

► **D**espite recent developments in the peace process and the restoration of the Assembly there is little doubt that the question of how Northern Ireland will deal with its past will remain a burning issue for some years to come. Core to this debate will be the issue of truth recovery and specifically the controversial question whether past atrocities should be brushed under the carpet of history or tackled head on.

The organisation *Healing Through Remembering* has attempted to deal with this debate proactively and recently launched a discussion document outlining options for truth recovery. The report was drawn up by the organisation's Truth Recovery and Acknowledgement sub group. This unique and diverse group includes former Loyalist and Republican combatants, a former British Army officer, members of the PSNI, victims of the conflict, people from church and civil society backgrounds and a range of others. Although the sub group members have robust and diverse views, all shared a common sense of frustration at the superficiality of much of the debate on dealing with the past over the last few years. The sub group therefore sought to provide sufficient information to offer this debate, and specifically the discussions on the issue of truth recovery, some structure and depth, allowing people to make up their own minds about what the best course of action might be.

The report details five options for truth recovery regarding the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. The options are neither exhaustive nor indeed mutually exclusive. The options are presented with the aim of concretising discussions that have often moved little beyond the abstract. They can be summarised as follows:

**Drawing a line under the past ... would mean the ongoing patchwork of processes would continue with no additional formal steps towards a process of truth recovery**

#### **Option 1 Drawing a Line Under the Past**

The "drawing a line under the past" or the "do nothing else" option would mean the ongoing patchwork of processes would continue with no additional formal steps towards a process of truth

## **Making peace with the past options for truth recovery in and about Northern Ireland**

### **Brandon Hamber & Kieran McEvoy set out the key options**

recovery. This is an articulation of the position of those who argue either that no further process of truth recovery is necessary, that truth recovery would 'open old wounds' for victims and others, or that truth recovery could destabilise the fragile political process or indeed that it might serve to criminalise those who were involved in acts of political violence.

#### **Option 2 Internal Organisational Investigations**

In this option, organisations previously involved in acts of violence would take primary responsibility for assisting in providing victims and families with the truth. The organisations would become involved voluntarily, to meet victims' requests for information, and would build on their experience in conducting internal investigations. This option could provide ex-combatants and the security forces with the opportunity to make a commitment to social and individual healing and reconciliation.

#### **Option 3 Community-based "Bottom-up" Truth Recovery**

This option would involve local people in collecting and documenting local truth. It would take advantage of this skills base, and would itself be a mechanism for communal healing and reconciliation. This model could consider structural issues, and combine with storytelling and local history as well as "top-down" truth recovery. It could provide an alternative to dominant "macro" narratives by giving voice to victims and marginalised communities, record previously untold stories, and underline the validity of different experiences between and within communities.

#### **Option 4 Truth-recovery Commission**

Such a commission would focus on events of the past over a specified period of time. It would explore the causes, context and consequences of violence as well as examine specific events and

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patterns. Set up by legislation by the Irish and British governments, with independence from both, it would have the power to compel witnesses, grant amnesty, recommend prosecution, order reparations, and present a report with recommendations. It would be a practical and symbolic expression of the willingness of society to deal with its violent past as part of the transition to becoming a more inclusive society.

### **Option 5 A Commission of Historical Clarification**

The primary focus of this option is historical (that is upon the causes and consequences of conflict) with less emphasis on either victims or those involved in past acts of violence. The

emphasis would be on devising an independent, authoritative, historical narrative about what occurred during the conflict and why, and to encourage a broader sense of collective (rather than individual) responsibility for what happened. An agreed narrative would limit misperceptions and disagreements about what actually happened, and thus help to prevent future cycles of violence based on grudges and manipulation.

### **Conclusion**

The *Making Peace with the Past* report document from Healing Through Remembering is not designed to offer a definitive view on how or whether Northern Ireland should have some form of a truth-recovery process. Rather, this report is intended to

provide sufficient detail and context to help focus the debate concerning truth recovery in and about Northern Ireland on realistic options for the future. ■

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The authors would like to thank Martin Beddeleem for his editorial suggestions.

Views expressed are personal to the authors. Copies are at the HTR Office 028 9023 8844, or download at [www.healingthroughremembering.org](http://www.healingthroughremembering.org)