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Where are the good places to grow old?

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# Give us inquiries into the banking crisis and Iraq, not Bloody Sunday

There is little new to be learned from Derry, 1972. But it is vital that we fully investigate the current decade's major failures



**Max Hastings**

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Governments most commonly convene judicial inquiries to propel difficult issues into the long grass. In 1998 Tony Blair reversed this process, by ordering Lord Saville to investigate Bloody Sunday. In the intervening period, £182m of public money has been spent in an attempt to retrieve the 1972 episode from a jungle of folk legends.

Last week it was revealed that although Saville's hearings ended in 2004, his report will not appear for a further year. The inquiry's bureaucracy in London and Derry still costs the taxpayer several hundred thousand pounds a month. At 4,000 pages, the report will be longer than War and Peace. Even if it proves to possess equal literary merit, Saville's reputation is toast, for the manner in which he has allowed a black farce to run like *The Mousetrap*, without garnering similar profits.

Blair's motive for launching the inquiry, back in that euphoric first year of New Labour rule, was to assuage Irish Catholics' most conspicuous grievance against the British army. It was absurdly naive, of course, to suppose that such an outcome was plausible. In a conversation at that naive time, I remember being amazed to hear Blair say, with knitted brow: "You know, those Sinn Féin people can be absolute bastards."

He was shocked by the discovery that Irish republicans were no more willing to give a break to him - good old Tony - than to his Tory predecessor. Blair deserves credit for persevering in Northern Ireland until a political deal was eventually struck. But this owed far more to a changing social, economic and security environment than to the prime minister's negotiating skills.

It slowly dawned on the British government that even if the Saville inquiry canonised Gerry Adams and sought charges against half the Parachute Regiment, the Northern Irish peace process would not thereby profit. But ministers dared not interfere with the lawyers' boundlessly lucrative singalong in Derry. Saville's hearings went on, and on, and on.

The key reality has always been plain. In January 1972, some soldiers behaved with murderous irresponsibility, killing 14 people who were almost certainly innocent of any crime. The almost contemporaneous Widgery inquiry obliged the government of the day by providing a cover-up. But nobody, including the British army, privately doubted the gravity of Bloody Sunday's failures and horrors. The best that can be said is that, in the course of a 30-year terrorist war during which IRA atrocities were endemic, it is

remarkable that the army's discipline did not collapse more often.

Yet disinterring Bloody Sunday 26 years later seemed an extraordinary step. How could witnesses' memories credibly be relied upon about an episode so far in the past? In the course of writing books about the second world war, I have interviewed hundreds of witnesses of many nationalities. What they say is invaluable in illustrating the nature of wartime experience.

However, it is impossible to rely upon their recollections about facts, times and dates, which become shrouded in mist even when people describe critical moments of their lives, and even when they are not applying a partisan gloss.

I was working for the BBC in Derry on Bloody Sunday. Though I was not responsible for reporting the demonstration, and did not see the shootings, I was a witness to the preliminaries. When Saville's officials invited me to give evidence, I declined. I said that I now remember scarcely anything about that afternoon.

They sent me a copy of my own testimony to Widgery. After reading it, I told the Saville team it confirmed my view. I was sure what I had said only a few months after the event accurately represented my recollections. But in 1999 I could recall nothing of those scenes and conversations. If I now gave evidence to Saville, I would be parroting words, based on re-reading my Widgery witness statement. This would be deceitful.

They warned I could be subpoenaed. See you in court, I said. I would have welcomed an opportunity to make my point before the law lord himself. I heard no more. A colleague, whose experience of Bloody Sunday was as marginal and memory as vague as my own, was then working in Chicago. Two Saville lawyers flew at public expense to the US to take a statement from him.

It has all been madness, a demonstration of what happens when lawyers are permitted by a weak judge to graze unchecked for years upon limitless pastures of public money. Lord Scarman, a notably more impressive figure, conducted an inquiry into the Belfast and Derry riots of August 1969, addressing a canvas much wider than that of Bloody Sunday. His report was published in April 1972, and few of his conclusions have been convincingly disputed.

The Saville nonsense must now run its course. No government could expose itself to a charge of suppressing the inquiry's findings. Next year, when they are published, there will be a brief blaze of headlines. The Parachute Regiment's shame will be rehearsed once more, perhaps prompting demands for murder charges. If anyone deserves to stand in the dock, it should be the senior officers who deployed the Paras - trained and conditioned for war-fighting, not peacekeeping - in Derry that day. But the senior officers are almost all dead.

Much has been learned about counter-insurgency in the subsequent third of a century. However, episodes like Bloody Sunday happen in all such conflicts, and will continue to do so. There have been lapses in Iraq and Afghanistan, albeit most notably by American forces. The De Menezes inquest suggests that the same mindset and breakdown of tactical control were in evidence at Stockwell in 2005 as in Derry in 1972. The De Menezes episode, thank heavens, is being explored within a useful timeframe.

It will be astonishing if Saville's report produces any important finding in advance of those by a host of authors in books about Bloody Sunday researched and published at no public expense. Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness, of all people, is on record as saying that Saville was unnecessary, and a government apology would have sufficed.

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The foremost objection to Saville is that his report can tell us nothing that is now useful, even if it gives satisfaction to the families of the dead. By contrast, there is a real argument for an inquiry into how Britain became engaged in the 2003 Iraq invasion, to ensure no future prime minister makes the same mistakes or perpetrates the same deceits, and that the intelligence service never again becomes entangled in such chicanery.

An investigation of the crash of 2008 would serve a vital public interest. Though plenty of people are writing books about it, none have access to bankers' files, which can be gained only on the authority of government. We need to know how this devastating systemic failure has come about. If such an inquiry is undertaken, however, its members should be instructed to report within three years. Any finding that takes longer than that becomes, like Saville, an exercise in archaeology rather than public enlightenment.

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