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The truth blame game can have no real winner

OPINION: Plans for a commission to deal with unsolved murders in the Troubles are unworkable, writes David Adams

EARLIER THIS week, "sources close to" the Eames/Bradley led Consultative Group on the Past (CGP) briefed a few journalists on the body's main recommendations for "dealing with the legacy of the Troubles". These are not due for publication for another month or so.

It seems the CGP will propose the setting up of a five-year "commission" to reinvestigate all unsolved murders, with a view to prosecution. Where prosecution is not possible, members of paramilitary groups and the security forces will be offered immunity to provide whatever information they can, and victims' relatives can then avail of that information.

Such proposals would make perfect sense, but only if we lived in a world full of perfect people. The problem is we don't.

How can anyone suppose a forensic examination of all that happened during the Troubles will alleviate bitterness in Northern Ireland, and help pave the way for reconciliation? Everything we know about basic human nature tells us that it would have the opposite effect.

It is high time we stopped kidding ourselves about the true nature, and supposed healing powers of "truth recovery". In a post-conflict situation, a truth process is a luxury affordable only to clear "winners".

Whatever the grandiloquence about justice and closure for victims, in practical terms, such a process amounts to little more than an exercise in retrospective self-justification by the winners, with only blame (whether deserved or not) and humiliation on offer for the brooding, now-powerless "losers".

To consider embarking on a raking over of the past in this situation - where there were no clear winners or losers in a conflict that is barely over, and where a still deeply divided society is split almost evenly along religious and political lines - almost defies belief.

Besides the clear and obvious dangers, without the genuine participation of all parties to the Troubles, the process being suggested wouldn't even have balance to commend it.

And be in no doubt, not all parties will participate. Only the security services can be counted upon for any real degree of co-operation. Even then, in order for the peace process to survive, they will have to withhold the identities of informants within the ranks of paramilitary groups.

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In this scenario, only a small number of people, if any at all, can ever be brought to account, and by definition then, only a tiny percentage of victims will ever stand a chance of having their cases brought to something approximating conclusion.

If the paramilitaries engage at all, it will be to lay blame on others: the British, the police, or former (long dead or out of favour) comrades.

Other than this narrow self-serving agenda, what reason do they have to participate? So in practice, the CGP proposals are capable only of delivering a lop-sided "truth process", where it is possible for virtually no one other than past or present members of the British army and police to end up in the dock.

Only the past actions of the security forces will be open to the kind of scrutiny that can uncover anything beyond what is already known.

Which is precisely what many of the vocal advocates for a re-examination have been after.

For them, this is not about the victims - at least not beyond a shameful exploitation of their pain and suffering - but about the rewriting of history.

About building a historical narrative which paints a picture of brutal British oppressors (aided and abetted by their local unionist lackeys) who left the downtrodden masses with no option but to rise up and revolt.

It is about creating a history normally reserved for the winner.

What of the victims then, what can be done for them? Not all victims are eager to revisit painful memories, indeed the majority would much rather be left alone.

For the rest, it is unfair to hold out hope for the truth as a magic panacea to their pain and suffering, when, most likely, the future holds only the disappointment of finding out that nothing beyond what they already know can be delivered.

And for a tiny few, the discovery that their feelings of pain and loss are no different on the other side of truth (depending upon what they find out, these could be made even worse).

If the CGP proposals are endorsed, not only will common sense have fallen foul of abstract theorising and banal cliches, we will run a real risk of heightening tension and deepening division - all to little or no end.

There is nothing wrong with seeking to deal with the legacy of the Troubles; it needs to be dealt with. The detritus of conflict is all around us, poisoning our society.

It is there in the drug dealing, the extortion, the organised criminality and the holding of entire communities to ransom.

That is where good people like those in the CGP should be directing their attention.

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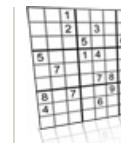
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