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Monday, January 07 2008



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# Omagh families deserve answers

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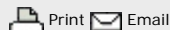
Sunday December 23 2007

The failure to bring the murderers of Omagh to justice is a blight on the new Northern Ireland and a blight, too, on this Republic. The police forces on both sides of the border blundered in the lead up to that awful bombing on August 15 1998, and they have both blundered in the subsequent investigations. Nine-and-a-half years later and there is still no justice for the 29 victims of that atrocity, and no closure for their families.

Last week's judgement in the trial of Sean Hoey, the only man accused of involvement in the bombing, revealed the abysmal catalogue of failures by the investigating police. Damningly, Mr Justice Weir found

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that there had been "deliberate and calculated deception" by police; he described police methods as "thoughtless and slapdash" and said that evidence had been handled "with cavalier disregard for [its] integrity".

Justice Weir's findings were unequivocal: the investigation had been shoddy and deceitful and the methods used were open to question. His findings have had an immediate impact on the way Low Copy Number DNA testing -- which uses tiny samples of DNA to produce an evidential profile -- will be used in future trials, with police forces already suspending its use.

But the judgement was about far more than police failure and scientific unreliability: it was, above all, a devastating result for the relatives of those who died -- many of whom have fought tirelessly for justice in the intervening years.

The police have now conceded that the prospects of anyone else standing trial for the murders are virtually non-existent and the last hope for some form of justice rests with a civil action, brought by the victims' families five years ago and due in court next year. It cannot be allowed to end this way. The Omagh bombing was the worst single atrocity in Northern Ireland's troubled history, and it came while people on this island were still celebrating the historic breakthrough of the Good Friday Agreement the previous Easter.

Since the attack, we have waited in vain for the police to build credible cases against the murderers. Their failure to do so beggars belief.

Politicians in Dublin, Belfast and London cannot hide from responsibility either. The successful prosecution of the Omagh bombers should have been at the very top of the political agenda, but it never made it there. Now it must.

The two governments in Dublin and London have a responsibility to deliver answers to the relatives of those who died. The only route that is likely to deliver those answers is a public inquiry that straddles the two jurisdictions. The relatives deserve to know what happened in the days before the bombing, when elements in the gardai and the RUC knew that an attack was planned, and what happened in the weeks after the attack, when both police forces moved so slowly. They deserve to know who ordered the attack and who carried it out, and they deserve to know what both governments were doing to bring the killers to justice.

The governments may resist calls for a full inquiry, but it is the only honourable course of action left open to them. They have a duty to the people of Omagh to uncover the truth, and they also have a wider duty to all of the people of this island, whose votes for peace were so callously trammelled by the Real IRA. The 10th anniversary of that attack is just eight months away; that is a reasonable deadline for an inquiry to be established.

The families of the 29 victims deserve answers, and the governments should help provide them.

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