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Northern Ireland needs truth, not money

Instead of compensation, victims of the Troubles need Britain to admit the extent of its complicity in the violence



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Recognition – that's the most important word offered by the report published by the Consultative Group on the Past. The commission is right, but it is also wrong. By offering unionists and nationalists households £12,000 for their suffering it attracted unintended consequences: renewed airing of sectarian grief, another cry of virtuous hatred. But financial recognition or recompense is not what the victims have been asking for in Northern Ireland. Their greatest desire is for justice. They remain unrequited.

By offering households recognition of their personal suffering it is deflecting the debate about the political problem of the past: the cause of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the conditions that made it the most intractable armed conflict in Europe, that cost more lives than the Americans lost in Vietnam.

The answer to that question is, it seems, to be franchised out to a hapless international elder, who will be obliged to do for Britain what it will not do for itself: ask what was going on in Northern Ireland.

This commission came to believe that Northern Ireland needed a truth and reconciliation process. But it hasn't delivered it. Northern Ireland's problem is not reconciliation but truth. The people are no longer at war and they have fashioned for themselves one of the most egalitarian and democratic models of governance anywhere in the world. What eludes them is the "true story". That belongs to the state itself. Without British sponsorship sectarianism might have faded. Equality and civil rights aren't that difficult to do. But in Northern Ireland Britain decided not to.

It condemned violence and at the time sponsored it; it penetrated all of the para militias; it enlisted loyalists, it steered their hitmen, supplied them with secret files, tolerated osmosis between the army and the loyalist militias. And when in 1987 the military men on both sides began to imagine a peaceful future, the security services reinvigorated the civil war by re-arming and modernising its proxies in the loyalist armies. It streamlined the targets and renewed the terror. So omnipotent was it that it crossed a line: it not only bent the law, it wanted to kill lawyers. Twenty years ago it orchestrated the assassination of the irrepressible defence solicitor Pat Finucane.

We know this because its counter-insurgency strategy left it vulnerable to exposure. By enlisting the loyalists as its auxiliaries it forfeited its monopoly of violence. And it lost control of the story. It was loyalists themselves who, with pride, revealed their dependence on British intelligence and ordinance. Their revelations have been confirmed by a few – very few - whistleblowers.

The Dáil in Dublin asks, in vain, for Britain to cooperate by sharing official documents on sectarian bombings in the republic. Britain has refused. Northern Ireland has ended the violence that – without our permission – Downing Street, MI5 and the security services sustained. If Britain is to warrant its claims to be a peacemaker, and if Northern Ireland is to fully know itself, that open secret must become the national narrative.

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