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Future of Ulster: Their aim? Reconciliation. Their means? Talking

A British soldier, an IRA volunteer, a Protestant victim - the extraordinary story of how, behind closed doors, former foes are now fighting for the peaceful future of Northern Ireland

By David McKittrick

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Jackie McMullan, who joined the IRA at the age of 13, was given a life sentence for an attack on a military billet. Behind bars he became a republican legend, surviving 48 days of the hunger strike that killed 10 of his colleagues. He served 16 years in prison.

Alan McBride is a Belfast Protestant whose life was devastated when an IRA bomb killed his wife, Sharon, at a Shankill Road fish shop in 1973. It also claimed the life of her father. Mr McBride said the loss of his wife had sent him to hell and back.

But together, Mr McMullan and Mr McBride are engaged in an extraordinary venture where ordinary people - extraordinary people - rather than politicians are taking the lead. Their aim? Reconciliation. Their means? Talk, and specifically talk about the past, with the aim of creating a better future. Among those working with them is Andrew Rawding, a former British soldier who lost friends and comrades during tours of duty in south Armagh.

For two years, behind closed doors, they have united to tackle one of the most deep-seated, difficult and potentially dangerous issues: how to help in healing the thousands of people on whom the Troubles inflicted emotional lacerations.

"I know Jackie McMullan very well now," says Mr McBride. "I have a problem with people who are unrepentant and unapologetic but Jackie acknowledges that the IRA caused hurt." Mr McMullan says: "I learnt a lot from Alan. I have a lot of admiration for him and the position he takes, coming from his circumstances. I believe he has shown moral and political courage."

Mr Rawding said of their work: "This is an incredibly important process. There is no moral high ground for anybody. It is not enough to remain in a comfort zone and sit on the sidelines and do nothing."

Some argue that looking back, and trying to make sense of the Troubles, is just too painful and certain to open old wounds. Yet there is already a striking amount of evidence, that the question will not go away.

Many who have studied the problem have concluded that bottling up the personal and communal hurt will cause it to fester. The fact the group, whose stated aim was "Making peace with the past," did so in a civilised way is an early and encouraging sign that former adversaries can work constructively on the future. "There was a real engagement," said Mr McMullan. "It wasn't as if

we were shaking hands and hugging but we didn't spend every meeting arguing and shouting. There were differences but we weren't locking horns."

Another participant, former assistant chief constable Irwin Turbitt, said: "It was a robust and mature set of discussions - more robust early on and then more mature later, as people actually started to listen."

The process produced not unanimity but a comprehensive report with a set of five options that the group hopes "will give shape and depth" to the debate which will continue in the years ahead.

The political world and public opinion have yet to reach a consensus on what to do next but Belfast's newspapers illustrate daily that scores of individuals and groups are seeking information about their relatives.

More and more previously secret information is gradually being disclosed. The expectation is that further revelations are on the way about loyalist assassins being protected by the intelligence community. As one group member put it: "Truth appears to be seeping under the doors, through the cracks in the ceiling and down the chimney, no matter how determined the attempts to stem the flow."

This post-conflict process is sometimes referred to as "truth recovery". The UN calls it "transitional justice", defining it as "a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation".

The Belfast group was assembled by Healing Through Remembering, an organisation that grapples with the notion of how people, in remembering the events of the conflict, can contribute to healing society's wounds.

Northern Ireland is awash with scores of inquiries, investigations and campaigns. Some are official, others are entirely independent, sometimes community-based and sometimes run by just one family.

The Government, for example, established the Bloody Sunday Inquiry to investigate events in 1972, and the police have set up a historical inquiries team to look into most of the 3,700 deaths of the Troubles.

Smaller-scale official inquiries have been announced into high-profile killings such as those of the nationalist solicitor Pat Finucane. The Irish government is looking into 1970s bomb attacks in the Republic as well as IRA killings of senior police officers on the border.

At a local level, dozens of families are seeking information on how their relatives died. In the case of "the Disappeared", some bodies have never been recovered, relatives want to know where the IRA buried them in the 1970s.

What is obvious is that whatever formal moves are to be made, a wide range of truth initiatives are already under way.

All that generates highly sensitive questions. Should those with knowledge of killings be legally compelled to talk about them? Should amnesty be available to some? Should names be named in public? Should large-scale compensation be contemplated to victims? What about apologies from perpetrators?

Questions such as those continue to hang in the air, as yet unresolved. Yet many members of the Healing Through Remembering group say such questions cannot be put aside, and need to be faced. But they did consider the option of "drawing a line under the past".

An argument advanced in favour of that approach was the concern that new revelations could jeopardise a new coalition government headed by Sinn Fein

and the Rev Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party. That was certainly a strong factor behind the Government's decision, a year-and-a-half ago, to put its consultations on hold.

Northern Ireland Secretary at the time, Paul Murphy, explained: "I have not for one second suggested that we have abandoned the idea. I am simply saying I did not think this was the time for it, and if anything it could be counter-productive ." A committee of MPs concurred, saying "the peace is as yet too fragile, the scars of the conflict too fresh".

Nationalists and republicans tend to be well-disposed towards truth processes of some sort, though Sinn Fein and the IRA have made no definitive commitment. They will not show their hand until concrete proposals emerge, and it will be a finely balanced decision: obviously they would favour a mechanism that would show Britain and loyalist groups in the worst possible light. Those on the Protestant and Unionist side are much more wary.

The loyalist paramilitary groups who were involved in violence say "the painful political conflict is not yet past" and claim digging into the past would "run a real risk of reigniting violent conflict".

They say, frankly, that "pro-state paramilitaries", which is how they describe themselves, typically have more difficulty justifying their actions than groups, such as the IRA, which present themselves as fighting a "liberation struggle".

They also worry that republicans would outperform them on presentation. According to one loyalist: "Republicans - who are seen to be very skilful in the art of propaganda - would use a truth commission as a stick to beat the British state with."

Arlene Foster of the Rev Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party said bluntly: "Any commission would amount to nothing more than a Brit-bashing session. Would we ever learn the whole truth from the terrorists? Are we expected to take the word of IRA men? They have made lying and deceit an art form."

The bulk of Protestant opinion is against a large-scale commission on the scale of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which functioned in South Africa.

And not just loyalists but many others recoil from the dimensions of the closest thing to a local example, the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. Announced in 1998, it has yet to report. It is the largest and most complex public inquiry in British legal history. The Government has brought in new measures to curtail subsequent inquiries and has attracted criticism. But with the Bloody Sunday exercise costing about £163m, it is almost universally agreed that no future investigation should incur such phenomenal expense.

The search is therefore on new types of institutions that could do the job quicker and cheaper. For some years, the widespread assumption was that the question was bipolar: should Northern Ireland follow South Africa, or do nothing at all? The group's report includes the option of such a full-blown inquiry.

Although it would have a financial cap and a specified time-scale it would have a large staff of lawyers and others, holding public hearings. It could grant amnesty to former combatants who co-operate, and could recommend the prosecution of others.

Tony Blair has shown no sign of favouring such an approach, but he believes there "needs to be some way of trying to allow people to express their grief, their pain and their anger without the past continually dominating the present and the future". It is a view shared by the Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, who said: "Instead of the healing process setting in, bitterness arises. Something must happen - I do not know what is the best way to do it."

In addition to examining the South African experience, the group looked at dozens of other countries that had truth mechanisms, including El Salvador, the Philippines, Mozambique, Guatemala, and Rwanda .

Several members were fascinated by the experience of Spain, which seemed to show that attempts to forget atrocities stretching back as far as the civil war of the 1930s have been ultimately unsuccessful.

Although many in Spain went along with a post-Franco pacto del olvido - pact of forgetting - the issue has now resurfaced, with the government appointing a commission to consider truth and reparations. Such research and discussions have produced other options. One envisages paramilitary groups and security agencies voluntarily giving information to families through a central co-ordinating body.

Another is for a commission of historical clarification, placing the emphasis more on devising an independent and authoritative historical narrative that would explore the roots of conflict, employing primarily researchers and historians rather than lawyers. The danger is it could be an arid scholarly process, though one advantage is that people could come forward to tell their stories.

The fifth option is to build on the grassroots initiatives already under way, combining storytelling with investigative work. An oversight body would collect testimony from victims, witnesses and ex-combatants, the idea being to maximise a sense of ownership and empowerment and to allow people to be heard.

The group says the options are not mutually exclusive and could be combined. Other ideas include a museum of the Troubles and a day of remembrance.

Irwin Turbitt, the former assistant chief constable, said: "I think the process that produced the report is as worthy of notice as the report itself. That in itself is a significant sign of progress."

Mr McMullan said: "Republicans have to set the standard in acknowledging the suffering of all those we hurt. Initially, I saw talking about this as a bit of a burden but now I do feel personally committed to it. The past isn't going to go away."

And Mr McBride, who is no stranger to hurt and pain, said: "I believe we need some mechanism for dealing with the past. It could hurt some people but I believe that the good it could do is greater than the hurt."

The soldier turned preacher: 'We can contribute to each other's healing'

The Rev Andrew Rawding's activities are just one example - though a particularly striking one - of the kind of bridge-building work which goes on beneath the radar in Northern Ireland.

As a soldier with the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, he served for two-and-a-half years as a platoon commander in dangerous areas such as south Armagh. Today, he is a Church of England minister, and is working with the Church of Ireland in Armagh.

He is in touch with some of the soldiers who served alongside him, too. He said: "What I have learnt from speaking to veterans who served in the 70s and 80s in particular is that they have had the time and space to reflect.

"Or their experiences have caught up with them, and they have questions as to what they were involved in and why. Some of it is simply an exploration of, 'How do I come to terms with my experiences, and how do I move forward in some way?' It's a very complicated issue and there is a mixture of emotions - grief or loss or some form of trauma, or some form of guilt, or just sometimes

big question marks."

He lost friends and comrades in Northern Ireland. While training to be a priest, he recalls, "I reflected on the call to love your enemies. So I started a voluntary journey to build a relationship with the IRA and the people who had served in it.

"It has taken patience and perseverance. I say, 'Look, we have been involved in extreme violence, and we actually have more in common with each other than we might have with other people, and we can contribute to each other's healing.'

"I have witnessed some incredible moments. I have sat around a table where a British Army veteran sat alongside a republican combatant, and they talked about the various gun battles they were involved in. We talked about weapon types and tactics, and formed a common bond based on our common experiences."

Even such militaristic encounters have, according to the minister, "helped to counter fear and to humanise the other, so we can see we share a common humanity."

He added: "We are trying to get the message out to communities that if these people can sit down together then maybe in the future there will be possibility for others to enter the dialogue.

"There are many veterans who actually need to come out of their isolation. Did the soldiers who died die in vain?"

The Troubles

3,720 People killed

47,000 People injured

37,000 Shootings

16,000 Bombings

116,000kg Explosives seized

12,000 Weapons seized

Over a million Bullets seized

19,000 Number charged with paramilitary offences

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