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Pursuit of 'truth' would only perpetuate pain

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

The last night of the old year was traditionally a time when we as children were encouraged – sometimes obliged – to stay up into the early hours of the first day of the new year.

We were expected to attend a Watch Night Service in our small church as the final moments of the old year passed by.

The idea was to provide space for quiet reflection in a prayerful atmosphere. Even to a child, a specific time in which to meditate on the passing of time was a helpful experience.

As a community we all have much to reflect on, not only over the past year but on what happened over the past 40-plus years of conflict.

Deciding how to approach this is the task allotted to the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group and the deadline for submissions is only a matter of weeks away.

They will then sift through ideas and decide which way to proceed – a sensitive and difficult task.

Some people seem to want a full-scale truth commission to delve into all aspects of the past including the origins of the Troubles.

This would lead us into Irish and British history because more recent events did not happen in a vacuum.

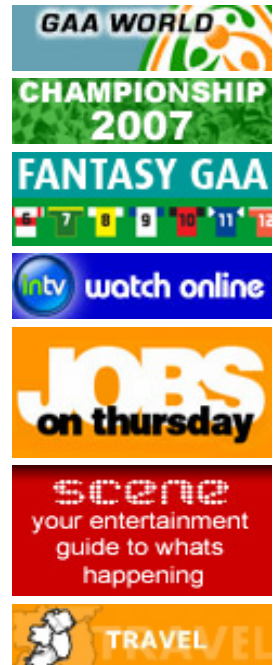
However, history is precisely what divides us and although a full scale truth commission is not ruled out neither is it specifically ruled in.

When we consider the amount of time and effort devoted to the Bloody Sunday inquiry – one major tragedy – the mind boggles at the prospect of an inquiry into decades of violence let alone into the more distant past.

Yet recent troubles make no sense in isolation from the wider history of these islands. Thus it seems that the possibility of arriving at agreed understanding of the past is precisely nil.

While a full-blown truth commission is likely to prove unhelpful,

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greater insights into our complex history are always possible.

Uncovering new perspectives on aspects of the past can be rewarding and satisfying although historical truth remains provisional whether the seeker is a professional historian or not.

Historians, in theory at least, are more aware of the difficulties involved whereas too many of us assume that only the other person's truths are mythical.

Jesus told his disciples they would know the truth and the truth would set them free but he also said that he is the truth.

He was obviously not speaking of scientific or forensic truth.

In any case, those who shout loudest about truth, often show scant regard for it themselves.

Looking for full knowledge of the past would prove an unending nightmare in which the temptation would be to lay the blame squarely on other people's shoulders.

But the truth is that the core of the problem lies in human relationships and, as one old friend suggested, when looking into the past we should seek our own responsibilities there to avoid scapegoating others.

In any serious search for truth new insights must be placed in context. But therein lies a major difficulty.

There is no agreement on an overall picture and rather than healing past wounds the whole enterprise could form an explosive mixture that stirs old enmities and inflicts further pain.

We would inevitably struggle to interpret facts in line with our own preconceptions while more powerful groups would be at a significant advantage and could withhold much evidence with impunity.

Those who suffered most are unlikely to have their views taken with the same seriousness while more powerful groups would shield themselves from unpalatable truths. We could therefore put ourselves through a painful process and yet be no more enlightened at the end of it.

There has not been full acknowledgement by the main players of the part they played in the conflict and while regret may be privately felt it has not been formally and publicly expressed.

We don't even agree on precisely who the main players were but, apart from the British and Irish governments, Sinn Féin and the DUP are now dominant politically.

This surely makes it incumbent upon them to lead the way by acknowledging their intertwined roles in sustaining if not initiating the conflict.

Acknowledgement of their part could be more healing than the unending pursuit of illusory truth.

The whole point of the exercise should surely be to break the enmity, promote reconciliation and establish a shared future rather than establish some mythical version of objective truth.

January 1, 2008

This article appeared first in the December 31, 2007 edition of the [Irish News](#).

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