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There is something about Omagh that won't go away

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By Patrick Murphy

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It is difficult, some might even say unethical, to analyse the Omagh bombing in political terms.

The sheer scale of human tragedy and suffering marks Omagh as an event apart in Ireland's bloody history of conflict and violence.

Many believe that the families and relatives of those who were killed have suffered enough and that we should draw a non-political line under the event.

But 10 years later, despite the revulsion, the pain and the horror, there is something about Omagh which will not go away.

That something stems from the wide range of unanswered questions about the bombing.

Could it have been prevented, in view of at least two tip-offs to the RUC, as revealed by Nuala O'Loan in 2001?

Why was the RUC investigation of the bombing so sloppy and so relatively short, as indicated by Dame Nuala and two major criminal trials?

Why was PSNI evidence at Sean Hoey's trial based on what the judge called deliberate and calculated deception?

Why were Garda notes at Colm Murphy's trial deemed by the Court of Criminal Appeal to have been falsified?

The implications of these, and dozens of other unanswered questions, are that the state may have failed to protect the lives of its citizens and to properly investigate their deaths.

There may have been a number of genuine mistakes by the intelligence services before the bombing and by the police after it. It may even have been the case that police officers, north and south, independently felt a common urge to falsify evidence.

Or there may have been something more sinister. There is no such subject as forensic politics but in this country there should be. It could trace the links between selected acts of violence and the creation of a desired political atmosphere through the force of newly-formed public opinion.

It would show that on Bloody Sunday, for example, state violence drove the civil rights campaign off the streets. It cleared the way for a stand-up fight with the Provisional IRA and in the new political atmosphere, many nationalists obliged by rushing into a long and futile war.

By accident or design, Omagh drove the PIRA off the streets 26 years later. Coming just four months after the Good Friday Agreement, the bombing had three immediate political outcomes.

It effectively ended any remaining nationalist support for anti-civilian terror by republicans. It facilitated the PIRA's first faltering steps on the long march to Stormont and it gave Sinn Fein the opportunity to condemn republican violence for the first time.

The new political atmosphere decimated the Real IRA and gave a moral impetus to the Provisional IRA's move

away from violence and towards politics.

Without an armed wing Sinn Fein became a constitutional nationalist party. Since radical constitutionalists are a rare species, Omagh ended the war and the PIRA's argument for war. It allowed the leadership to deviate from the historical IRA policy of asking volunteers to dump their arms until the next campaign.

For the first time in republican history, the leadership destroyed their arms and entered what they regarded as a British parliament.

While Britain has not always won its military battles in Ireland, it has generally succeeded when it moved the fight from the field to the floor of parliament.

Omagh helped to make politicians out of the Provos and thus it represents a defining moment in modern Irish history.

But the political outcomes of Omagh do not prove political intent or even political involvement by British intelligence.

They may not have done enough to prevent the bombing but they did not plant the bomb. The RIRA did that and they must bear responsibility for it.

Perhaps the unanswered questions represent no more than a series of blunders by the police and intelligence agencies. Maybe our greatest, recent human tragedy had the saving grace of being a fortuitous political event for the policies of London, Dublin and Washington.


But since the courts have told us that police forensic evidence cannot be trusted in relation to Omagh, we only have forensic politics to fall back on. The only way to test the relative merits of both approaches is to seek the truth, the whole truth, through an all-Ireland public inquiry.

Omagh had victims and survivors.

Truth was one of the casualties as illustrated by the vast number of unresolved issues.

Some believe that because of the suffering of the families of the Omagh victims, it is unethical to raise these issues. Others believe, for exactly the same reason, that it is unethical not to raise them.

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