner came to an end on December 5 by operation of Contract. Bertha McDougall presented her report in a personal capacity in January

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