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Truth behind Troubles 'will shock unionists'

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Tuesday, January 08, 2008

By David Young and Chris Thornton

Unionists are in for a shock when the depth of links between the security forces and paramilitaries - including the IRA - is eventually revealed.

Sources close to the body looking at how to deal with the past say they've been taken aback by information they've come across while preparing recommendations on ways of putting the Troubles to rest.

They are also wrestling with ways of getting the truth out of paramilitaries and members of the security forces who broke the law - and that could lead to some form of amnesty.

The Consultative Group on the Past - chaired by former Church of Ireland primate Lord Eames and former Police Authority vice chairman Denis Bradley, began a series of public meetings in Belfast last night.

Set up in 2007, they are due to publish recommendations later this year. They've already had a series of high-level private meetings and inspected material from the Stevens Inquiry's investigations into collusion.

They intend to meet paramilitary leaders later this year.

Before last night's meeting, one source said: "Some of the things we're coming across are going to have - I don't want to use the word devastating - but a surprising effect, particularly within the Protestant-unionist community.

"Some of the things we're coming across will come as a shock to people in this community who knew that things were going on during the Troubles but were not aware of the extent of them."

The sources close to the group revealed a number of options which are currently being considered in advance of a report being prepared for the government this summer.

They include:

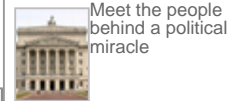
- A truth recovery process that would allow those involved in unsolved murders to disclose what happened without fear of prosecution;
- Asking the main participants in the conflict to apologise for the hurt they caused; this would include the Government and security forces as well as paramilitary organisations;
- The drafting of a covenant that people could sign committing them to non-violent means;
- Making the Historic Enquiries Team an independent body, separate from the PSNI, and widening its remit to cover the Republic of Ireland. It has been proposed this new body could also employ former paramilitaries to enable it to access further details about past killings;
- Creating an audio/visual database of testimonies given in the truth recovery exercise.

It is understood the consultative body, which by the end of the month will have met with 90 separate groups, has not found much support for a South African style Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Sources said feedback so far indicated that many victims were also tired of public inquiries such as Bloody Sunday and tribunals into a number of other controversial killings like Rosemary Nelson's and Billy Wright's.

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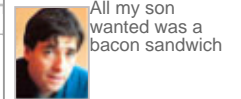
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If the group does recommend a truth recovery exercise in its findings to the Government it would be a Northern Ireland specific model, sources said.

They conceded the issue of an amnesty was an "extremely difficult subject" and one that would have profound legal implications.

One source said: "There needs to be something that will engender a situation that will make it a lot easier for people to come out into the open and tell their story."


Other public meetings are planned for Derry, Armagh city, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh, Omagh, Co Tyrone and Ballymena, Co Antrim.


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