

Making Peace with the Past: Options for Truth Recovery In and About NI

by Brandon Hamber & Kieran McEvoy

Since the resurrection of the Assembly on 8 May 2007, Northern Ireland feels like a different place. At the same time, however, much work remains to be done if the political process is to be bedded down. Dealing with the past will invariably raise its head and questions surrounding truth recovery about past atrocities may prove decisive in how and if the political process will hold.

Recently Healing Through Remembering launched their discussion document outlining options for truth recovery. This was drawn up by the organisation's Truth Recovery and Acknowledgement sub group. This unique grouping 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 diverse views on truth recovery, all shared a common sense of exasperation at the shallowness which has characterised much of the debate over the last few years.

Discussions have too often narrowed to 'either you are opposed to any further movement on truth recovery or you are for a South African style Truth and Reconciliation Commission' with little room for nuance or subtlety. The sub group therefore sought to provide sufficient information to offer the debate some structure and depth letting people make up their own minds. The report includes an analysis of the experiences of various international approaches to truth recovery in addition to the range of ongoing initiatives

in Northern Ireland and the Republic. The heart of the report details five options for truth recovery regarding the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. These options are neither exhaustive nor indeed mutually exclusive, but rather aim to concretise discussions that have often moved little beyond the abstract. They can be summarised as follows:

OPTION ONE

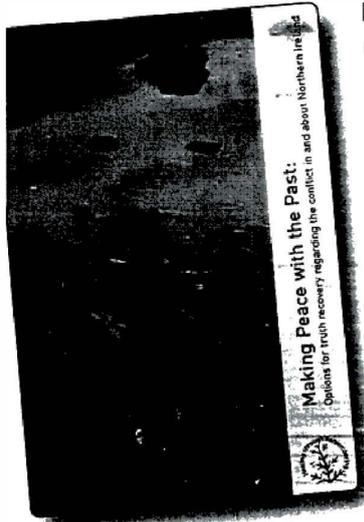
Drawing a Line Under the Past

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 recovery. This is an articulation of the position of those who argue either that no further process of truth recovery is necessary, or possible, or that truth recovery would 'open old wounds' for victims and others, or destabilise the fragile political process or indeed that it might serve to criminalise those who were involved in acts of political violence. That said, ongoing initiatives such as the post-Cory inquiries, the work of the Police Ombudsman as well as individual cases before the courts would continue. Thus, for those who oppose this option, the obvious criticism is that all of these 'truths' will continue to emerge as before, albeit in a haphazard and piecemeal fashion.

OPTION TWO

Internal Organisational Investigations

In this option, organisations previously involved in acts of violence including loyalist and republican paramilitaries as well as state agencies would take primary responsibility for assisting as much as possible 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. There would be a greater trust from former paramilitary or security force personnel in the process if those who were interviewing or investigating past events were former comrades and colleagues. However, there might well be considerable public mistrust of organisations investigating incidents in which they themselves had been involved. Moreover, this option would not lead to prosecution or the naming of names, nor would it directly help in transforming institutions or political leadership.



OPTION THREE

Community-based "Bottom-up" Truth Recovery

There are existing local models of communities devising and carrying out their own forms of truth recovery. Involving local people in collecting and documenting local truth 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. Of course as a localised mechanism, it risks varying greatly from one community to another, or focusing within single identities, and therefore not holding to account all institutions and protagonists. This option would rather lead to a broad collection of stories and narratives about the past.

OPTION FOUR

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 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. A Truth-Recovery Commission could build on the truth recovery work that has already taken place, but do so in a much more inclusive fashion. 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. It would work best if it included independent eminent international figures, avoided an overly adversarial and legalistic way of working, and saw itself as part of the wider process of making peace with the past rather than the only vehicle. Whether it could be established, and succeed, would depend very much on the trust, participation and confidence of victims, ex-combatants, and institutions within society to participate in it.

OPTION FIVE

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. This option would probably generate less political opposition, and could be the start of a broader public debate on what happened. It would produce a report, and could make recommendations. However, the Commission would have no evidentiary powers, no power to compel witnesses, grant amnesty, prosecute, or name names. Also, it would be unlikely to meet the needs of victims, and would risk seeming distant and scholarly, both of which would limit public ownership of its results.

CONCLUSION . . .

The Making Peace with the Past 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.

The organisation awaits your feedback and welcomes all responses.

The authors would like to thank Martin Beddleem for his editorial suggestions. Views expressed are personal to the authors.

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