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There is a lot of nonsense talked about the need for truth and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Of course it would be great if all sides to the conflict which blighted this province for 30 years would stand up and admit honestly what they did during the 'war'.

Well it would be great from a historian's point of view. He or she could collate all the accounts by republicans, loyalists, police, army, UDR, spies, informers and anyone else who contributed to the madness and mayhem, write them down and leave them for posterity.

But would truth and reconciliation do what many want it to do — help those bereaved by the Troubles or those injured during it come to terms with their loss or their injury? It is doubtful. If we look at what we know already, all it would do would be to cause more trouble and more heartache.

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What are these?

Would anyone really like to know that their father, brother or sister was killed to protect an informer? Would that seem to be a fair price for their life? Whose interest would be served by revealing that agents for the police or army or intelligence services were allowed to kill in complete contradiction to any rules for running agents?

Would it help to know just who was working for who in the murky world of intelligence? Would our belief that the Troubles was a conflict between good guys and bad guys be shattered by what a truth commission would uncover?

Although everyone says that some sort of truth forum would be a great idea — and Gerry Adams is the latest to espouse it — it will never happen. Too many people have too many dark secrets to hide and those people go from the meanest streets of Belfast to the highest offices in the land.

We only have to look to the extraordinary lengths that governments have gone to over the years to stop the truth coming out to realise that it never will, or at least never in a constructive way.

Look at the Stalker and Stevens reports into allegations of collusion. Have you ever read what they say? Governments are great at ordering inquiries and drawing up reports but if they ever uncover any dirt, then they are left to gather dust on the shelf.

And the Government is still at it. Until this week the Government was trying to get through Parliament the power to hear inquests in Northern Ireland in secret. Under the proposal — which has been shelved but not abandoned — juries, relatives and the public would be removed from inquests if ministers believed national security issues were involved.

What is a national security issue? It can mean anything the Government wants it to mean. Usually it is something which is embarrassing to the government of the day and which it doesn't want the public to know about. We have plenty of experience of such an approach to truth and honesty. Earlier this year the Chief Constable was forced to hand over police investigations into controversial 'shoot-to-kill' incidents.

A couple of years ago the Government rushed through laws allowing it to withhold sensitive information from the inquiries set up to investigate the deaths of solicitor Pat Finucane, Portadown man Robert Hamill and loyalist paramilitary boss Billy Wright. What is the truth? In these cases what the Government wants us to know — nothing more, nothing less.

If the Government is reluctant to even countenance the truth emerging in some cases, what are the chances of former terrorists standing up and admitting what they did or who they worked for?

Many relatives, quite understandably and quite rightly, are consumed with the desire to know exactly how and why their loved ones died and who knew what about those responsible.

But short of the perpetrators finding a conscience and owning up, there is very little likelihood of the relatives ever getting the closure they desire.

There are just too many people with too many secrets to allow the truth to come out.

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