

Truth Recovery - A Contribution from within Loyalism

Preface

Since the ceasefires in 1994, the call for truth and justice in Northern Ireland has become a familiar cry echoing the sentiments of many people and communities who have been bruised and battered by 30 years on the front line of violent political conflict. The question remains – how do the people of Northern Ireland begin to deal with the hurts, the pain and the overwhelming number of human rights abuses, which define the conflict?

This consultation paper emerges from a constituency that is well aware of its own pain and suffering, acknowledges the pain and suffering of others and wants to be involved in a genuine process of conflict transformation that helps to improve the quality of life of ordinary people who are yearning for the dawn of a new day.

This desire for change was highlighted in the statement issued on behalf of the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) when the loyalist ceasefire was announced on 13th October 1994:

In all sincerity, we offer to the loved ones of all innocent victims over the past twenty-five years abject and true remorse. No words of ours will compensate for the intolerable suffering they have undergone during the conflict.

Let us firmly resolve to respect our differing views of freedom, culture and aspiration and never again permit our political circumstances to degenerate into bloody warfare.

We are on the threshold of a new and exciting beginning with our battles in the future being political battles fought on the side of honesty, decency and democracy against the negativity of mistrust, misunderstanding and malevolence, so that together we can bring forth a wholesome society in which our children and their children will know the meaning of true peace.¹

This statement paved the way for a new beginning for this constituency – a beginning that was very much shaped and informed by the legacies of the violent conflict but also was hopeful for “a society in which our children and their children will know the meaning of true peace.”

To achieve this kind of new society, we acknowledge the need not only to be bold and brave but also to be honest and realistic about who we are and what we can deliver within our current political context.

This consultation document is an attempt to provide opportunities for our constituency to begin debating the issues around truth recovery. We acknowledge that people may experience this document as being inward looking and self-reflective. It is. It needs to be. It has to reflect the reality of where our constituency is in its current process of conflict transformation. Our intent is not to alienate others; our intent is to encourage honest and challenging thinking within a constituency and to allow others to respond critically to that thinking. As quoted in the CLMC ceasefire statement we are not unaware of the pain and suffering of others and are committed to the sentiments contained in paragraph 2 of the Declaration of Support in The Good Friday Agreement:

The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured and their families. But we can best honour them

*through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.*²

We recognise the need for all people and organisations to access the resources needed for “a fresh start” and we call on all relevant organisations, especially government, to put the resources in place to help people and communities access the help they need on their journey for healing.

This consultation document represents the beginning of a journey - a journey that should be welcomed and supported as part of the true process of peacebuilding within this society.

“Truth Recovery”? A Contribution from within Loyalism to Current Debates

Introduction

There seems to be a growing interest in the possibility of some kind of “truth commission” or “truth recovery” process regarding the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. On 27th May 2004 Secretary of State Paul Murphy announced the start of a two-stage consultation process on the Troubles. He said that he would be consulting victims’ families, church leaders, politicians and academics, and that the Government was coming to the process with an open mind.³

In his announcement, Mr Murphy said, “These discussions will initially take the form of private soundings which will in due course lead to wider consultation. I will also be commissioning work of relevant international experience which will cover the sort of processes which others have used in seeking to come to terms with the past.”⁴

This was followed by Mr Murphy embarking on a fact-finding visit to South Africa following that country’s high profile Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

There are a number of deep concerns within loyalist circles about these recent developments. To ensure that loyalist concerns are not ignored and to clearly articulate that position we have brought together a representative grouping of people from PUP, UVF/Red Hand Commando and community work backgrounds. Two workshops have been held so far, one in May and another in June. At the one-day event in May we looked at some of the challenges facing any “truth recovery” process, as highlighted by the South African TRC. Drawing on experiences from other parts of the world, information was provided on a wide range of factors involved in the design of a “truth commission”. An initial exploration of the fears/barriers/costs regarding such a process for Northern Ireland also took place, and there was an opportunity to discuss potential benefits of “truth recovery”.

This initial exploration underlined the fact that there are many serious “fears/barriers/costs” that are uppermost in people’s minds. The half-day meeting in June was therefore devoted to fleshing out some of these concerns. This Preliminary Consultation Paper aims to reflect the discussion held at these two meetings. Given the many issues that are involved in “truth recovery” we realize that further discussion will be required. Following further discussions in the autumn and having received feedback from within our constituencies to the Preliminary Paper we hope to produce a public Consultation Document by the end of 2004. This Document will not only serve as our contribution to the wider debates regarding a truth commission for Northern Ireland, but it will also provide a clear challenge to any attempts to impose a “truth” process.

Fears/Barriers/Concerns/Costs

- Current political context: “the conflict is not over”

There is an obvious concern about the timing of any “truth process”: How can a “truth recovery” process work in a political context where a clear, final political/constitutional settlement has not yet taken place? Those advocating truth commissions often claim that these processes help deeply divided societies to deal with a painful past. In the context of Northern Ireland, however, the painful political conflict is not yet past. Brian Feeney quoted in an Irish News article states, “There have been about forty truth and reconciliation processes around the world in places like South Africa and Peru. The only time they have worked is when the conflict has definitely come to an end. That is not the case here.”⁵

Discussion during the above-mentioned meetings stressed how volatile the political situation still is in many parts. People in loyalist areas feel their culture and future to be under threat by a “republican war” carried out by politics and propaganda.

In fact, it was stated that in some areas the sectarianism on the ground is now worse than it was 10 years ago, prior to the announcement of the ceasefires. The initial optimism and goodwill generated by The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement has all but evaporated in loyalist areas.

In this kind of unstable, unsettled political context, a “truth process” that attempts to open up old wounds runs a real risk of re-igniting violent conflict instead of helping society to move beyond the Troubles. Many wounds are still too raw, many people’s buttons are still too easily pressed for a “truth process” to have a realistic chance of succeeding. Under such circumstances, any “truth process” runs the risk of indoctrinating a more “militant” younger generation with hatred and providing justification for continuing conflict.

- Size of population: “the intimacy of the conflict”

Given the small size of the population of Northern Ireland (around 1.5 million people), in which a huge proportion of those affected by and those participating in armed conflict come from specific areas such as West and North Belfast, there is a concern that “everybody knows one another”. If someone was to make a public statement about his or her past activities there will be no place to hide. Not only will that person face high risks in terms of personal safety, but his or her family will also be endangered.

The individual and family costs of someone disclosing past activities are increased by the fact that on this island people tend to have very long memories. Once someone is branded with having done something seen to be wrong, their children and even grandchildren may have to live with the long-term legacy of those past actions.

- Uncovering “truth” – vulnerability of loyalists

Loyalist activists/ex-combatants/paramilitaries are particularly vulnerable to a “truth process” for they have never enjoyed the same level of legitimacy in their community as have republicans. While loyalists don’t feel that “we have to make excuses for the fact that many of us were prepared to take up arms to defend our community against the threat of armed republicanism, given the inability of the state to provide adequate protection”, experience has shown that pro-state paramilitaries typically have more difficulty justifying their actions than those who disguise theirs with the language of a “liberation struggle against a colonialist regime”.

Loyalists have never accepted the argument that the republican campaign was a war of national liberation against a colonial power. They saw the conflict as one that involved two communities with two different attitudes towards the state – the unionist community, which was pro-state; and the

nationalist community, which was ant state. It was as simple as that - a civil conflict in which the two main protagonists were the unionist and the nationalist communities.

The UVF and RHC were pro-state paramilitaries in the sense that they supported the desire of the unionist community of Northern Ireland to remain part of the British state. The republican armed groups were seen as the physical force component of a wider opposing force – the nationalist community. The nationalist community that gave birth to, nurtured and sustained the republican campaign, and that provided armed republicans with the political rationale for their campaign, was the enemy that stood behind the republican terror campaign and therefore was, in the eyes of the UVF/RHC, culpable.

Pro-state paramilitaries are stigmatised for carrying their campaign to the community that they regarded as the real enemy for which the republican armed groups were the cutting edge. That nationalist community was, for many young loyalists, as responsible for their armed groups as Germany or Japan was for their armies of aggression. That is something that neither the state nor middle unionism will accept (at least not openly). Consequently, it is feared they will use any supposed truth recovery process to isolate loyalist paramilitaries as criminal gangs who operated on the fringes of the pro-British community. Why, then, should loyalists participate in a process that could officially write them off as criminals?

The ongoing stigmatisation, criminalisation and even demonisation of loyalist ex-prisoners, especially within unionist circles (“middle unionism”), clearly suggest that it would be madness for any loyalists who have not been successfully prosecuted to expose any of their actions before a truth commission.

Especially in rural areas, a loyalist ex-prisoner is marked out by the rest of the community. After release from prison many of these former political prisoners have managed over the years to achieve a limited degree of acceptance in their communities, but prejudices remain just below the surface. If people are reminded of certain past actions or if new “dirty details” were to be exposed, the door would certainly be slammed in the face of ex-prisoners who are trying to make a contribution in their community or to live normal lives. Many people who are now prepared to work with some of these ex-prisoners may no longer be prepared to do so. For those who wish to continue their work, life could be made uncomfortable for them.

This kind of discrimination is less visible in urban areas given the larger concentrations of ex-prisoners, but the negative attitudes amongst those from the comfortable, leafy suburbs are the same as those amongst rural unionists.

In other words, any “truth” process that would require individual ex-prisoners or excombatants to give public testimony about specific past actions will most likely contribute to the continuing demonisation of these loyalist activists. It is very difficult for them to see any benefit from such a process and therefore there is very little chance that they will co-operate/participate.

- Families

There are specific fears about the impact of public disclosure on the families of those “telling the truth”. Imprisonment had a huge impact on the families of loyalist prisoners. Many of them not only had to endure the absence of a father/husband, but were also stigmatised in various ways in the community. Children were often taunted with “your dad is a jail bird”, many wives were followed when they did their shopping, were viewed as “available” or “loose women”, or were “looked down upon” or pitied. People have found ways of dealing with the hardships of partners and fathers in prison, including undeserved guilt by association. However, they want those difficulties to remain

buried in the past now; they want to draw a line under those times; they are not prepared to revisit those bad days.

Revisiting what was done in the past furthermore runs the risk of not being understood by the current/younger generation. Children today will probably find it difficult to imagine the threats and fears that inspired their fathers to take up arms. Once their fathers became involved in the “dirty war” a certain hardening often took place, which will be difficult to understand unless one has been in the same situation and political context. Thus a “truth process” might well harm relationships between older and younger generations in loyalist areas.

- Healing?

A further concern relates to the idea that a “truth process” is supposed to contribute to “healing” or even “reconciliation”. However, if this healing or reconciliation requires Loyalist ex-prisoners/ex-combatants to stand up and say that they are sorry, then there is little chance of success. During the announcement of the loyalist ceasefires in 1994 a collective apology was offered for the suffering caused to all innocent civilians over the last thirty years. This apology must not be misunderstood as a rejection of the political cause for which loyalists fought. If a situation were to arise again where an attempt is made to violently impose a united Ireland on loyalists, or if they felt that their communities were again under the same levels of threat from armed republicanism, then they would not hesitate to respond with armed resistance.

The concern is that if loyalists were to make statements before a commission where victims were expecting an apology, then their lack of political remorse might be experienced as salt rubbed into the victims’ wounds, which is unlikely to contribute to healing.

A related problem might arise from moral pressure being put on people to participate in a “truth process”. If people choose for good reasons (such as those mentioned above) not to participate, they might be portrayed as callous, or less than human, or insensitive to the needs of victims. Thus a “truth process” that makes unrealistic demands on “perpetrators” to show remorse etc., might actually widen the gap between perceived victims and perceived perpetrators.

- Whose agenda is it anyway?

There is deep suspicion amongst loyalists about the high potential for a “truth process” to be abused by republicans to suit their political agenda. A repeated concern expressed was that republicans – who are seen to be very skilful in the art of propaganda – would use a “truth commission” as a stick to beat the British state with. As such, the process will be a convenient instrument to blame the British state and “its surrogates” for everything, providing justification for their war, thus allowing them to be let off the hook. If this were to happen it will merely add further insult to the injuries of British/Protestant victims.

Contrary to what they claim, republicans have been involved in many actions against civilians, in both communities – examples include La Mon, Shankill, Teebane, Enniskillen, Kingsmills, Tullyvallen and the Disappeared. There is little faith that republicans will honestly expose these dirty deeds before a “truth commission”.

There are also serious doubts amongst loyalists about the agenda of the British state in some kind of “truth process” for Northern Ireland. This recent interest is seen as a public relations exercise without any real commitment, a convenient, pragmatic alternative to a costly series of tribunals, or as a way to avoid their own involvement in the conflict.

Avenues for further exploration?

During the various discussions held thus far a number of points were raised which might be seen as potential benefits of a “truth process”. There has not been adequate opportunity to explore these possibilities, but they are listed below:

- How do we counter the tendency for loyalist ex-prisoners/paramilitaries to be scapegoated? How do we ensure that other groups and institutions, such as government, media, churches, business and non-combatants, accept responsibility for their role in the conflict?
- How do we stop the endless stream of one-sided inquiries? Is there an alternative to these expensive public inquiries, which are sapping away at the confidence of unionist/loyalist communities? How do we address the current imbalance in favour of republicans? Is there a better way to “put things to bed”?
- How do we tell the story/stories of our community, warts and all? How do we get the truth out as we see it? This might help to counter demonisation, as well as the over emphasis on republican stories. Unless our stories are told, the future teaching of history will remain one-sided.

Concluding Remarks

The discussions thus far demonstrate that any type of “truth process” has little chance of succeeding unless a clear answer is provided to this question: What are the benefits for loyalism in any truth process?

Participant Groups

Groups who participated in the workshops included: -

EPIC	Greater Shankill Alternatives	Northern Ireland Alternatives
West Belfast Athletic & Cultural Club	The Bridge Community Association	Community Safety Partnership (East Belfast)
LINC Resource Centre	REACT (Armagh)	REACT (Londonderry)
Interaction Belfast	Progressive Unionist Party	Community Voice (Ballymena)
Factory Community Group (Larne)	Loyalist Prisoners Welfare Association	Mediation Resource Centre (Carrickfergus)

Thanks to Martin Snoddon (Conflict Trauma Resource Centre) who co-facilitated the two workshops.

1 CLMC Ceasefire statement; <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/clmc131094.htm>

2 The Good Friday Agreement; <http://www.nio.gov.uk/issues/agreelinks/agreement.htm>

3 Dan McGinn; *ORDE CLAIM 'A DISGRACE'*; Newsletter, 31 May 2004

4 Paul Murphy; *Dealing with Past to Build a Better Future – Murphy*; <http://www.nio.gov.uk/press/040527a.htm>

5 Barry McCaffrey; *Truth process would be 'part of conflict'*; Irish News, 31 May 2004