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Opinion

Laurence White: Will raking past find our future?

Friday, January 04, 2008

You probably couldn't meet two more decent men than Denis Bradley and Lord Eames, co-chairs of the Consultative Group on the Past - the body set up to find the best way to deal with the legacy of the Troubles.

Both men have shown numerous times in their public lives a rare ability - especially in Northern Ireland - of being able to articulate the views of their own communities as well as appreciating the views of 'the other side'.

They are men who believe in a rational approach to a problem, seeking the widest possible information and then attempting to find a consensus or, at least, a fair solution.

That is the approach they have taken as regards their current task. They have met a wide range of statutory, voluntary and community groups who have been working with victims and survivors of the Troubles.

And later this month Bradley and Eames will be holding a series of public meetings across Northern Ireland, beginning in Belfast on Monday.

They say: "Working together we can help ensure that we move towards a society that has not forgotten the past but which learns from the past in a way that helps us all to shape a better future."

They admit that finding a way to deal with the past will not be easy. The legacy of pain and hurt right across the province is enormous. That pain has been added to by the fact those responsible for the vast majority of the deaths in the Troubles were never brought to justice for their deeds.

Bradley and Eames want everyone who has an idea of how to deal with the past and how to help society here move forward to present their suggestions to them by January 25.

I have no doubt that these two men will come up with good ideas and will draft a masterly report taking into account the sensitivities of all who suffered during the Troubles.

But will their work really help us to move forward? The mere raking over the past arouses deep passions in those who suffered directly. Quite naturally they feel their suffering is of a greater scale than that endured by anyone else and that creates, in their minds at least, a hierarchy of victims.

As well, there is no common feeling of hurt or pain. Those bereaved by the death of a police officer feel nothing in common with the family of a paramilitary member who was killed by the security forces. What feeling of shared victimhood is there between a Northern Ireland family bereaved by some random act of violence and the family of some long-forgotten squaddie shot dead on our streets?

Are we as a society mature enough to accept that all the deaths and injuries of the Troubles were unacceptable; that all the victims had friends and families who deserve respect and sympathy; that the causes of conflict were many and varied and that all sections of society plumbed the depths of depravity during the Troubles, if not in their actions, then certainly in their attitudes?

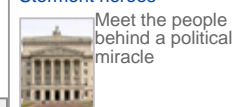
It will be difficult for this society to move forward unless everyone in it accepts that they had some part to play in the evolution of the Troubles or the continued divisions since. Our guilt may have been as a result of inaction as well as of misdeeds.

Bradley and Eames have an unenviable task. No matter what recommendations they put forward they will have their detractors. But one charge which can never be levelled at them is dishonesty. The two men will produce a report of integrity. It will then be up to the rest of us to show if we are up to the challenge of producing a shared future of mutual benefit.

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Stormont heroes



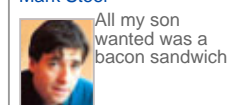
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Community Telegraph

Saved just in the knick-ers of time

A Hartlepool woman's generously proportioned Bridget Jones-style knickers proved not so much passion killers as lifesavers. Jenny Marsey's son and nephew were frying in the family home when the pan went on fire.

The nephew grabbed his aunt's large size 18 - 20 bloomers from a nearby washing basket, held them under the tap and used them like a fire blanket to put out the blaze.

Rather unkindly, one media outlet headlined the story - Big Knicks Put Out Fat Fire.

A very bitter pill to swallow

They should lock up Richard Brunstrom, Chief Constable of North Wales, after his claim that Ecstasy is safer than aspirin. His spurious argument appears to be based on the fact that around 20 people die each year after taking Ecstasy, whereas aspirin kills around 60 people a year.

But the vast bulk of deaths from aspirin are suicides - people overdose deliberately. Anything taken to excess can be lethal. Aspirin is actually something of a wonder drug; not only curing headaches but also preventing heart attacks, strokes and some cancers. No one can make that claim about Ecstasy.

But even if Ecstasy was pharmaceutically safe - and it isn't because it is manufactured by people who have no interest in its safety or otherwise, only in the money they can make from it - Brunstrom's comments are stupid.

How can parents, teachers or people in authority try to convince young people of the danger of drug-taking when a chief constable comes out and says that one of the most popular illegal drugs of choice is safe?

Young people wanting to experiment will then rationalise that if one illegal drug is safe, then maybe all illegal drugs are safe.

Mr Brunstrom should take an aspirin, lie down in a dark room and stay there until his delusions fade away.

Hands off policing ... until it suits

The Government would like to see responsibility for policing and the justice system returned to Northern Ireland hands in May this year.

Yet, strangely for a man who spent decades lambasting successive Labour and Tory governments for their handling of policing, Ian Paisley has said no. He feels that the time is not right for devolution of security and justice powers and that there is no real demand from local people for the return of those powers to Northern Ireland.

That, of course, is balderdash. Ian Paisley doesn't care a fig whether local people want security and justice powers devolved or not. At this moment in time, it obviously doesn't suit him and therefore, like all politicians, he is disguising his own desires as the will of the people.

After all, if politicians really listened to what voters said, taxes would be lower, there would be no wars and we would have infinitely better health and education systems.

But why would the First Minister not want justice and policing powers devolved for the first time since 1972?

Could it be that Sinn Fein would control policing and justice in the Executive? That wouldn't go down well with unionists, as well as a few nationalists.

Could it be that there is no real point in controlling the police any more?

Under the old Stormont system before 1972, the police was the armed wing of government and obeyed every whim of unionist politicians.

But that wouldn't happen today.

The PSNI has operational independence and is increasingly made up of officers from all parts of the community. It could no longer be used to keep uppity minorities in their place.

Instead, the Assembly and Executive would have to produce an effective policing and justice programme. Local politicians would suddenly find themselves in the firing line if the drug dealers, dissident paramilitaries, knife-wielding thugs and assorted racketeers continued to operate with virtual impunity.

Running an effective police force is actually damned hard work and maybe the highly-paid boys and girls up at Stormont don't really fancy that job.

It is always nice if you can find a scapegoat when things go wrong, and successive British governments have filled that role for decades.

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