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# Election of Bobby Sands 'still bitter legacy for Border Protestants'

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PROTESTANTS LIVING in Border areas still blame republicans for waging a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" against them and cannot understand how nationalists voted hunger-striker Bobby Sands as MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone in 1981, according to a new report.

The report, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*, found that many Protestants living in Border areas suffered attacks, murder, fear and isolation during the Troubles and felt that no one was prepared to come to their aid.

"The question of whether or not there had been a campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' against them in the Border regions was for most interviewees an accepted fact," said author David Gardiner.

He conducted more than 40 interviews of Protestants living in the Diocese of Clogher which takes in parts of Donegal, Louth, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Monaghan.

It was commissioned by the Church of Ireland Hard Gospel Project and found that over decades Border Protestants faced a wide range of "complex challenges which have had a profound and somewhat debilitating effect on individuals, families groups and the broader community".

The election of hunger-striker Bobby Sands in 1981 remained a powerful and lingering issue for many Protestants, according to the report.

"Many Protestants and unionists saw it, both then and now, as a clear and unambiguous vote of support for the retention of the 'armed struggle' and the purging of Protestants from the land," it stated.

"They couldn't understand it then and they still can't," it added.

The author found that a number of Protestants had a strong sense that their "Roman Catholic neighbours did not approve of or support the

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campaign of terror against the Border Protestant people but that they suspected that their neighbours were unable to communicate as much or reach out a hand of friendship for fear of possible repercussions".

"This remains, for many, one of the unspoken issues on which they would appreciate hearing the views of their Roman Catholic neighbours," added Mr Gardiner.

One interviewee said: "Why have the 'other side' been so unable and/or unwilling to give up the guilty?"

The report also addresses how Protestants saw themselves different in many ways from Catholics.

Mr Gardiner suggested availing of another historic anniversary to address the issues of relationships between Protestants and Catholics.

"In the context of promoting dialogue and learning one suggestion was put that the upcoming 400th anniversary of the Plantation or Dispossession (depending on your 'take' on these events) of Ulster - circa 1609 - would be an ideal opportunity to creatively raise and proactively seek to address some of the historical legacy issues," he said.

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