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Gerry's Maze escape brings home his past to unionists

After the adverse reaction to this week's BBC documentary about the IRA breakout from the Maze, Brian Rowan wonders how many will feel about the details that will emerge when Lord Eames and Dennis Bradley release their report on the past

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The ink is not yet dry on the report – but the document is well into its construction. Yet one wonders whether in the current political climate – in that standoff at Stormont – how ready our politicians are for a report and recommendations on the questions of the past.

The Eames-Bradley Consultative Group is well down the road in terms of its work and writing. The report will be ready sooner rather than later – possibly by November.

From inside the group any suggestion of any slowing down because of political pressure or difficulties is dismissed.

“When the job's done we will let it go,” a source commented.

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It will go to the Secretary of State — and then will be filtered into the political system.

It could start another fire.

Take the unionist reaction to just one event in our past — the Maze Prison breakout and the role of now junior minister Gerry Kelly in that IRA escape.

In this, the 25th anniversary of the jailbreak, the story was told in a recent BBC television documentary. “Chilling” was the word used by one unionist leader — who said that Northern Ireland in this ‘settling in stage’ does not need ‘primetime reminders of the past’.

That escape is one tiny piece in a huge jigsaw — a picture of the past that is not just about the IRA and Gerry Kelly, but a ‘war’ of many sides and many parts, including the role of the State and how, in the recent words of Eames-Bradley, “innocent people were allowed to die”.

How ready are the politicians for a report that will begin to open out that debate?

Gerry Adams believes the success of any truth process will depend on the “full co-operation by all relevant parties”.

But is that really achievable?

Gerry Kelly — the unapologetic republican — has, at times, spoken about his past, including his role in the Maze escape.

It is part of his truth, however ugly and chilling some may find it.

But bringing that one story out into open caused quite a reaction.

So, what will the whole story and the whole truth do – that truth from “all relevant parties”?

There is no ‘right time’ for the Eames-Bradley report — and there will be those who won’t like its content and who will struggle with its recommendations.

But this report is not an end in itself.

It’s more a beginning — trying to create a structure within which some of these most difficult questions can not only be asked, but possibly answered.

The Healing Through Remembering Group based in Belfast grew out of some thinking back in 1999, and has been having these discussions across a wide group of people from all sorts of backgrounds for almost 10 years.

“Dealing with the past is not just a nice debate about what we put in a museum or how we explain the Sixties, 70s, 80s to schoolchildren,” project co-ordinator Kate Turner commented.

“It’s about how we relate to each other, and how we engage with each other.

“Unless we find ways to tackle how we all remember the past our progress towards a peaceful society will keep tripping up on the different versions we have of the conflict and issues about each others pasts,” she added.

There may have been something of that in that BBC television documentary on the Maze prison escape.

Part of what it did in relation to Gerry Kelly was remind some in the world of politics that this man, with all his IRA past, is now sitting in government.

It was a reminder they didn’t appreciate.

So, the ‘right time’ for Eames-Bradley to publish is when their report is ready, because there is no other right time, and certainly, on the face of it, no politically right time.

By all accounts the ink on that report will be dry soon — and then the next question is what to do with it.



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