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## News

# We can tiptoe round the past or we can take bull by horns

Sunday, July 08, 2007

By Brian Rowan

We've now had the first meeting and the first statements, the opening words in a process that is about both the past and the future.

Denis Bradley has a way with words and last week he spoke about "dealing with the shadows of the past in an acceptable and appropriate way".

But who will be prepared to step out of those shadows? Bradley is co-chairing a consultative group on the past alongside the retired Church of Ireland Primate Lord Eames.

And next summer they will bring forward their recommendations.

I think it's time to take this particular bull by the horns. You could talk forever, consult forever, and get nowhere and go nowhere on this issue.

Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde wanted a process that asked the hard questions of all sides - including his.

So let's start asking them.

The talk before the consultative group was announced was that there would be "a big conversation" and a "blank sheet" - no pre-determined outcomes.

In that, there is room to be bold.

As part of what they are doing, the Eames/Bradley group should invite the IRA army council, the UVF and Red Hand Commando brigade staff and the UDA inner council to send representatives to a specially-convened conference.

Those who can speak for the police, the Army and the security services should also be there, as well as representatives of the relevant governments and political parties. The conference should take as long as it needs to establish what the parties to the conflict are prepared to contribute in answering and explaining that past.

That's the bull by the horns.

The conference is the opportunity for the questions to be put to those who have the answers.

And it would allow Eames and Bradley to make a judgment on how specific, or how general, any answering of the past is going to be.

There may well be arguments about 'equivalence' - about the security forces in the same room as the 'terrorists', but what we had was a very dirty war, not the stuff of goodies and baddies but something much more complicated and confused.

And all of that is seen in the stories of Scappaticci, Haddock and in those war games when guns were taken off and then given back to the UDA.

In all that mess - and in all that messing - people died.

There was a political jibe aimed at Martin McGuinness and Gerry Kelly in the Assembly last week, but this process on the past can't be about one side, can't just be about the Provos.

It has to be about all sides - all of them answering and explaining, however difficult, however awkward.

It is, of course, entirely possible that if such a conference were to be called, that there would be those who would stay away. Maybe more would stay away than would attend.

That in itself would tell us something about who is prepared to step out of those shadows and who wants to

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There is an opportunity in this consultation process that Lord Eames and Denis Bradley are leading to begin to get some of the answers, or at least to begin to ask some of the questions of some of the right people.

The conference, if it were to be called and attended by those invited, could be the first table of explanation - the beginnings of some breakthrough on this most delicate of all issues.

We can tiptoe around it forever, or we can take the bull by the horns.

Which is it to be?

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