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Opinion

Brian Rowan: No winners in digging up the past

Wednesday, May 16, 2007

Have we had too many inquiries into the past? Security writer Brian Rowan questions their necessity

It is an opinion that is shared right across the policing family.

So, when Stephen Grange spoke the words at the recent annual meeting of the Superintendents' Association, he was speaking for many more than were in the room.

In how the past is being addressed, he said there was a need for the Government to pause for breath.

Someone else put it much more bluntly. "We are in a hole and we need to stop digging," he told me.

In his speech, Stephen Grange - a police chief superintendent - said there was a "perception that a hierarchy of victimhood exists", and there were "grave concerns about the present management and focus of this process."

"We, in the Superintendents' Association, would call upon Government to pause in this relentless pursuit of the past," he said.

They are talking about the public inquiries and the investigations by the Police Ombudsman that dig deep into an often very dirty war.

So what is their problem - their complaint?

The issues are balance and context - and the perception is that the tools of these investigations and inquiries, the shovels and spades, are digging in one place only.

They have a point.

We don't yet know what the contribution of the IRA, UVF and UDA leaderships will be to answering the questions of our past.

When are they going to be asked and by whom?

Is any serious thought being given to any of this?

Maybe there is a need to pause for breath until we have some more of the answers.

To only search some of the corners is to ignore much of what happened.

So, if it's going to be done - if there is going to be an examination of our past - let the investigating eyes look everywhere.

I have said before that everyone who gave an order should be in the room.

No side should be allowed to stay away - there should be no half-truth process.

If we want the war examined, then let's examine it all.

And that's some of what we need to find out first.






Who will come to the table, and what will their contribution be?

Let's ask the political, security, republican and loyalist leaderships who they will send into any such process and for what purpose.

And let us be sure we know what the victims need and want.

If we are going to pose the questions, then we need someone to ask them - and getting that right would be a useful first step.

There are already suggestions in the background about who should be "dusted down" to do such work.

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We can be confident now that the wars are over.

What has grown out of our political process is something quite remarkable, but underneath it all, there is a gaping wound that needs some proper care.

The past and how we deal with it is important to our future.

There is some rich research out there. The Healing Through Remembering project has produced written work that offers possible ways forward.

They have thought this through, and they have given us the beginnings of some process.

But who wants to be part of it and who doesn't?

Some of what was filthy in the world of the Special Branch and informants has been shovelled to the surface in recent probes.

But that is only part of the story - part of our past.

We need a process. We need to know what the questions are. We need to know who is going to ask them. We need to know who is going to answer them. And we need to know what we are going to do with all that information.

Maybe more than anything else, we need to take that pause for breath.

What is it we want to know and why?

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