

Coming to terms with the conflict in and about Northern Ireland: Lessons from the Healing Through Remembering Project

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Background

Over a thirty-year period, the conflict in and about Northern Ireland has caused the death of over 3600 people. At least ten times more have been injured, in a population of about 1.5 million people. There has been an overall death rate of 2.25 per 1000 population (Morrissey & Smyth, 2002). This death rate is higher than in Argentina (0.32 per 1000), about the same as in South Africa, but substantially lower than in El Salvador (20.25 per 1000) or Cambodia (237.02 per 1000) (Morrissey & Smyth, 2002).

State responses to the impact of these conflicts have been criticised for being slow and limited. There was until recently a ‘policy silence’ in the areas of health, social services, education and other provisions for victims of the conflict (Hamilton, Thomson, & Smyth, 2002).² This has resulted in a legacy of distrust (especially of the statutory service) within many community groups working with victims of the conflict.

Many researchers and commentators mark the beginning of concerted government involvement in making policy for victims/survivors as beginning—for better or worse—with the Bloomfield Report appearing in May 1998, as well as the Wilson Report in the Republic of Ireland. These were state-sponsored initiatives aimed at making recommendations that could assist victims and recognise their suffering.

The Bloomfield Report recommends further consideration of a central Northern Ireland memorial, i.e. a building that is peacefully located within memorial gardens, and dedicated to the purposes of rest, reflection and care, as well as housing

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² This was also acknowledged by government, as Minister Des Browne noted “in all that time [*thirty years of conflict*] there were no policies in relation to victims.” See Irish Echo Online, February 19-25, 2003, Volume 76, Number 7.

appropriate works of community art that embody the memories of those who have suffered. The report recommends that the memorial incorporate inscriptions, but not the names of individuals. It does not recommend a truth commission, but says this issue requires ongoing review.

The Bloomfield Report, however, was met with mixed reactions. One criticism raised was that the report prioritised victims of paramilitary violence and did not pay sufficient attention to the victims of state violence.³ This point was reiterated recently in the Healing Through Remembering Project Report (Healing Through Remembering, 2002).

Since the Bloomfield Report there have been other government initiatives. A Victims' Liaison Unit⁴ was set up in the Northern Ireland Office (NIO)⁵ in June 1998, and a Victims' Unit in the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister⁶ as part of the Northern Ireland Assembly⁷ in July 2000. To date, the NIO and the Victims' Unit of OFMDFM claims to have spent (or allocated) over £20 million on victim-related projects. From the EU, £5.8 million has been made available for so-called victims' work for the period 2002-2004, although spending can continue to 2006.⁸ Most of these rather recent developments have been orientated towards community groups, i.e. mainly grassroots support to self-help groups and counselling organisations for victims.

The launch of the Victim Strategy Document by the Victims' Unit on 6 August 2001, from a policy perspective, is the most notable government development to date in terms of assisting victims. The document sets out to develop a "strategy to deliver practical help and services to the surviving physically and psychologically injured of violent, conflict related incidents and those close relatives or partners who care for

³ The Pat Finucane Centre for Human Rights and Social Change, "Submission to the Independent Commission into Policing", <http://www.serve.com/pfc/submiss1.html>. Also see the Press Statement from Relatives for Justice, 1 April 1998.

⁴ See <http://www.nio.gov.uk/victims> for more information.

⁵ The NIO is essentially the British Government Department dealing with Northern Ireland. According to the NIO website it was created in 1972 after the Northern Ireland Government was dissolved in the face of a worsening security situation. The establishment of direct rule from London saw William Whitelaw appointed the first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and, to date, 14 MPs have served in this post over the past three decades. The role of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) is to support the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The NIO has responsibility for Northern Ireland's constitutional and security issues, in particular, law and order, political affairs, policing, criminal justice and victims. It also has responsibility for matters relating to the licensing of and legislation concerning firearms and explosives, including fireworks. Economic and social matters are the responsibility of locally elected Northern Ireland ministers when power is devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive. When power is not devolved to the Executive, responsibility passes back to the Northern Ireland Office. For more information see <http://www.nio.gov.uk/index/about-the-nio.htm>

⁶ Part of the Northern Ireland Assembly (see footnote below for explanation) set up as part of the 1998 Peace Agreement. For more information on the Victims' Unit see <http://www.victimsnri.gov.uk/>

⁷ The Northern Ireland Assembly was established as part of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. The Assembly is the prime source of authority for all devolved responsibilities and has full legislative and executive authority. At the time of writing this paper the Assembly was suspended as of midnight on 14 October 2002. Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were held on 26 November 2003. Whilst in suspension the Secretary of State has assumed responsibility for the direction of the Northern Ireland Departments. Efforts are underway to restore the Assembly. For more information on the Assembly see <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/>.

⁸ Seventy-five per cent of the funds have come from the European Union and 25% from the Northern Ireland Executive. The measure is known as PEACE II.

them, along with those close relatives or partners who mourn their dead” (Victims Unit OFMDFM, 2002), which is how the Victim Strategy defines “victim”.⁹

A range of other policy-orientated initiatives have also taken place. For example, reviews of the compensation scheme and of counselling were undertaken; victim representatives were nominated to the Civic Forum; a Memorial Fund¹⁰ was set up; the Human Rights Commission explored the possibility of including a specific focus on victims in the Bill of Rights; and victim issues were mentioned in the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Programme for Government.

At the same time, over sixty victim groups, drawing from across the major political perspectives, have continued to actively operate. Their work is extensive and far-reaching, including service-delivery work such as counselling, befriending, and alternative therapies, as well as lobbying and advocacy. An initial £3 million Core Funding Scheme was set up, and a further £3 million was allocated for the work in 2003-2005 for these groups.

That said, a debate as to who the “real” victims of the conflict has raged. Individuals from different sides of the conflict have alleged that there is a hierarchy of victimhood, i.e. pointing out that their specific type of victimisation is given a lower level of official prioritisation than certain others.

The process of support to victims came late in the day and initially was somewhat chaotic in its development, although the process is currently stabilising to a degree. Many victim groups, however, remain concerned about the possibility of long-term funding, sustainability, and support. They also hold quite divergent views at this stage about how best to deal with the past, e.g. should there be a truth commission, a memorial listing all those killed in the conflict?

Transitional justice questions

Although victims need to be at the forefront of any policy for addressing the past, the question of dealing with the past also concerns the wider society. In 1998 I undertook some research on whether Northern Ireland should have a truth commission. I concluded that, at that time, an official truth recovery process seemed unlikely for Northern Ireland (Hamber, 1998). Others made similar arguments; namely, that no moral or political authority existed to support an entity such as a truth commission (NIACRO and Victim Support Northern Ireland, 1999).

I further argued in my research that the balance of power between forces during transition generally determined government policy on issues (Benomar, 1993) and, in Northern Ireland, at that stage, the forces were too evenly weighed, and all sides were opting to leave their truths hidden for the time being. As such:

⁹ Available at <http://www.victimsnri.gov.uk/publications.htm>.

¹⁰ The Northern Ireland Memorial Fund was established for charitable purposes (by the British State with initial grants supported by it) and aims to identify the needs of those who have suffered and continue to suffer as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland. It sets out to assist and support them, and those involved in the provision of support for them, in a practical and what it terms “an innovative way”. It offers, among other things, small grants, respite schemes for carers and victims, and chronic pain management schemes.

Most political players demand truth from those they perceive as the other side or sides, but seem unwilling to offer the truth from their side, or acknowledge and take responsibility for their actions. This is mostly due to fear that such acknowledgement (public or otherwise) will weaken in the new dispensation and that the truth may be used against them within the context of the delicate peace that prevails. There are also those in Northern Ireland who refuse to accept that they did anything wrong or that their action (or inaction) was complicit in perpetuating the conflict (Hamber, 1998, p.80-81).

Several years on, the endpoint has not shifted significantly, but the debate and the intricacies of dealing with the past have certainly gained political and public momentum.¹¹ In addition, various mechanisms that one could broadly call “truth-recovery processes” in some shape or form are underway.

For example, the Bloody Sunday Inquiry was announced on 29 January 1998 and has been the most extensive public inquiry in British history;¹² a commission to investigate disappearances was also set up; four new inquiries into political murders are due to start soon; an inquiry into the origins of bomb attacks in Dublin and Monaghan in 1974 was set up by the Irish Government; and a number of ongoing legal matters have come before the European Court of Human Rights.¹³ There are also many ongoing community initiatives working with memorials, oral history and commemoration. Ongoing projects have also documented the extent of the conflict in Northern Ireland in great detail.¹⁴

Recently the Northern Ireland Chief Constable called for a truth commission, claiming that he did not have the resources to investigate all the unsolved cases. However, a few weeks later, £9 million was allocated (enough money for about 30 staff) by the British Government to investigate various unsolved cases in Northern Ireland, totalling over 2000. At the same time, the debate about whether Northern Ireland should have a truth commission continues. The British Secretary of State has announced a consultation process on the issue. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, a parliamentary sub-committee in Westminster, is also looking into the issue.

Healing Through Remembering

To date, the most thorough public and civil society investigation of strategies for dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, however, has come from a civil society initiative known as Healing Through Remembering.¹⁵ This initiative sought to document possible mechanisms and realisable options for how remembering should occur so that healing could take place for all those affected.

¹¹ For a more recent discussion on the feasibility and potentialities of a truth commission for Northern Ireland, see Hamber, B. (2003).

¹² See <http://www.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org/index.htm>.

¹³ See Ní Aoláin, F. (2002).

¹⁴ See, for example, Fay, Morrissey & Smyth (1998); McKittrick, Kelters, Feeney & Thornton (1999); The Cost of the Troubles Study. (1999); Ardoyne Commemoration Project. (2002).

¹⁵ See <http://www.healingthroughremembering.org> for more details.

In June 2001, after over a year of discussion, a group of individuals formally agreed to become the Healing Through Remembering Project Board. This Board was made up of a range of individuals with very divergent political and social views. The Project was formally launched on 8 October 2001.

The key task of the Project was to undertake an independent consultation process on how Northern Ireland, and those affected both in and out of Northern Ireland, could remember and deal with the past and in so doing, move towards healing. The purpose of the consultation was to produce a document outlining a range of options for dealing with the past and with truth recovery.

This entailed an extensive public consultation process, which involved advertising in all the major newspapers (fifty-six in total), writing to hundreds of organisations, and face-to-face discussions with many representatives of these. Those responding to the consultation were asked to primarily consider: How should people remember the events connected with the conflict in and about Northern Ireland and, in so doing, individually and collectively contribute to the healing of the wounds of society?

Over one hundred submissions were received. Respondents included individuals and organisations broadly identified as or working with victims, security forces, ex-prisoners, students, school children, religious leaders, NGOs, academics, service-providers, and artists and performers.

The responses were analysed and synthesised, and published in a final Report in June 2002. Many of the submissions, as this final Report notes, endorsed the value of remembering and spoke of the importance of finding ways to move society forward. Others expressed their concerns about the potential pitfalls of remembering. Importantly, drawing on the submissions, the Healing Through Remembering (HTR) Project saw the whole society as having a responsibility to deal with the past.

Specifically, in the final Report respondents identify some fourteen key forms of remembering processes. These included: storytelling and oral history; memorials; museums, exhibitions and art; public and collective commemorations; truth recovery processes; other forms of legal processes such as trials and inquiries; community and intercommunity interactions; support for individuals and victims; research and social policy development; a Centre for remembrance; a financial response, i.e. the establishment of a memorial fund for victims, and a satisfactory compensation system; education and training; supporting current remembering processes; and self-examination of institutions and apologies.

From the above suggestions the Board distilled six interrelated recommendations to take the process forward. The recommendations formed part of the final Report. The Project's recommendations include a focus on truth recovery, but extend well beyond it. They specifically include: (1) developing a living memorial museum; (2) establishing a day of reflection; (3) setting up a network of commemoration projects; (4) establishing a collective story-telling initiative; (5) establishing an initiative to take the recommendations forward; and (6) initiating an acknowledgement process towards truth recovery.

In terms of truth recovery, and based on its consultation, the Project felt that a formal truth-recovery process should be given careful consideration, though only as one part of dealing with the past. Importantly, the HTR final Report stipulates that an important first step in a truth-recovery process is acknowledgement, by all, of acts of commission and/or omission. As the Report notes:

all organisations and institutions that have been engaged in the conflict, including the British and Irish States, the political parties and Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries, should honestly and publicly acknowledge responsibility for past political violence due to their acts of omission and commission. We see this as the first and necessary step having the potentiality of a larger process of truth recovery. When acknowledgement is forthcoming, we recommended that measured, inclusive and in-depth consideration be given to the establishment of an appropriate and unique truth recovery process (Healing Through Remembering, 2002, p.50).

The use of the phrase “truth recovery” was deliberate. It was broader than the idea of recommending a truth commission as such. In the broadest sense, truth recovery could imply mechanisms such as truth commissions run domestically or intentionally, commissions of enquiry, tribunals or special prosecutions or, perhaps, historically based truth-recovery processes driven by victim narratives.

Furthermore, the Report is at pains to point out that any such process should relate to and not replace other formal truth-finding structures that exist, namely those within the existing criminal justice system and other associated mechanisms such as inquests, police investigations, prosecutions and inquiries. Much work remains to be done before an acceptable mechanism (that is also legally viable given other developments) could come into being.

The Report, however, is clear that the British and Irish states (who the HTR Board recommend should initially lead the process), political parties, republican and loyalist paramilitaries and other institutions would all need fully to acknowledge the extent of their particular culpability. In fact, it argues that all in society should consider what they have done and have not done to prevent loss of life. Sincere acknowledgment is the key foundation for exploring truth recovery in an even-tempered, self-effacing and responsible manner. Truth recovery, however, is only one part of the picture.

The final Report points out that each of the six recommendations is a stand-alone recommendation, but that they are all profoundly interconnected. They should be seen as an ensemble rather than as isolated activities. They are all reliant on inclusive discussion and participation to be realised. Currently, the Project (which has since received a new round of funding and become the Healing Through Remembering Initiative, as recommended in the initial report) has set up a range of civil society working groups to begin to try and implement the recommendations.

Lessons learned

A range of lessons can be drawn from the Healing Through Remembering (HTR) Project.

Firstly, any initiative to deal with the past works best if it is broadly inclusive and is driven by consensus. The HTR Project was made up of individuals from very different backgrounds (e.g. ex-political prisoners, victim representatives, academics, NGO workers, etc.). This led to a lengthy process of establishing the Board as trust was being built (nearly two years in the making). However, in the end, this enriched the process, and the final Report reflects a range of perspectives. As such, the recommendations have met little resistance from various political groups. This has meant that the working groups implementing the recommendations have begun to unfold with cooperative participation from a range of individuals with very divergent views.

The same steps used by HTR with regard to inclusion can be applied to truth-recovery processes more broadly. Specifically, they work best when there is consensus on their remit and focus. This requires genuine consultation and a serious engagement with the issues at hand. Victims also need to have their say in such a process. Many may want to tell their stories and have them officially documented, something that some truth commissions have done particularly effectively. But equally it is naïve to think that most will be satisfied with this alone. Investigation and, potentially, prosecutions will be high on victims' agendas if international experience is anything to go by. This needs to be respected and become part of the debate from the outset, as do other methods of remembering, as the HTR project highlights.

Furthermore, "remembering" should not only be restricted to victims. The whole society generally has a responsibility to address the legacy of the past as the HTR final report notes. Although processes for dealing with the past need to be victim-centred, the spirit of the HTR Project is that all role players need to be part of the process of dealing with the past. Most importantly they have a role in acknowledging the part they themselves played in the conflict and in finding ways to contribute to effectively addressing the consequences of conflict and meeting the needs of victims.

The past can only be dealt with if all concerned enter the debate in an inclusive way, aimed at entrenching peace as the ultimate goal. We should not underestimate the importance of getting this right. The discussion needs to be aimed at societal reconciliation and not point-scoring. If we do not first agree on the underlying principles (again a lengthy discussion in the HTR Project) all discussion will be contorted and subject to political wrangling. This will ultimately result in mechanisms that will continue the conflict by different means, rather than find ways to resolve it constructively.

A second lesson is that any process of remembering or dealing with the past needs to be transparent and publicly accountable. In the HTR Project all activities in the consultation process were made public. The background and political perspectives of the participants were made explicit. This was very difficult for some groups who, for example, could initially not deal with the fact that an ex-prisoner was meeting with a victim in the project, but such an inclusive approach was critical. The same should be applied to any truth-recovery process.

In South Africa, for example, the selection of truth commissioners was a public process. The public was asked to nominate individuals that they felt had a good human rights track record of being commissioners. These individuals, some three hundred, were then interviewed in public (by a selection panel selected by President Mandela) and in the full glare of television cameras. Their pasts were open to discussion if necessary, and the public could send in questions to the panel if they wanted. Ultimately seventeen individuals were selected. In this way, the legitimacy of the commission was built from the start. This teaches us that transparency is vital in truth-related processes or any remembering-based initiative.

The third lesson is that a genuine strategy for dealing with a violent past should not merely be set up for pragmatic and political reasons. There needs to be an authentic investment in uncovering the truth and remembering as ways of learning lessons for the future—this is not easy. If one thinks of the example of a truth commission (as one mechanism for dealing with the past, of course), the discussion should not be narrowed at the outset; for example, truth being discussed as something that is only dependent upon justice being relinquished as in the South African case. Some truth commissions have recommended prosecutions after their investigations. A creative and wide-ranging discussion is needed.

As a civil society initiative, the HTR Project used this wide-ranging approach in its work. It started its consultation with a very wide question as noted above. This consultation led to a focus on a range of recommendations (e.g. the living memorial museum, day of reflection, mentioned above), which are now being investigated to outline the specifics of how to attain them. It would have been restrictive to start the HTR consultation too narrowly, say by asking whether Northern Ireland needs a truth commission. A much more far-reaching discussion was needed first that recognised that dealing with the past is long-term and multifaceted and cannot be reduced to one mechanism.

This links to the final lesson, i.e. that dealing with decades of conflict is long-term, complex and time-consuming. It will not entail a single approach or model, and the past cannot just be put to rest. International lessons suggest it takes decades. We should not look for any quick fixes. We should not rush into opinions on different methods before we have agreed that remembering, acknowledgement, truth and justice are important issues for victims and society at large. We must interrogate what we mean by these terms and debate our different perspectives. Civil society also needs to be active in practically addressing the issues that are raised. This has been central to the philosophy of the HTR initiative.

Furthermore, it needs to be recognised that in any society, there is always a range of initiatives and projects already working on the ground. Any strategy for dealing with the past should appreciate this. Strategies for dealing with the past “should not replace what is already in place and what is developing in other sectors” but should seek to “complement current initiatives that should continue to be supported and developed” (Healing Through Remembering, 2002, p. vii). This is vitally important, as it is these initiatives that have built the opportunity for dialogue and often must take the process forward long after mechanisms such as truth commissions have ceased to operate.

Dealing with the past is wider than a truth-recovery process alone, and from the outset, it should be recognised that it will remain an issue and part of the society where it takes place for years, even generations, to come. It is critical to involve civil society and the society more broadly in any processes aimed at dealing with the past. HTR has attempted to do this from the start, but like the complex process of addressing the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, HTR too has a long way yet to go.

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