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Voice

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Voice: “So What Is It Like Now That Your Country Is Run by a Terrorist?”

Brandon Hamber

In 1997, I was a visiting fellow at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland on sabbatical from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa. At the time, a group of community activists from across the political spectrum living in Derry (or Londonderry, depending on your politics) were preparing for a trip to South Africa. I was asked to give the group a brief orientation. South Africa was a place they had all heard much about with its iconic status of all that is appalling and hopeful in this world wrapped into one, but most knew little of what to expect.

I cannot remember exactly what I said to the group that wintry night. I am sure I spoke about the positive changes in South Africa. I certainly mentioned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a process I was working closely with at the time.

I opened the floor to questions; I expected the usual: “Does Northern Ireland need a De Klerk-like figure?” or “Do you think Northern Ireland needs a truth commission?” But that night was different. No sooner had I asked for

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questions when a man leapt to his feet and blurted: “So what is it like now that your country is run by a terrorist?”

I was astounded. I could not remember when last someone even vaguely equated Mandela with terrorism, a discussion that had long since slipped from the political landscape. The only response I could muster was that I personally felt it was fine. More to the point, and at the risk of dragging up an old cliché, I commented that he needed to remember that one person’s terrorist was another person’s freedom fighter.

Over the next year, I completed my fellowship and returned to South Africa. When in 2001 I moved back to Northern Ireland, I realized that the question was a preliminary taster of the differences between the two societies.

In Northern Ireland, the word ‘terrorist’ is frequently heard, even today. The word has gained new life since the events of 11 September 2001 in the US. The “war on terror” has given it global legitimacy once again. Some use it as a qualifier as to why Sinn Féin, the largest elected Republican party in Northern Ireland, with its association with the IRA, should be excluded from the power-sharing government. It is used sometimes to describe anyone from a paramilitary background regardless of his/her current politics or approach. It is rarely used to describe state atrocities.

Conversely, in South Africa “terrorism” is a term that steadily began to die out from 1990 onwards following the peace process. Prior to that, it was ubiquitous. I grew up in a South Africa where the government wanted us to believe that the “terrorist” *rooi/swart gevaar* (red/black danger) was pervasive. The world, including the US government, supported this view well into the 1980s.

This is not to say the liberation forces in South Africa did not commit violent, terror-inducing acts; indeed, there were many. But it remained a glaring irony that, despite their rhetoric, the monopoly over acts of terror resided with the apartheid state. This somewhat obvious contradiction became increasingly evident as the peace process unfolded. This led to the eradication of the word from the South African political lexicon.

Another factor in its disappearance was the TRC. Within its framework, “terrorism” as a word largely proved meaningless. It was at best a descriptor (i.e., it described acts that caused terror). For us, it was only significant to peace-building when it was contextualized and accompanied with explanations as to why certain acts took place by combatants or the state, and if we could use it to learn from the past and prevent future violence.

In Northern Ireland, things are changing. There is little doubt that it is a safer place than before. That said, the peace process lurches between moments of profound progress and hiatus. There has not been a wholesale change of political power as there was in South Africa. The political forces remain fairly

evenly balanced. Northern Ireland finds itself facing more of a stalemate than South Africa ever did.

In this context, words such as “terrorism” still have currency. Unlike in South Africa, the past of certain individuals, especially former paramilitaries regardless of their political mandate or contemporary politics, continues to be used as the major reason for halting the peace process. Calling someone a “terrorist” poses as a one-word explanation as to why her/his voice should be silenced.

Clearly, as a descriptive label “terrorism” and how we use it is deeply linked with debates about the legitimate use of violence by the state and combatants. The people of Northern Ireland and the British State still have to reckon with this.

When making peace, a new vocabulary is needed in which past atrocities are not only described in detail in all their abject awfulness, but at the same time the context, causes, and nature of all acts by all players need to be better understood and lessons learned. This is a tall and ambitious order, but living in two violent societies has taught me that genuine peace-building is embedded through efforts at explanation and not just descriptive words that pretend to explain.

On the personal front, from time to time, my wife (who is from Northern Ireland) and I both still catch each other glancing at an empty car on a lonely street or an unattended bag in a public place. Thousands of miles apart we both grew up with the lurking threat of bomb-blasts. But these little fragments of personal history will mean little to our children if we never find the words to articulate and *fully* explain the context in which our seemingly odd little paranoias were born.