

Dealing with the past: time to move to a new level



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conflicts of the past. This should be followed by a commitment to developing and participating in a process of truth-recovery.

References

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I began to explore the issue of how Northern Ireland should deal with the past shortly before the 1998 Agreement. At that time, when I asked policymakers and community groups whether the issue of dealing with the past was important or would become important in the future, responses ranged from bewilderment to hostility. More immediate issues were at hand. A discussion of the past was equated for some with suggesting unravelling the peace process while others were dogmatic they had nothing to account for. However, a decade on the issue of dealing with the past has become mainstream. The fact that PEACE III has a funding stream entitled 'Dealing with the Past' is proof in itself. The key question though is whether society is any closer to grappling with the past.

Progress

Much has happened since the Agreement. The peace process has spluttered to a (seeming) finalé marked by the unthinkable co-operation between Paisley and McGuinness as First and Deputy First Ministers in the new Assembly. In terms of dealing with the past there has been, among others, the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, commissions to investigate disappearances; inquiries into political murders north and south; cases before the European Court of Human Rights; the Historical Enquiries Team; and the Consultative Panel on the Past set up by the British government to provide ways forward on the dealing with the past question.

At the civil society level, the Healing Through Remembering initiative, which has brought together former loyalist and republican combatants, British soldiers, members of the PSNI, victims of

the conflict, people from church and civil society backgrounds, academics and others, to debate ways of dealing with the past has made a significant contribution. The project has presented options for truth recovery, hosted a Day of Reflection, considered methods such as storytelling and provided ideas for a living memorial museum (*Healing Through Remembering*, 2002, McEvoy, 2006). The breadth and extent of this project, and its unique position in driving the dealing with the past debate from the bottom up, is unprecedented internationally.

Thus, it would be untrue to say this society is not dealing with the past. Rather, the question is whether more is needed and whether a structured collective process is necessary.

Resistance

Many questions remain about the past in terms of truth and the secrets of the 'dirty war'. For some victims the question of justice remains pressing. Although some apologies have been made, genuine acknowledgment from the governments, paramilitaries and wider institutions that had a role in the past such as churches, the judiciary, the media, the educational establishment, and those allocating services such as housing, has not been forthcoming.

When the particular question of truth recovery is raised typical responses follow: the truth is too damaging, everyone has secrets and it is safer to leave these alone; Northern Ireland is small and the violence intimate, truth-telling would be destabilising; justice cannot be delivered;

the Agreement has already granted early release; truth-recovery is too expensive; acknowledgement can only be forthcoming once culpability has been conclusively established; and no one would tell the truth anyway.

These resistances to truth recovery are interesting. Graham Hayes writes: "the perpetrators fear the truth because of the guilt of their actions; the benefactors fear the truth because of the 'silence' of their complicity; some victims fear the truth because of the apprehension of forgetting through the process of forgiveness; and other victims fear the truth because it is too painful to bear" (Hayes, 1998, p.46). Hayes' comments command respect for the difficulty of acknowledging the past, while at the same time they pose a challenge to us all.

Why is it that we are better at thinking of why not to address the past than arguing why we should? Giving the reason that people will not tell the truth as a justification why we should not interrogate the past is a case in point. Yes, lingering half-truths and lies, and a failure to take responsibility for actions and inactions is a reason why we should be wary when considering the issue of truth recovery, but it is also a reason as to why truth recovery is an imperative.

A new level

Dealing with the past can be a technical matter that could be dealt with by a legitimate and inclusive truth-recovery process. However, it is also about political will and courage. Being open to reasons why dealing with the past may be necessary is the first step. Having the courage to admit that not all that

was done in the name of a just cause—whether you see that as your role as the state, defending the state or fighting against it—is the next.

So has the dealing with the past process moved on in ten years? The answer is a cautious yes. Dealing with the past is now squarely on the agenda and much is happening. However, risks remain that the debate about how to deal with the past will be self-defeating or the debate in itself may become the process rather than moving to a new level.

In 1998, after investigating different views on the matter of dealing with the past, I concluded the following on truth recovery: **"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).

I am not convinced many have moved beyond this. Surely the time has come to stop obfuscating, talking about whether we should talk about the past or waiting for another committee to report on what should happen next. Someone has to jump first, and that means at an absolute minimum, publicly admitting mistakes were made and acknowledging one's own role, either by commission or omission, in the