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The blanket

A Journal of Protest and Dissent

Impossible Task for Truth Body

David Adams • *Irish Times*, 18 January 2008

I was disappointed with last week's media briefing by "sources close to" the Eames/Bradley led Consultative Group on the Past (CGP), even before I turned to their list of options for dealing with our recent history.

Non-attributable kite-flying and plausibly deniable leaking as a means of swaying or inuring public opinion is usually the grubby preserve of governments and political parties; it is certainly not what you expect from a body trying to encourage more openness (and honesty) in others,

Further, one can only hope that the lazy stereotype of contemporary unionism inadvertently conveyed by the CGP "briefer" is not reflective of a view held by the body as a whole. If it is, then we should all be concerned that a group tasked with finding consensus on how to deal with the past has such a basic lack of understanding of the majority community in Northern Ireland.

Remarking on how deeply the security forces in the North have penetrated all of the paramilitary groups, the CGP spokesperson was reported as having said: "Some of the things we're coming across are going to have - I don't want to use the word devastating - but a surprising effect, particularly within the Protestant-unionist community".

He obviously believes that nationalists are less easily shocked than unionists in this regard. Unionists may have held a somewhat rose-tinted view of the security forces about 20-25 years ago, but given all that has emerged since then, that is far from being the case now.

Allegiance to a state will naturally manifest in at least conceptual support for its properly constituted police and security services, particularly when they are under constant, violent

There is no such thing as a dirty word. Nor is there a word so powerful, that it's going to send the listener to the lake of fire upon hearing it.
- Frank Zappa



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attack from those opposed to the state's very existence. However, this should not be taken to indicate unquestioning acceptance of everything that each individual member of the police or army does. Just as citizens of the Republic naturally and properly support the Garda Síochána and the Army, but do not believe them to be beyond errors of judgment or even law-breaking, so it is with unionists and the forces of law and order in Northern Ireland.

Now that the existence of these "surprising" truths has been raised and interest has been sparked, one can only trust that they will be fully revealed to the public, if at some stage a truth process is undertaken. To do otherwise would be to engage in selective truth telling, and we have already had more than enough of that. It would be helpful, as well, if, when dealing with the issue of security force infiltration of paramilitary groups, people were to differentiate between the use of informants and collusion.

There is not a police service in the world, at least none that is any good at its job, that does not make use of informants. There is a major difference, however, between police gathering intelligence from people who, for the very reasons they have access to vital information, are unsavoury characters, and them colluding in criminality. Although undoubtedly there were individual instances of the latter during the Troubles, the use of collusion as a blanket term to include everything related to the running of informers in Northern Ireland has become common. This is at best lazy, and at worst politically motivated.

The CGP might well have been surprised to discover the number of people within paramilitary groups who were/are informants. And, more likely, at how many of these people hold senior positions within the organisations about which they pass information, and the identity of some of the individuals involved. However, none of this, on its own, constitutes collusion, and hopefully is not being categorised as such by the CGP.

I hold both Lord Eames and Denis Bradley in high regard, and have no desire to be unduly harsh about the options reportedly under consideration by the CGP. Suffice to say that the idea of a British government formally declaring that it was engaged in a war in Northern Ireland, and thereby elevating paramilitary groups to an equivalent level with state security organisations, turns morality on its head.

The massive legal implications of such a move are made clear by even a cursory glance at the Hague and Geneva conventions regarding conduct of war and war crimes, especially where the deliberate targeting, torturing, kidnapping and disappearing of civilians is concerned.

To think that a retrospective declaration of war in tandem with a general amnesty might result in lawbreakers coming forward to admit guilt is naive in the extreme. The overriding truth is that it is impossible, at least at this early juncture, for people in Northern Ireland to agree about recent history.

In order to construct a generally agreed, widely palatable version of the past, the truth must be contorted and cherry-picked - which is in direct contradiction to the very notion of truth recovery, and would probably do more harm than good. Lord Eames and Denis Bradley are engaged in an impossible task.

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