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Thursday, January 29, 2009

Trauma of the Troubles should stay in the past

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Eames and Bradley have helped to rewrite history with their idea of £12,000 for next of kin of all 'victims', writes **David Adams**

'JUST WHEN I thought I was out . . . they pull me back in,' complained Michael Corleone in *The Godfather: Part III*

The people of Northern Ireland know the feeling only too well. No matter how hard they try to move on from the Troubles, they are forever being dragged back to relive them. The prevailing orthodoxy – driven largely but not entirely by a loose coalition of academic theoreticians, self-interested politicians and their supporters, and various influential well-meaning people – is that we cannot “move on” without first “dealing with our past”.

Why this should be so, has never been properly explained. There is occasional mention of the folly of leaving a legacy of bitterness that might someday come back to haunt us. Yet, like so many other inconvenient realities, the certainty that bitterness will be increased by raking over the recent past is ignored.

We are told that genuine reconciliation depends upon a forensic re-examination of the Troubles, and that only in this way can we ensure we do not repeat history. The fact is that the agreed powersharing political arrangements, a panoply of legal safeguards, and a multitude of oversight bodies all make it impossible to repeat past mistakes (even if someone were so inclined), but this seems to be of no consequence. The truth-seekers just plough on regardless, often sounding uncomfortably like big-tent evangelical preachers as they lecture endlessly that only “the truth” can set us free.

What precisely is the nature of this truth they seek to uncover? It is certainly not the entire truth. Many of those in favour of a forensic trawl through the Troubles are in a prime position to lead the charge if they so desired, but have failed to do so.

Journalists cheerleading for truth-recovery will, for example, argue that professional integrity, if nothing else, demands that they expose whatever they can about the past. Which would be fair enough, but for the fact that the same people have for years been sitting on truths about who did what to whom and at whose behest, and even who ordered certain atrocities. But they have never shown any inclination, professional or otherwise, to share this knowledge with the wider public. Indeed, most would run a mile at the suggestion that they should publish all that they know, even though there is little or no prospect of them being subject to legal proceedings if they did.

So much for their commitment to warts-and-all exposure.

Some of the politicians, though not all, who have been most vocal in their support of a "truth process" are the least truthful about their own history, and probably have more to hide than most. They are not looking to have the entire truth uncovered, but merely a version that will serve their own purpose. That purpose being the rewriting of history so that all blame for the Troubles can be heaped upon the British and the unionists.

It has to be said, some of the well-meaning advocates for a truth process seem to lean in the direction of selective exposure and history rewriting as well. Perhaps they have difficulty in accepting that both communities were equally culpable for what happened in Northern Ireland.

Then there are the "victims", upon whose behalf everyone claims to be acting, but who are, more often than not, mere pawns in a bigger game. I listened to a radio phone-in programme a few months ago, where a local self-styled "expert in conflict resolution" was explaining to the presenter the merits, as she saw them, of a truth process in Northern Ireland.

A woman whose policeman son was murdered by the IRA rang in to say that she and her family just wanted to be left in peace with their memories, to get on as best they could with their lives. In the most patronising way imaginable, the expert proceeded to tell the caller that she was totally wrong, that "closure" could only come through full disclosure of what happened in the past. The views of the victims, it seems, are only important if they coincide with the greater plan, or the grand theory.

A concern for the sensitivities of victims supposedly underpinned the Eames Bradley-led Consultative Group on the Past. Yet by proposing that a payment of £12,000 be made available to the families of everyone killed in the Troubles (or reparation, as republicans are already calling it) including paramilitary members, they stand accused of riding roughshod over the feelings of the vast majority of victims in order to placate a tiny few.

By drawing such equivalence, they have at the very least helped rewrite history. Those, like the Eames-Bradley group, who are genuine about trying to encourage reconciliation, must accept that it cannot be forced or contrived. As far as it can be achieved at all, reconciliation will only come through the gradual maturing and development of the Belfast Agreement.

They should also seriously consider whether by advocating a raking over of the past they are being used to further agendas far removed from their own.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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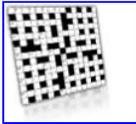
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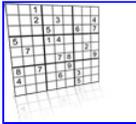
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