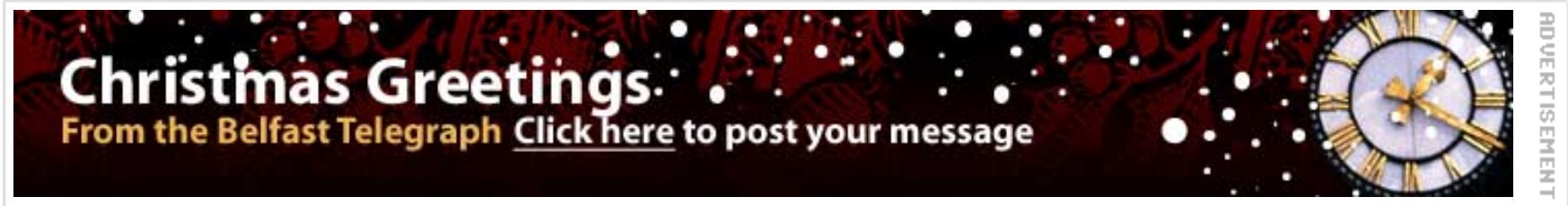


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Local & National

Finally some focus on drawing the truth out of Ulster's past

Friday, December 08, 2006

By Brian Rowan

In a small meeting, there was another beginning to the big discussion - the business of our past, how to achieve truth and what that truth might be.

What was clear in the conversation was that we have now moved beyond the narrow choices of either doing what was done in South Africa or doing nothing.

Last Friday, in the Indian Community Centre that sits beside the Orange Hall on Clifton Street in north Belfast, there was a focused debate, a structure to the discussion and options to think and talk about.






That has been made possible by the work of the locally based Healing Through Remembering group, which brings under its roof a wide range of opinion - people who in our "war" would have found it difficult to sit and talk with each other.

The fact that they have been part of the making of a report that is now at the heart of the debate was described on Friday as "a symbolic expression - a sign of hope".

Six of the group were there to discuss that recent report - Making Peace With The Past - and the five options it has presented as possible ways forward.

The panel included the former senior RUC/PSNI officer Irwin Turbitt; Mike Ritchie, director of the republican ex-prisoners group Coiste na nIarchimí; Andrew Rawding a former Army officer; Dawn Purvis, chairwoman of the UVF-aligned Progressive Unionist Party; the Healing Through Remembering project co-ordinator Kate Turner; and consultant Brandon Hamber.

They were joined in the room by just over a dozen others, most of whom had something to say on what they thought was possible and not possible in the context of the options under discussion.

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So, what are they? Well, they stretch across a range of possibilities.

They start with drawing a line under the past - a "do nothing else" option, which would mean that existing inquiry processes would continue but there would be no additional formal steps towards truth recovery.

Then there is the option of "internal organisational investigations", asking all who were involved in the conflict - not just republicans and loyalists - to provide information to victims.

There could be "community-based truth recovery", meaning local people would collect and document information, testimony and stories about events in their areas.

Option four is a truth recovery commission.

This would focus on events over a specified period of time and would be set up by the British and Irish governments.

A fifth possibility is for a "commission of historical clarification" - an independent body that would prepare an authoritative narrative about what occurred during the conflict and why.

These are the options that Healing Through Remembering is taking out into the community for discussion - the conversation that began last Friday and that will continue in about a dozen other such meetings.

The timeframe for this debate is to be in the region of 12 months.

"The report gives us the information we need to have an open and honest debate about how to deal with truth recovery," Kate Turner told the Belfast Telegraph.

"What are the issues? What are the possibilities?"

"We are just hoping to hear from as many people as possible who have thoughts on this."

What the panel members were keen to highlight last Friday was that their report is not about definitive recommendations. In the words of Dawn Purvis, it is something that is designed to help the discussion - something that is intended to "focus debate".

Mike Ritchie made the point that you could "mix and match" the options - that the emergence of truth "is a process, not an event", that there are ways in which drawing this out "could be done", and the challenge now is to see if a consensus can be achieved on the way forward.

That won't be easy.

I think the beginning to this process almost needs some agreed definition of what it is we have been through, what it is we are talking about - this thing that some call the Troubles and others call terrorism or war or conflict.

Someone in the audience on Friday mentioned "the extremes" and was asked by someone else whether that included MI5.

Finding a way - a process - to achieve truth or get explanations for what happened over 30 years and more will be difficult enough.

Getting agreement on what it is we are talking about might be harder still.

Mike Ritchie says you maybe try to achieve that definition as part of the wider process.

"Perhaps the way is to have some sort of formal process where you ask independent, honest brokers to have a comprehensive look, resolve outstanding problems from the past and give an account of the nature, causes and extent of what we have been through."

This process has many pieces and fitting them all together might prove the biggest challenge in this period beyond the many hundreds of deaths of the last three decades or so.

But there is a group of people out there who have at least begun the discussion and who have now given it



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