

# Dealing with the past: lost in translation



Expecting victims to forget a violent history is not an option, says conflict expert

**Brandon Hamber**

During the Belfast Festival the performance of the play *Truth in Translation* which focuses on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission will bring the dealing with the past debate once again to the fore.

Instead of relying on the testimonies of victims, perpetrators, commissioners or the Commission audience, *Truth in Translation* uniquely centres on the translators who worked for the Commission.

Translators contended with 11 official South African languages and at the same time were expected to remain uninvolved as they narrated atrocity after atrocity.

However, by the nature of translating in the first person they became absorbed into the process, becoming vehicles for the truth and the lies they themselves had to utter.

The play is on a global tour prioritising societies coming out of conflict. Now that it is in Northern Ireland it will impact

on the debate about dealing with the past.

This is a challenging question in any society emerging from conflict and seems almost impossible to escape.

Like the translators in South Africa, the dealing with the past debate touches everyone, from those who wish to forget to those who because of their victimisation cannot. The past is part of us all.

Working with victims of political conflict has taught me that the needs of victims do not disappear with the passage of time.

This was evident when I worked with those testifying before the Commission in South Africa, as well as in societies as diverse as Liberia and Brazil, and here in Northern Ireland as chair of the cross-community organisation *Healing Through Remembering*.

It is difficult because victims have multiple needs. It would be naive to say that any process, including the South African one, can meet all needs.

Nevertheless, expecting victims to forget the past when their lives have been profoundly altered by violence is simply not an option.

At the same time, dealing with the past is also wider than meeting the needs of victims.

A violent past results in silences, concealments and misperceptions across society.

A victim-centred but society-wide process for dealing with the past is necessary.

A society-wide understanding demands asking hard questions: for example how did violence come about and how was it sustained? This means considering the role of not only those engaged in violence, but also the institutions and organisations that made it possible.

A genuine truth recovery process would include a focus on the churches, political parties, media, health services, education and housing services among others.

Such institutions may well have exacerbated the situation or failed to prevent it from getting worse.

Seen through this lens it is no wonder many feel the best option is to leave the past alone. But will the past just go away?

The past has continued to shape the present in this part of the world for centuries, surely at some point we have to grapple

with the myths and misdemeanours of the past.

The South African process was hardly perfect and cannot be imported wholesale.

However, if South Africa teaches us anything it is that peace processes do not fall apart from looking into the past.

Although at times the Commission created more questions than it answered, the process of having a structured inquiry into the past forced South Africans to confront the past in some shape or form.

This is evidenced by plays such as *Truth in Translation* that continue to draw audiences and challenge perceptions here and in South Africa.

Dealing with the past is a process and not an event.

A criticism I have of the South African approach was the over-reliance on stressing the South African Commission as the primary mechanism for dealing with the past.

Clearly a range of mechanisms were going to be necessary over a long period of time. *Healing Through Remembering* has continually stressed the need to consider options for truth-recovery, but also to look at museums, memorials, commemoration, storytelling, acknowledgment and self-critical reflection as ways of tackling the past on several fronts. Any future processes

will need to be wide-ranging, robust, consensus-driven and hold no punches.

Truth-recovery particularly is a messy business and doing it right should make all feel uncomfortable with the result.

The challenge, however, will be to use this to learn lessons from the past to build the future rather than to slip back into the blame game. Visionary leadership will be needed, and a willingness on all sides, including the governments, to stay the distance and own their own transgressions.

People here may not need translators to understand different stories, but clearly many still struggle to hear what others are really saying. Is it not time for the listening and learning to begin?

Dr Brandon Hamber is chair of *Healing Through Remembering* and the research co-ordinator of INCORE, a United Nations Research Centre for the Study of Conflict at the University of Ulster.

*Truth in Translation* runs at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, from tonight to Saturday, November 3, as part of the Belfast Festival at Queen's. For booking visit [www.belfastfestival.com](http://www.belfastfestival.com) or tel: 9097 1197

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