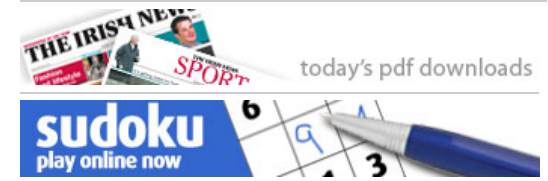


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By Newton Emerson

12/01/08

The prospect of defining the Troubles as a “war”, apparently under consideration by the Consultative Group on the Past, opens up no end of fascinating legal possibilities. Among the acts defined as war crimes under international law are torture, hostage-taking, summary execution, collective punishment, reprisals against civilians, targeting of civilians or civilian property, use of civilians or civilian property as a shield and deliberate destruction of cultural artefacts including historic buildings. Sound familiar?

What may sound less familiar to some of our “ex-combatants” is the definition of a combatant in the Geneva

Convention. This requires armed forces and “militias and members of other volunteer corps, including

organised resistance movements” to “carry arms openly”, “conduct their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war” and display “a fixed distinctive sign recognisable at a distance”. So unless balaclavas count, defining the Troubles as a war will just define republicans and loyalists as criminals all over again.

One person who clearly does think the Troubles were a war, albeit only subconsciously, is DUP enterprise minister Nigel Dodds. On Wednesday Mr Dodds stood up in the House of Commons and asked the prime minister to forestall any attempt to: “validate or vindicate terrorists and criminals in their sordid terrorist war by describing it as a war”. From the tone of his voice it was quite clear that Mr Dodds instantly realised his mistake. But by then it was too late.

Whatever the Troubles are eventually called, everyone can agree that “war” beats “the 30-year campaign”. This phrase, first used by Dublin MEP Mary Lou McDonald in 2005, remains the official revised Sinn Fein newspeak term for our recent unpleasantness. Not very catchy, is it? No wonder it never caught on.

Ian Paisley’s life-long links to loyalism, described in his own words as “a strategy of knowing and not knowing”, are universally acknowledged, thoroughly documented and a legitimate subject for comment. Except on BBC Radio Ulster where psychology lecturer Jude Whyte, whose mother was killed by a UVF bomb, found himself suddenly cut off for daring to mention the first minister in this context. Some people at BBC Northern Ireland need to be reminded that we are not paying them to function as the 12th Stormont department.

Can it really be true, as the chief constable has informed an assembly committee, that 99 per cent of his “real experts” in criminal intelligence are now tied up with inquiries dating back over five years? The 219 conflict-related killings since the 1994 ceasefires have resulted in only 17 successful murder or manslaughter convictions, which does rather suggest a longer-term problem.

Much scandal surrounds the reinstatement of a PSNI officer who appeared in a drink-drive commercial and was then convicted of drink driving. Little scandal surrounds the fact that this officer was at least investigated

and suspended, unlike the two officers found guilty of “deliberate and calculated deception” at the Omagh trial.

But the real scandal is that the PSNI’s current

drug-driving ad features a highly distinctive opening shot of Banbridge town centre just weeks after the police applied to close down a nightclub in Banbridge. Subtle.

How many times must it be explained that the “child poverty measure” doesn’t measure child poverty at all?

The office of the first and deputy first ministers is the latest official bastion to fall for this nonsense by repeating the claim that 100,000 children here live in poverty. But this statistic is based on the median wage, which means that it is merely a measure of income distribution. The solution? Everyone at Stormont should take a pay cut. Then Northern Ireland’s median wage would drop like a stone, lifting thousands of children out of “poverty”.

Sinn Fein environment spokesman Daithi McKay has vowed to campaign “across the island” against new nuclear power stations planned on the other island. So it’s the British government, the City of London, the nuclear industry and all their various lobbyists, patrons and dependents versus the MLA for North Antrim. Hmmm. Who shall be victorious?