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Saturday, January 31, 2009

Wounds still too raw for an examination of the Troubles

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For now, it would be best if there was no process exploring Northern Ireland's past, writes **Noel Whelan**

IN APRIL 2006, the trailer for *United 93*, the first feature film about how passengers on one flight, United 93, thwarted that aircraft's September 11th hijackers at the cost of their own lives, was withdrawn from American cinemas because of the response it attracted from audiences.

The trailer drew calls of "too soon" from cinema-goers even though its scheduled release date was more than four-and-a-half years after the harrowing events it depicted.

In many ways the response in Northern Ireland to this week's publication of the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, co-chaired by Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, was similar.

It is simply too soon to ask Northern Ireland to set about an official and systematic exploration of the history of the Troubles. Even now, almost 11 years since the Belfast Agreement, the wounds are still too sore, the divisions too deep and the past too hotly contested. Just talking about how Northern Ireland might deal with the conflict's legacy generated scenes of anger and bitterness of a type many dared to hope were themselves in the past. It is tragic that the Northern Ireland story pushed its way back up news bulletins and on to front pages because it again provided pictures of people from both communities hurling abuse at each other.

The Bradley-Eames report is a comprehensive work running to almost 200 pages. Even the executive summary reveals it to be as thorough and thoughtful as one would expect from any group chaired by these two men. Their task, however, was perhaps too enormous and they were asked to embark on it too soon.

It was almost inevitable that some of their recommendations would attract strong criticism from one or other side and, as it happens, the proposal that £12,000 be paid to the close relative of each person who died as a result of the Troubles has proved most controversial.

A more attractive feature of the recommendations, however, was the suggestion that all current tribunals and inquiries into individual events be wound up and their work subsumed into a single all-embracing legacy commission, which, within a limited five-year timeframe, could review and investigate historical cases, conduct a process of

information recovery and design and support reconciliation initiatives. To date the official exploration of the history of the Troubles has been controversial and costly. Almost all of it is being done by means of legal or quasi-legal investigative processes, most of which were established as a result of political horse-trading on so-called confidence-building measures at various stages of the peace process.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland have separate units dealing with historical cases, the costs of which, Bradley-Eames suggests, are sapping their capacity to focus on present and future policing priorities.

By far the most costly ongoing official inquiry is that chaired by Lord Saville into events in Derry on Bloody Sunday in January 1972. Established in 1998, the inquiry held its first public hearing in 2000, took oral evidence from more than 900 witnesses, the last of them in 2004, and, incredibly, has yet to publish its report.

Last November, Lord Saville announced that he would not deliver his report for at least another year, that is, 11 years after the tribunal began its work and five years after its last public hearing. To date it has cost more than £185 million, almost half of it going on legal fees, and it is still costing £500,000 a month.

All this for a tribunal which Martin McGuinness recently admitted was unnecessary, saying that an apology from the government would have sufficed.

Conducting historical research in an adversarial legal forum at senior counsels' daily rates is a costly absurdity. This expenditure of time, effort and money could more usefully be spent securing the present or planning a better future. If the governments take nothing else from the Bradley-Eames report, it is to be hoped that the suggestion that tribunals be wound up finds favour.

One could question the merits of the all-embracing legacy commission proposed by Bradley-Eames, but it does deserve some further consideration. It would be an improvement on current structures and, budgeted at £200 million, would be much cheaper. There can be no guarantee, however, that spending £200 million on a legacy commission could even come close to establishing the full truth of what happened or to bringing comfort or closure to even a majority of the victims and survivors of the Troubles. Maybe in a decade or two it might be worthwhile as a historical exercise but not now.

Northern Ireland suffered more than 40 years of a conflict in which almost 4,000 people died. A further 40,000 were left with enduring serious physical injuries.

There are those who argue, with merit, that Northern Ireland cannot really move forward until it has looked back, but maybe Northern Ireland should just stand still for a while. The task of dealing with a legacy of this enormity should wait, at least until the political settlement has bedded down.

For now, it would be best if there was no official process exploring or reconciling Northern Ireland's past. The officials, the quangos and the lawyers should withdraw. For the time being, the events of the Troubles can, maybe, only be left to unofficial exploration by writers, artists, and, of course, filmmakers.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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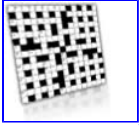
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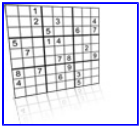
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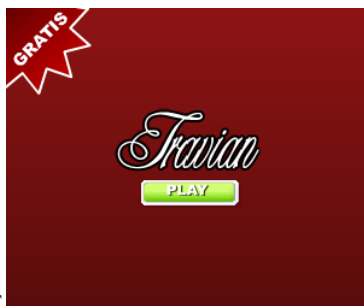
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