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Simple handshake provides a shaft of hope amid Northern Ireland's darkest shadows

Thursday, 29 January 2009

They stood head to head, eye-balling each other, trading insults, fighting back the tears.

On one side the brother of a teenage IRA member shot dead by the British Army in Londonderry, the other a daughter who lost her parents in an IRA bomb attack on a fish shop in the loyalist Shankill Road, Belfast.

Read the full report here [pdf 640 KB]

Daniel Bradley, a Catholic already incensed by unionist protests which delayed the start of proceedings, could barely contain himself as Michelle Williamson, a Protestant, let fly. It was as if years of bitterness and pain for each other's traditions suddenly exploded. A sad and distressing exchange between two people who had never met before.



Michelle Williamson, whose mother and father were killed in the Shankill Bomb, 1993, and Daniel Bradley, brother of an IRA man killed in 1972

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From wholly different backgrounds and with very contrasting opinions on the contentious Troubles' legacy report, they traded angry words for almost five minutes, both making sure the other knew exactly how much pain they had suffered.

Then suddenly, just as the row looked destined to end in recrimination and resentment, Mr Bradley tentatively reached out his right hand. She took it cautiously and in a remarkable act of conciliation the pair wished each other well.

"We need to move on," he said as he clasped her palm. "We have to put this behind us."

It was a rare shaft of hope on a day when many of Northern Ireland's dark shadows ominously reappeared in the Europa Hotel's Grand Ballroom.

Ms Williamson was there to protest — angry at the proposal to compensate relatives of dead paramilitaries, just like Mr Bradley.

"He told me his brother died for the cause," she said afterwards. "Well my mother and father died with shopping bags in their hands, they were innocent victims."

"But we shook hands. That does give me a glimmer of hope for the new Northern Ireland."

Few expected the launch of the consultative group on the past's recommendations to pass without incident, and with the usual suspects in place, so it proved.

First the demonstrators picketed the front entrance and then formed a protest line at the front of the platform inside.

MEP and leader of the Traditional Unionist Voice Jim Allister was prominent, no doubt with an eye on the forthcoming European elections.

The tormentor-in-chief of the Democratic Unionists, who resigned from the party over its decision to enter powersharing with Sinn Fein, branded the report as amoral and another sop to republicanism.

Northern Ireland Troubles Gallery



Drumcree: Petrol bomber on Garvaghy Rd



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DISEASE. ABUSE. NEGLECT.

Well-known victims' campaigner Willie Frazer, who lost five family members at the hands of the IRA, was also among the loud dissenting voices. Drawn mainly from the unionist tradition, they focused much of their ire at Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, who was among the 300 guests in the Grand Ballroom.

He sat impassively as he was subjected to a sustained barrage of insults and allegations both before and during the presentation.

And of course no unionist protest would be complete without the former Assembly member Cedric Wilson who led a sustained and familiar verbal attack on the west Belfast MP. Red with rage, he only agreed to fall silent after being threatened with arrest.

But that was not the last intervention from the renegade Mr Wilson, who repeatedly interrupted proceedings from the fringes. And as the voices of the Protestant demonstrators rose, so inevitably came retorts from republican victims' groups seated, all too predictably, at the other side of the room.

Among those who sat quietly and uncomfortably as the brickbats flew was Police Service of Northern Ireland Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde, who learned hours earlier that he had missed out on the job as the Commissioner of the Metropolitan.

He was joined by former Met Commissioner Lord (John) Stevens, who 10 years ago conducted an investigation into paramilitary collusion with the security forces during the Troubles.

Ironically, the pair appeared to be the only officers in the room when one of the organisers called on the police to remove Mr Wilson.

Yet while the heated exchanges undoubtedly made for dramatic TV images, the warm and enthusiastic applause for Lord Eames and Denis Bradley at the close suggested the silent majority was perhaps not as outraged with their proposals as those who vented their anger from the sidelines.

Admitting their report wasn't perfect and could never please all, the co-authors urged their audience to at least give it a chance.

As the crowds drifted from the hall, leaving the angry voices of the remaining protesters behind them, it seemed most were content to do just that.

"If we don't take action now," Denis Bradley told them of the lingering hurt, "it will move to the generation not yet born and the cycle will begin again."

His words rang true for many there, but so too had the opening remarks from Brian Currin, a South African mediator who advised the consultative group.

"The peace process, as we well know, has a long, long journey to go," he said.

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Live in peace together or die in war alone? It's a no-brainer.

Posted by Davy | 10.02.09, 19:10 GMT

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No Mickey, it is simply not good enough to trot out 'We must all move on'. The fact remains that this proposal does indeed place terrorists on a par with their victims and no civilized society would entertain such an idea, regardless of any need to bury the past. What next? A government grant for Bin Laden?

Shameful, shameful, shameful. Eames should resign forthwith from all positions he is involved in, be they clerical or otherwise. I, for one, will not set foot in a C. of I. church again while he is any way connected with it. Thank goodness it appears that Brown (displaying some common sense) may reject this nonsense.

Posted by Jimbo | 29.01.09, 19:59 GMT

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Well done Michelle Williamson and well done Daniel Bradley, for evil prospers when good people do nothing.

Please note that there was no money involved in this simple but significant gesture.

Posted by Thos | 29.01.09, 17:51 GMT

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With tears in my eyes I think a picture of the two people shaking hands would have served the article, and those reading it better.

Posted by RMS | 29.01.09, 16:17 GMT

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See the plaque on the side of the Corr house in Carland, Co. Tyrone, about the Carland Riots. " - - - Let peace in Carland ever be."

We do need to learn from the past.

Posted by Patrick J. Corr | 29.01.09, 13:55 GMT

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Yes Mickey, suggest you take your own advice there. Your constant sniping and malicious lies make you among the worst offenders

Posted by Tony | 29.01.09, 12:33 GMT

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For once, well said Mickey!!

Posted by Mark | 29.01.09, 12:22 GMT

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"We need to move on," he said as he clasped her palm. "We have to put this behind us."

The single most important thing that occurred yesterday.

Could some of the neanderthals, who contribute to these pages and regularly attempt to dredge up the past, adopt this policy?

Time will tell.

Posted by mickey | 29.01.09, 09:36 GMT

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