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**Time for truth**

Why all parties to conflict must come clean if the victims are to get justice...

By Brian Rowan

05 November 2006

Where do we find the beginning towards the end?

Where do we look for the truth of the past 30 years and more? Who will tell it and who won't?

Who wants to speak and who wants to listen? Who doesn't want to hear?

Look inside the pages of a report published last week by the Healing Through Remembering project and you will see an attempt to give some structure to the debate about our past and how it plays into our future.

There is no definitive proposal on the way forward, no magic wand offering to make all truth available, but there are carefully thought-through options - five of them, including one under the heading Internal Organisational Investigation.

The thinking here is about the republican and loyalist organisations and the security forces and intelligence services "voluntarily" becoming involved in a process to meet victims' requests for information.

It is about asking those organisations to "take primary responsibility for helping, as much as possible, in providing victims with the truth about what happened to their loved-ones".

In this option - or in something like this option - we may find that beginning towards some end. That is, if people want to help, but already there is some evidence of resistance.

Organisations involved in conflict may be more willing to explain their actions as opposed to accounting or answering or repenting for them.

More information - more truth - may become available if it is asked for rather than demanded, if the process is voluntary and not mandatory, if it can be done anonymously rather than publicly.

Could our first step be a process of explanation and information? Could it be something that is requested rather than demanded?

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Could this be the beginning that then leads to some next stage? Could the answers be given in an organisational context?

In other words, not from the individuals involved, but given more generally in the names of the IRA, other republican organisations, the various loyalist groups, the police, Army and the intelligence services.

That may be more achievable - more realistic - and may open the door, at some later stage, to individual contributions and explanations.

If leaderships set the direction then others may feel more comfortable and more willing to speak for themselves - to explain their actions.

So, what is needed if this is to work?

From the republican and loyalist organisations a willingness to go beyond the very general comments they have made, and from the security forces and intelligence services, an honest explanation of their role.

Offering "abject and true remorse" to the loved-ones of innocent victims as the loyalists did in 1994 or making an apology for the deaths and injuries of "non-combatants" as the IRA did in 2002 is not enough.

Nor can the security forces hold to the line that they were just some piggy-in-the-middle trying to keep two warring tribes apart.

Some in their ranks were players in a 'dirty war'. There were cases of collusion and there were those who messed with and were involved in taking people's lives.

That truth should be spoken, and should not have to be dragged out in a protracted and expensive process of public inquiries.

In many cases here involving loyalists and republicans, killing was followed by character assassination - by statements making all sorts of false allegations about the victims.

These lies were used to try to justify actions - to justify the pulling of a trigger or the placing of a bomb.

In our developing peace, paramilitary leaderships could order a review of those statements, could make possible internal organisational investigations, could take away the lies and in many, many, cases could provide the truth that people are looking for.

They could begin to do that now, do it because it is the right thing to do, do it as part of a process of making war into peace, do it by way of saying to people that the war is genuinely over.

But will they?

One of the political representatives of the UDA, Davy Nicholl, believes the chances of it happening are "very slim".

"I don't expect paramilitaries to be suddenly rolling up to the door of some organisation or body to reveal themselves to be involved in past events," he told Sunday Life.

But it needs to be done - not necessarily in the way



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described by Davy Nicholl, but in some way, and done sooner rather than later because there are people in leadership positions who have been there for the past 30 years, and who have detailed knowledge of the period.

→ [The 'foiled terror plot'](#)

→ [Loyalist murals](#)

Last week's report from the Healing Through Remembering project should focus the debate, and should move us beyond thinking to actually doing something.

→ [World Cup 2006](#)

→ [Budget 2006](#)

Its author, Kieran McEvoy, hopes the work can be "a central reference point" and something that can take us beyond what at times has been a "very abstract debate".

→ [Education: Big Debate](#)

The past and the future are intertwined - and the truth of the last 30 years might make the living of the next 30 that bit easier, that bit more peaceful for those who have questions and need answers.

→ [Spying in Ulster](#)

→ [The fog of war](#)

Hearing them and answering them gives them their place in the present and tells them they aren't forgotten or lost in the past.

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