

## Truth about the Troubles is as elusive as ever

Sunday, September 02, 2007 - By Colm Heatley in Belfast

South Africa had a truth commission focused on redemption and healing. Sierra Leone wanted to put those responsible for murder on trial. But Northern Ireland has yet to decide how it will uncover the truth behind the more than 3,500 killings that occurred during the Troubles.

Telling the untold stories of hundreds of murders is a major priority for many in the North, and one which reaches out beyond just the victims and their families.

Uncovering the truth is a central issue to building a civil society and giving the North's citizens - and indeed many in the Republic - confidence that at least part of the past has been addressed.

But, so far, the truth has proved elusive - obstructed, many believe, by a desire to keep the past buried. The response has, to date, been disorganised and drawn-out.

The most high-profile tribunal, the Saville Inquiry, has spent most of the past seven years looking at the events of Bloody Sunday, and has cost an estimated stg£200 million to date. Yet, so far, it has reported nothing back, in what most people regard as an open-and-shut case.

While most of the outstanding issues that bedevilled the peace process have been resolved, the issue of collusion between the state and armed groups means that any truth commission would likely prove politically embarrassing to the government of Britain - and possible, of Ireland.

A plethora of organisations already exists in the North, which, officially at least, aim to uncover the truth about the past. The Historical Enquiries Team, headed by Dave Cox, was established to look at all of the unsolved murders during the Troubles, but Cox last week complained that the funding wasn't there to carry out his work.

However, many people believe that the organisation has a limited ability to investigate murders and enjoys too close a relationship with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

In addition to Cox's team, there is also the Police Ombudsman, a series of public inquiries into controversial murders, and a number of government-sanctioned inquiries, such as the Stevens Inquiry, whose findings have never been made public.

Denis Bradley, the former priest and former vice-chairman of the policing board for the PSNI, and Robin Eames, the former Anglican archbishop of Armagh, are also part of a group tasked with examining how best a truth commission could be established and what form it should take.

Within the next week or so, a new victims' commissioner will also be appointed following an agreement between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party.

Representatives of some of the main victims groups in the North, including the Pat Finucane Centre and Relatives for Justice, met in Belfast last week in an attempt to decide how to move forward with the issue of victims and truth.

"What we need is an independent, international commission with the power to investigate and look at the killings which took place," said Paul O'Connor of the Pat Finucane Centre.

"That would allow questions to be asked that currently just aren't being asked, and it would do it in a joined-up way, which hasn't happened so far."

For some people, however, the idea of a truth commission raises the possibility that those responsible for murder, especially the state, will escape any punishment and get off the hook.

"Let's be honest, no one is on the hook, certainly not the British government, so I don't think opinions can be made based too closely on that," said O'Connor.

"I think that it is very clear that we need some sort of public forum to be established whereby all of this can be addressed clearly."





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O'Connor said that the emphasis was not on retribution, but about finding the truth. What structure or powers that forum will be given are fundamental questions that even the victims' groups have yet to establish.

Given too much power, the forum could alienate the witnesses it needs, and end up isolated and unable to carry out its work, hamstrung by legal arguments which delay the work. With too few powers, it would be little more than a talking shop.

Getting to the truth of the thousands of murders has obvious political connotations, not least because of the British government's now

widely accepted role in supporting loyalist paramilitaries.

Bank of Ireland went deep into the Republic, with the 1974 example.

A joint Oireachtas report found last year that there was substantial evidence that the bombings took place with British collusion. While the idea of getting to the truth of what happened during the Troubles is one that few could disagree with, it is also drawn along political lines.

For unionists, amongst whom there is less enthusiasm about truth commissions, unsolved murders are best dealt with by the courts. A large section of unionists view the state as inherently democratic and just. Furthermore, unionist politicians play down the role of collusion between the state and loyalist paramilitaries.

While a number of campaigning victims' organisations exist within the nationalist community, the best known unionist group is FAIR (Families Acting for Innocent Relatives), headed by Willie Frazer.

While he supports a truth forum, his emphasis, not surprisingly, is on "republican terrorists", and he disagrees that collusion took place in anything more than a haphazard way.

The one thing that all of the nationalist victims agree on is that the British government should have no authority to organise or lead any investigation.

"That power must be taken away from the British state," said Mark Thompson of Relatives For Justice. "They were protagonists and they have spent most of the time trying to cover up what went on, so for a commission to have any credibility whatsoever, the British government must have no part in its organisation. What they should do is hand over their files and tell us what they know."

That, as most concede, is extremely unlikely, and in many ways lies at the heart of the problem. A substantial body of evidence now exists to show that the British actively colluded in hundreds of murders of people who it claimed as its own citizens.

Some of those murders were among the most squalid in the North's history and, from the late 1980s onwards, through the work of loyalist agents such as Brian Nelson, the northern nationalists were effectively terrorised by random sectarian assassinations.

Public inquiries, such as the Saville Inquiry, have been lampooned because of their high costs, but victims argue that the truth costs nothing, whereas covering it up can be financially expensive.

In an era in the North's politics when armed groups and political parties are being urged to face up to the future, few issues will signal progress more than getting to the truth of the Troubles.

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