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## Centre could mark resolution not to repeat past

([Roy Garland](#), [Irish News](#))

The preservation of part of the Maze Prison as a conflict transformation centre has caused heart-searching and division within and beyond the Democratic Unionist Party.

Opponents have tried – with some success – to redefine the proposed centre as an IRA shrine dedicated to the glorification of terrorism. Opponents find a receptive audience among people who want to forget traumatic days when this community was torn apart in a fight that no-one could win.

Most are acutely aware that 10 republican hunger strikers starved to death there and this makes preservation vulnerable to the charge that the site might become a terrorist shrine.

The plans embrace part of the H Blocks where hunger strikers died and a former loyalist compound where loyalists engaged in serious reflection.

Such a shrine has the potential to become a propaganda machine presenting a one-sided perspective on the wider conflict given the emotive hunger strikes.

And yet loyalist Gusty Spence was central to the first successful campaign for political status in Crumlin Road jail. When special category status was withdrawn some loyalists engaged in dirty protests and hunger strikes but having little support beyond the prison walls they disengaged.

If parts of the prison were ever to become a shrine to terrorism this would undermine the projects aims which are to symbolise the end of conflict and help regenerate the Northern Ireland economy.

It was also to be an educational resource for visitors as well as for local and international students of civil conflict.

Set in the context of a new sports stadium for all it would symbolise a new beginning.

However, DUP politician William McCrea states

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categorically that he will never accept anything at all connected with the tragedy inflicted on the people of Northern Ireland. Coming from a church whose moderator is an iconic symbol of that conflict and in whose church grounds stands a memorial to Lord Carson and his UVF, this seems rather strange. McCrea talks as if terrorists were aliens from outer space who invaded this part of Ireland to kill its inhabitants and destroy their property.

But the perpetrators were on the whole from our own mean streets and didn't suddenly awaken from sleep to face an irrational orgy of violence without any context.

They were our kith and kin, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. Certainly the conflict was not theirs or ours alone.

It also involved British and Irish and perhaps other international interests.

Thus for elements within the DUP – a party launched in the rubble of an IRA pub-bombing on the Shankill Road – to try to distance themselves from the conflict is disingenuous.

Washing hands of responsibility in pursuit of vain glory represents an unconvincing denial of complicity in an awful war that set neighbour against neighbour.

There can be no effective long-term way forward based on such denial. Nor on the other hand, can the whole truth of what happened be fully recovered and blame apportioned without resort to scapegoats.

Responsibility for the conflict lies in many places including among the great and the good as well as with paramilitaries.

It is impossible to disentangle the different strands and apportion blame but 10 hunger strikers died and thousands of people perished outside our prisons.

This was a tragedy that should have been averted.

The proposed conflict transformation centre is to be linked with a new 42,000-seat sports stadium embracing various sports, a multi-screen cinema, restaurants, a hotel, an equestrian centre and so on.

Entrance is to be from a new junction on the M1 with a park-and-ride facility and a new railway station. All of this is for laudable objectives and surely we have enough wit to ensure that the centre is a genuine educational facility challenging republican, loyalist, nationalist, unionist and other perspectives that depict the conflict in simplistic terms as one

between heroes and villains.

That would be myth-making rather than education.

The complex could legitimately mark the end of a tragedy that involved more than 30 years of man's inhumanity to man with thousands of deaths on our very doorstep. The new centre should also highlight our insistence that never again shall we descend into such an abyss of degradation. It should be a repository for the stories of prisoners, warders, security force personnel and ordinary people who struggled to maintain normality in abnormal circumstances in order to inform future generations.

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