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Better to invest in future than dwell on the past

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I hope both Archbishop Eames and Denis Bradley – in fact all of the rather nebulous members of their group – have read David Park's book, *The Truth Commissioner*.

Even though the book is fiction, as you read it all the questions about what truth and whose truth begin to nag at the back of your mind, so that by the end of the story it is hard not to come to the conclusion that the author

is guiding you towards – there is no such concept as absolute truth about an incident or event, just different, sometimes competing angles.

The other uncomfortable element illustrated is that when it comes to complex and emotional matters humans, even subconsciously, can be economical and duplicitous with the facts.

The plot of the book, for those who haven't read it, is about a truth commission set up in the not too distant future in Northern Ireland.

The main character is the commissioner himself, a cynical but experienced legal expert who, while chairing the truth commission is largely preoccupied with healing the rift between himself and his only daughter.

The other characters are there to act out the dilemmas facing the key participants in the truth commission.

The stories of the protagonists are very believable.

There is the policeman, wracked with guilt, who, in good faith, worked through informers but found that things turned out badly and different to what he hoped for.

There is the woman and her daughters who simply want to know what happened to her beloved son killed by the IRA, body still missing.

There are the ex-IRA guys wondering what made them get into killing young witless lads in the first place and behind it all are the dark and shadowy figures of the intelligence agencies with their separate and secretive objectives – in this case (we think – but we, the readers, may be being duped) the maintenance of the Stormont assembly.

One is left in no doubt that many of the characters have integrity, that their motivation may be authentic but that doesn't mean they will be in agreement about what is the truth.

In fact the author shows us that such are the complex machinations of our minds and our strong need to justify past personal actions that, inevitably, each individual's interpretation of the same event is different.

While this is a work of fiction, Park has put his finger on a few painful realities which all of us who want unanswered questions answered must face.

Eames and Bradley were surely preparing us for this last week in their interim report, even though both well know that for the people who feel themselves most wronged this will be another bitter pill that will add to, not lessen their woes.

During the recent Mitchell conference at Queen's University Belfast I helped a group of young people, alumni

of the Washington Ireland Programme, organise a 'future voices' event, at which they had an opportunity to say what they wanted from their country's leaders.

Four of these young people told stories about what shaped them and how they in turn wanted to shape the future.

They talked about the need for support, north and south, for young entrepreneurs; they shared their concerns about our propensity to be racist; they talked about the privileged position of young Irish people who in the modern world because of our comparative affluence must give, not just receive; they talked about their positive commitment to a shared future on this island.

Although the group of young people who completed the programme have their own harrowing tales of loss of loved ones because of the conflict here it is interesting and salutary that they chose to look towards their future and not dwell on their past.

As in this period of recession harder decisions about where to allocate scarcer resources must be taken, what the next generation want and need should become the priority. Attempting to find the truth about past happenings is undoubtedly worthy but, nevertheless, could turn out to be a meaningless mirage.

Perhaps we should all face the hard challenge that the best way to honour and respect the dead might be to invest properly in their children and grandchildren's future

n For further information about the Washington Ireland Programme see www.wiprogram.org

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