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Brian Rowan: Victims alone cannot carry the burden of past sufferings

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

At Queen's University, Denis Bradley once more juggled all of those difficult issues that are part and parcel of Northern Ireland's past and present.

The issues of sectarianism, segregation, victims, survivors, amnesty, prosecutions, the dead and the cost of dealing with and not dealing with a conflict of several decades.

"We cannot keep going on beating ourselves up over the past," he said.

"We firmly believe that we must deal with this within a reasonable timeframe.

"This should be done in one place, which has the confidence of all sections of our community," he suggested.

But will that Commission, expected to be recommended by the Consultative Group, with its two units — Investigations and Information Recovery — be that place of confidence?

Who will establish it, who will fund it, whose truth will be told and whose won't?

Those questions will have to be answered when the report and recommendations of the Eames-Bradley Group are published in the New Year.

There will be an ugly battle — an argument and long debate — before any implementation.

The IRA and the UDA refused to meet the Consultative Group, the UVF did talk once, and then there is the question of the role of the State in conflict and killing.

Mr Bradley has said that our process will not be the South African model of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

But what will it be, and can it be something that will bring the IRA, the loyalists, the State and many others to the same place of explanation?

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It is much too soon to think of answering that question.

At Queen's, Mr Bradley talked on a range of issues — and the Consultative Group wanted this speech to be heard in every corner in every community, and not just by victims.

“Outside the victims sector there are many who would wish the past away, who believe that if we simply throw money at meeting the physical and emotional needs of victims then they should be happy, should go away and allow the rest of society to get on with the future,” he said.

“Dealing with the past is not just about victims, it is about our entire society.”

But is that society ready for a process that will shovel all that recent history to the surface to be sifted through and examined before we move on?

There are others who can't move on — who have been broken physically and emotionally, and at Queen's, Mr Bradley said: “It is deeply unfair to place the entire burden of dealing with the past on the shoulders of victims alone.”

What he is asking is, who else is prepared to carry the weight?

The question of the past and how it is dealt with is the next political football — something that will be kicked and played in all directions.

There are those who want to hear and are demanding to hear Gerry Adams' truth — but he will have questions of his own to ask of others.

No one knows yet the direction this process will take.

Writing a report and making recommendations is one thing — getting them implemented is something quite different.

“If we do not deal with the past and start to lay the foundations now for a transformed society then there is the real possibility that this will not be the last generation to experience the horrors of conflict,” Mr Bradley warned.

He said that for as long as “hatred, suspicion and a desire for revenge remains, then the possibility of the return of violence looms over this society”.

And he offered an opinion that “the peace has not yet been won”.



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