

# Pandora's Box?

## Engaging with our pasts: Initial explorations from the victims sector and republican community

**Mick Beyers**

### **Preface - Pandora's Box and the myth of 'Never Again'**

The notion of 'dealing with the past' can be seen as a kind of Pandora's box. Opponents who suggest 'drawing a line under the past' may appreciate Hesiod's version of the Pandora myth; the opening of the box unleashes all kinds of harm and destructive forces and results in "the earth and sea [being] full of evils". Alternatively, proponents of a process for engaging with the past may be quick to point to another version of the myth in which the box contains blessings for humans sent by the gods rather than evils. In this version the opened box releases many blessings with the exception of hope, which remains „to promise each of us the good things that fled." Here Pandora's box becomes the "provider of the gifts that made life and culture possible".<sup>1</sup>

Pandora's myth, therefore, is full of uncertainty - not unlike the ambiguous task of engaging with the legacy of a conflicted past. As a society transitioning from conflict to peace Northern Ireland may wish to propose its own version of Pandora's myth: for instance, upon opening the box the harsh legacy of conflict ceases to exist and the threat of future violence is forever vanquished. This third version is alluded to in such popular euphemistic phrases as "acknowledging and remembering the past so that it never happens again". Do we really believe that by opening Pandora's box into the past and remembering, acknowledging, and stating "Never Again", political conflict can be abolished?

Of equal concern is the current notion that 'recording' suffering, for example in books or oral histories, is a form of acknowledgement which somehow contributes to the 'Never Again' factor. While initiatives to record people's experiences do support voices which are often silenced giving some form of

acknowledgement and perhaps contributing toward the healing process, the voices of those most affected by structural or political violence are often absent when issues around engaging with the past are considered.

Considered from a historical perspective, the notion that acknowledgement, remembrance, and resolve contribute toward an end to war does not bear fruit. In the aftershock of the First World War (the first ‘great’ war to “end all wars”) there was certainly a desperate resolve with the realization of the utter ruin Europe (aided by America) had brought upon itself. In the immediate post-conflict period, condemning conflict was very much in vogue and the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, ushered in by fifteen leading nations (including the United States, France, Germany, Italy and Japan) renounced war “as an instrument of national policy”.

The renunciation lasted just barely over a decade. In 1939 the Second World War (the second ‘great’ war to “end all wars”) began.

In the modern era, after two world wars and countless others, physical force continues to be utilized by governments to attain (or maintain) political objectives. At the time of finishing this research, for instance, Israel (with the backing of the Bush administration) was engaged in aerial and artillery bombardment of Gaza, the most densely populated piece of earth in the world.

Thus for democratic ‘civilized’ nations the use of violence for political gain remains a viable, ‘legitimate’ option and a matter of national policy. By extension, the act of ordinary citizens remembering, acknowledging, and saying “Never Again” in the hope of preventing conflict is as substantial as dew on the grass. It is not normally the general populace who create the possibility for conflict: it is often government institutions which create this potential through social and economic conditions and political policies.

## **Introduction - Opening the Box: A research framework**

The project was initiated in May 2008 and seeks to refine and deepen an initial study commissioned of the researcher by Coiste na nIarchimí and published as *The Legacy Report: Accessing the potential for network building between republican ex-prisoner groups and victim/survivor groups*. Of the initial 18 victim/survivor groups interviewed for the Legacy Report, this research focused on 5 groups identified as pivotal groups. The defining theme of the research methodology was engagement and participation was determined

by a group's history of inclusive engagement with a variety of groups and individuals from diverse perspectives, in addition to the centrality of the concept of outreach in the group's ethos. The point of focus in the republican community was 5 republicans who have a history of community activism, outreach and engagement, and who are to the fore in their communities in a variety of initiatives that engage with the legacy of the past.

Victims and republican activists are understudied often disenfranchised populations that are further marginalized through post-conflict processes. While both communities are important stakeholders in processes to deal with the past, insufficient attention has been given to the needs and views of these distinct populations. The distinctiveness of this research stems from the attention given to the particular voices of those victimized by the conflict and in its use of these voices as a salient source of knowledge. This article is underpinned by one pivotal question: How do we address the legacy of our conflicted pasts without compromising the political stability of new political institutions?

This article defines the term 'victim' broadly. Victims as a grouping are not easily quantifiable and are in no way homogenous. Any definition must reflect the dimensionality and complexity of victims' experiences represented in victim/survivor groups. The victims' experience includes those bereaved, injured or traumatized by political violence wielded by the British government and security forces, republican guerrillas<sup>2</sup>, or loyalist paramilitaries. Additionally the term must also recognize the victimization which occurred through structural violence, an often unrecognized yet interrelated form of political violence which refers to poverty, hunger, social exclusion, inequality, and humiliation.<sup>3</sup> When the wider political-economic context is considered the term 'victims' extends to those who may not refer to themselves as 'victims' but who have been victimized by the past.

As noted above, the starting point for the research is the shared positionality of the two groupings vis-à-vis the wider political context. Thus the research rejects the artificial dichotomy normally applied when victim/survivors and republicans are considered, as simplistic, unfair, and not pragmatic. By extension this article suggests that the terms 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are reductionist and counter-productive when used in the aftermath of political conflict. The act of labeling a person as 'victim', 'perpetrator', 'civilian', and 'combatant' represents an over-simplification in that one facet is taken to distinguish the whole person and their experience. Such labels are counter-productive to conflict resolution initiatives because they encourage polarized and/or zero-sum thinking.

Significantly, a rejection of the victim/perpetrator dichotomy does not equate to the notion of 'sameness'. By extension, the argument against creating a hierarchy amongst victims does not indicate that the experience or suffering of those bereaved, injured, victimized or traumatized through the events of the last forty years is 'all the same'. Advocating for parity of esteem among victims (or those victimized), and equality of treatment, should not be confused with reducing individuals to the category of sameness. In this context 'equal' does not mean the same.

There are limitations to any research and this is no less the case with research in post-conflict transitional societies. When I formally approached the Republican Movement seeking their participation in the research I was told that while the research was deemed important by the Movement they did not feel able to participate at this time. However this did not preclude the participation of republicans, in an individual capacity, who have been to the fore in their communities in such initiatives.

Considered comprehensively the theoretical and methodological approach outlined above is not designed to negate or ignore the often painful and divisive issues raised in research into the complexities of the past. Instead the research process is a tool to encourage discussion and collective investigation in a forthright manner.

### **Unpacking our pasts: Themes**

The Agreement was agreed without any consensus concerning the underlying causes of the conflict. As such the issue of why there was conflict was not addressed. Although ambiguous, the main provisions of the Agreement include the establishment of a Human Rights Commission, an Equality Commission, and the introduction of new legislation governing policing, equality, human rights, and judicial reforms. The centrality of an equality and human rights agenda as well as security sector reform confirms for some that the state was (originally) deeply flawed. However others maintain that these initiatives were unnecessary but required for certain sectors of the community to support the Agreement. From either perspective, processes to deal with the past should not be seen as a magic cure for the complex ills of Northern Ireland society. Instead, civil and political rights should be understood as instrumental in creating the necessary conditions for social well-being and political stability.<sup>4</sup> In this way the implementation of the reforms mandated by the Agreement provides the crucial foundation for any process to engage meaningfully with the past.

## **Conflict resolution and reconciliation**

In general, participants in the research operate from two general perspectives about processes to deal with the past. The perspectives are not mutually exclusive and participants draw from both although one of the two, conflict resolution or reconciliation, is normally given more emphasis. In the latter, there is a sense of such processes amounting to a kind of political gesture to reconcile historical antagonisms between two traditions, unionism and nationalism. This is often equated with the opportunity for recognition and acknowledgement, and for victims to tell their stories. There is also some expectation that during such a process individuals ('perpetrators') would 'come clean' and talk about past abuses and/or violence. Often this understanding is approached from the perspective of individual bereavement, trauma and suffering with the thought that processes may support individuals to heal and move forward. The main incentive here is to move out of conflict and towards the normalization of society, and often corresponds with those who identify with or self-identify as victims.

The second perspective frames processes to deal with the past as a conflict resolution mechanism. The focus here is on political formations (e.g. the British state, orangeism, republicanism) and processes which support institutional reforms, acknowledge British state involvement in the conflict, and facilitate the implementation of new rules of law.<sup>5</sup> This is often seen as part of a larger societal agenda and involves shaping relations between citizens and the state. There is a focus on independence, accountability, and transparency and as such, a concern with the structure of any formal process. The main incentive here is the requirement for change and the focus is the wider political and social context. In general, individuals from the conflict resolution perspective do not always see dealing with the past as the 'real' political work.

In some instances participants in the research, irrespective of their perspective, note in their communities a lack of demand for or interest in a process to deal with the past. Some indicate that while they believe such a process necessary they do not wish to participate. There is a feeling that such efforts may not be an appropriate response and that they represent a 'soft' option. Others refer to the Eames-Bradley Consultative Group to suggest that a framework for a truth process should not be imposed from 'above' and that such a framework would be artificial. Paradoxically, in the face of some apathy there is a strong sensibility that to be credible any initiative must be 'home grown' and this necessitates genuine community involvement, and that state agents and institutions should not dominate processes. Community

involvement is also important to ensure that those individuals and communities most affected do not bear the blame for the conflict while wider conditions and institutions remain unaccountable. To be credible processes must represent a comprehensive approach to engaging with the past.

This article will now explore a number of key issues which emerged from the research investigation. These issues are organized under two overarching themes, justice system and post-conflict processes.

### **Justice System**

Perhaps one of the most telling indications of peoples' experiences over the past 40 years is their attitude and expectations of the justice system. In the course of the research 'truth', 'justice' and 'equality' were recurrent themes but attitudes toward what constituted truth or justice, and how (or if) it could be obtained, varied greatly.

### **Truth(s)**

If independent and comprehensive, initiatives to engage with the legacy of the past can provide some truths for all sides. In this sense no organization or government that is compliant in the process can avoid at least some exposure. The likely result is 'hard truths' in addition to some truths. The May 2008 key note address given by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley raised the question of the value of full disclosure. They noted that Northern Ireland is a "small place with close knit communities" and that there are truths which could destabilize political institutions.

The notion of 'too much truth' was not well received by the participants in the research. For many, whether victims or victimized, full disclosure equates to elucidating the whole past. This is seen as essential to rebuilding trust in government institutions, to building a stable and democratic future, and to dealing meaningfully with the past by setting the record straight. In this way establishing truths will facilitate the greater goal of a sustainable peace. By extension, a truth process was deemed important only to the extent the structure was able to: provide victims/victimized with the opportunity to tell their stories; uncover facts that could support cases for prosecution; support the mandate for institutional reform; and, tackle the legacy of silence which shrouds informers and state agents.

For republicans who participated in this study truth is understood in terms of the British state and linked to a wider political and historical context. Republicans are interested in establishing British culpability for the conflict and the legacy of poverty, inequality, and unemployment in (Catholic) working class communities in what was experienced as a partisan state. In this way truth is predominately understood in terms of institutions and exposing the hidden activities of the state particularly with respect to the 'dirty' or 'intelligence' war. Republicans have low expectations where state accountability is concerned and there is a large degree of skepticism that truths of this nature will ever be revealed. With respect to victims there is a sensibility that both victims of state and non-state violence have a right to truth. However in terms of non-state violence republicans are only beginning to consider what the right to truth looks like from a unionist perspective. During the conflict republicans note that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) accepted responsibility for its actions including the deaths of innocent civilians; however, organizational accountability is not always enough for those (largely unionist/protestant) individuals who do not identify with group-ideals or a collective consciousness.

Representatives from the victims sector understand truth as integral to healing at both the individual and societal level. It was noted that too much of not knowing contributes toward an unhealthy society. As one representative maintains, "People died and we must find the terms to deal with it. The past will not go away and there is an imperative to deal with this, if not it could provide the motivation to return to conflict." Not unsurprisingly representatives note among some victims there is support for individual accountability and a confessional approach to establishing truth. This is especially pronounced among victims of non-state violence and here there is also a tendency toward punitive justice mechanisms. Among victims of state violence there is a sensibility that the British government will never acknowledge its 'convoluted' role in the conflict and prosecutions of state agents are highly unlikely.

## **Justice**

Participants reflect that some victims place their trust in the justice system and believe that to move forward justice must be seen to be done. These individuals have linked their healing and closure to having their day in court and it was noted that some want vengeance. For these individuals such punitive justice measures equate to fairness and the eradication of injustice. However it was also evident that some victims, often from rural areas, are not in favor of retribution and ask the question, "Could you live with it if this was your neighbour?"

Other victims/victimized, including republican participants, feel that while the system reflects what is the (English) rule of law in Northern Ireland it is not just or impartial and there is little confidence in the institutions of the British state which is understood to have operated with impunity. One victim's representative noted, "There is no chance of justice through a British criminal justice system designed to provide impunity. We cannot focus our energies on putting people in jail when this is not realistically achievable."

While there is a strong sense that people should not be denied the path to judicial proceedings some groups indicate they feel a responsibility to lower the expectations of victims. This involves engaging critically with the notion that justice through the courts is achievable at this late stage. Several victims' representatives suggest that after thirty years the judicial system is not likely to work, that realistically too much time has passed for convictions to be a possibility, that evidence would not meet modern forensic standards, that information has been lost or never appropriately collected, or that witnesses have died. Groups working with the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) have had their expectations tempered due to what was done formally when the incident occurred in that the official paperwork trail was often very sparse. Additionally there is the legacy of covert activities by both state and non-state agents which by their very nature were meant to be untraceable. In light of these considerations there are severe limitations on what courts or inquiries can achieve.

Currently in northern Irish society the establishment of truth and the experience of justice are equated with the justice system. However international experience shows the judicial system to be a blunt instrument when the realities of deeply entrenched political conflicts are considered. This experience suggests that truth and justice do not simply mean formal judicial proceedings, but the provision of reparations, the establishment of truth seeking initiatives, and reforming institutions. These approaches demonstrate that there may be multiple paths to truth and justice.

### **Post-conflict processes**

When there are severe constraints on the justice system it is important for other processes to provide measures of truth and justice. In such a context these processes can play a critical role in dealing with the past by bridging the gap between what is desirable and what is achievable. The practice of acknowledgement is vital and there are numerous ways to interpret and provide acknowledgement. An important distinction exists, however, between actions

which protest suffering and actions which acknowledge it. Likewise, acknowledgement is not a substitute for the reforms often mandated in peace processes. However, initiatives to deal with the past can provide an opportunity to support substantive change by reaffirming the necessity for institutional reforms.

Two approaches for providing acknowledgement, referred to as 'acknowledging' and 'accounting', are explored below.

### **Acknowledging**

Recent research has argued that political violence is distinct in that it serves to undermine the position of individuals, communities, or institutions in society.<sup>6</sup> It follows that the experience of political trauma may involve a loss of security and stability as well as a sense of 'wholeness' following incidents that have shattered or threatened that sense. In this way acts of political violence can be internalized and personalized, and experienced intimately; an individual's humanity is violated. Participants from the victims' sector place great emphasis on the acknowledgement of this experience. The act of acknowledging is to take someone seriously as a conscious being, as a human worthy of dignity and respect. It further provides recognition for their experiences and, in situations where violence dramatically altered the course of their life, acknowledgement offers recognition for a person's very existence, for their will to survive.

Victims' representatives note that for traumatised individuals it is not always or simply about seeing someone in court, but rather the experience of acknowledgement. The act of acknowledging can have many forms. It may involve reparations, ceremonies, or commemorations and other acts of remembrance, which serve as a testament to events and validate individual lives and experiences. Official statements which express sympathy for the deaths of non-combatants and apologize for specific actions are a good beginning. However, there can be no notion of selective acknowledgement or by extension, selective culpability.

The political conflict in and about Northern Ireland involved a variety of opponents but the research focus lends to a concentration on the British Army including intelligence forces, the RUC/UDR, and the IRA. Often former combatants/volunteers have a different perspective on conflict because they have actively chosen to become combatants or because of their politics and experiences during the conflict, or both. By extension it may seem that former opponents do not fully appreciate the extended suffering and deep pain of

individuals and communities impacted by their actions. This is not surprising given that Northern Ireland as a society is only beginning to understand the long-term effects of the conflict and the depth of impact to our social and moral fibre. Arguably the onus is on former combatants/volunteers who often make their homes in the communities which bore the brunt of the conflict. RUC/UDR combatants and former IRA volunteers are often role models in these communities and as such they are looked upon to provide leadership.

Organizations may require a period of internal debate and assessment to face the challenges that dealing with the past may involve. It will involve tough questions. Are these organizations, especially the British Army and the Irish Republican Army, willing to recognize and acknowledge (or continue to acknowledge) the terrible things that were done during the conflict as defined by individual and communal experiences? Can the British Army, the IRA and the RUC/UDR acknowledge that while the organizations may not have been sectarian they bore a sectarian element and/or their actions were interpreted as motivated by sectarianism? In this way acknowledgement could be an opportunity for organizations to demonstrate to wider society that they operate from a foundation of integrity and that their politics is credible. This kind of acknowledgement would lack moral force however if it were to be brokered and done on a quid pro quo basis.

### **Accounting**

In the absence of judicial proceedings personal accounting or storytelling/oral histories may establish some truths and provide feelings of justice. In a number of different ways research participants pointed toward the need for individual as well as community stories to be told. For republicans the focus is on correcting the denial and criminalization of their experience. This involves an accounting of the partisan nature of the British state, a shared second class-ness, and the common experience of impoverishment, social exclusion, inequality, and humiliation. It includes stories of ongoing intimidation, internment without trial, interrogation involving torture, imprisonment, and brutality at the hands of RUC/UDR and British Army experienced at the individual and communal level. For victims of state violence their bereavement and trauma is further exacerbated by a State which is perceived to have acted with impunity.

Simultaneously, British Army and RUC/UDR members believed they were defending law and order, and understood service to be a duty performed for the safety of communities, and for the greater good of their country. Members of the security forces and their families lived with tremendous fear, often feeling isolated from others in their community. Additionally these families have experienced suffering, trauma, and bereavement often further compounded by the brutal circumstances of their loved one's death. Security force members believe they fought for what was right and now, like many others from their community, experience feelings of further loss and betrayal due to the political changes that have taken place and in particular the new power-sharing arrangements with those once branded 'terrorists'.

The accounting of past experiences has implications for listeners who must be willing to hear the 'true stories' of others. This accounting may be difficult for those from a unionist tradition because it would involve stories of the flawed nature of the state and provide a justification for republican participation in armed struggle. It would also raise the spectre of state culpability for the conflict and administrations which pursued military solutions seemingly acting outside the law on a regular basis.

Republicans maintain they were at war with the British government in Ireland but their actions resulted in casualties and deaths of their fellow countrymen as well as civilians. To date it appears that republicans have not put substantial thought into what constitutes unionism beyond understanding it as a sub-set of British identity. By extension the unionist/protestant experience of republican violence and its consequences, including the legacy of intense distrust, has not been critically explored. Republicans also maintain that a distinction exists between that which is personal and that which is political and therefore may find it difficult to listen to personal accounts from others without attempting to politicize those stories. In some sense this amounts to a de facto denial of others' accounts (of the conflict) because the story is not honoured and understood on the terms in which it is expressed.

The current period requires compassion in the form of an increasing sensitivity to the pain that people have experienced. It further requires an empathetic willingness to experience vicariously something of the pain, sorrow, and suffering of others. It requires an appreciation of multiple realities and an understanding that there are multiple truths instead of one. By extension, the assumption that individuals with vastly different experiences, political perspectives, and cultural heritages should think alike is equally illogical. Thoughts and feelings are not simply invalid because they reflect a different perspective.

## **Remorse and regret**

Studies indicate that effective acknowledgement of wrongs typically include an account of the action/offence; acknowledgment of the hurt or damage done; acceptance of the responsibility for, and ownership of, the act; and an explanation that recognizes one's role.<sup>7</sup> Participants in both groupings generally agree that republican statements have displayed these characteristics. However amongst victims sector representatives some of these statements, in particular those issued by Gerry Adams, are understood to be full of predication.

Studies further note that statements may include an expression of regret, humility or remorse; a request for forgiveness; and an expression of a credible commitment to change or a promise that it will not happen again.<sup>8</sup> It is here that the difficulty begins. Victims sector representatives note that victims, particularly from a unionist tradition, want republicans to express remorse and regret. These participants note that acknowledgement is not the same as being sorry for what has occurred or being remorseful for involvement in armed conflict. Previous statements issued by the Republican Movement are appreciated for "as far as they go" but they are always seen to protect the integrity of the 'struggle'.

Republican participants agree that acknowledgement is not the same as expressing remorse. The Republican Movement is understood to have accepted responsibility for its part in the conflict and to have expressed regret on several occasions. Republicans with few exceptions do not feel remorse for their actions in the sense of having done something "wrong" or "immoral".<sup>9</sup> While the process to acknowledge the past is deemed to have been undertaken authentically any expression of remorse would be regarded as not genuine or authentic. There is also frustration that when the actions of republicans are put in a political context this is not acceptable. Republicans also note the expectation of apology is always placed on republicans and that the British government, the security forces, and other culpable agents have not acknowledged wrongdoing.

Such considerations raise the question of whether there is any responsibility that comes with asking for an apology that extends beyond acknowledgement of the action taken and the hurt caused? Ironically the need for a more extensive type of apology may imply a relationship in that it suggests the giving of an apology and from the other party, the giving of forgiveness. By extension, asking for an apology which expresses remorse and regret could suggest that the recipient is willing to forgive. This would be a difficult gesture for many victims/victimised who do not feel capable of (or responsible for) forgiveness. This is one area where further discussion and critical debate may be beneficial.

## **Local processes**

In Northern Ireland there are two parallel processes, the community-based process of peacebuilding and the political process. Ironically it is often grassroots initiatives that proactively engage in face-to-face dialogue and outreach while formal structures and politicians have made slower progress. Among republican participants in the research the notion of community-based local processes to assist in the attainment of information or to provide further clarification on specific events was unanimously supported. In addition, several representatives from the victims sector have worked with republicans previously with good results which assisted some families in feeling a degree of closure. This work occurs at the local level, between individuals, and is not a substitute for formal processes. While there is an awareness of the bureaucratic nature of formal party policy in the midst of ongoing negotiations, it was noted amongst republicans that “we should do what we can” and that such efforts should be facilitated to the best of people’s abilities when “it is the right thing to do for the families”.

## **Government and a hierarchy of victims**

Many participants noted growing frustration with the actions of political parties and the political process. For example, it was noted that one party had recently passed principles on a truth process but that this was not conveyed to victims’ groups. This has added to the general feeling amongst some groups that political parties are “just paying lip service” to the issues instead of engaging substantially.

The view was also expressed that political parties as well as the British and Irish governments have contributed to an artificial hierarchy amongst victims by privileging certain incidents above others. Reference was made to the fact that every individual has suffered in their own hearts as much as those directly impacted by specific ‘showpiece’ incidents (e.g. Omagh, Bloody Sunday etc). By extension, the political parties are understood to contribute to the fragmentation of the victims sector by a focus on specific events and deaths which may translate into political bargaining chips. Victims’ representatives note this displaces the human costs - the very real suffering and the ongoing needs associated with trauma and bereavement. Additionally this focus keeps the victims sector very raw with some individuals feeling that their relatives have been forgotten about and that their pain is less significant.

It was also argued that parties have contributed to the reinforcement of an artificial hierarchy by distinguishing between former combatants and non-combatants. By extension, research notes that whilst former prisoners reject the label of 'victim' this does not mean they have not been negatively impacted by the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Victims' groups express concern that the space has not yet been created for some ex-prisoners to deal with their personal trauma.

Overall it was felt by victims' groups that their issues are increasingly being lumped with issues of truth recovery. However, truth recovery, dealing with the past, and the processes this involves, is much broader than victims' issues. By extension, victims' needs will not be met solely by a truth process or other mechanisms to deal with the past.

### **Conclusion - Never Again?: Implications of the research**

The past is understood through the lens of the present. When asked to think about the past republicans believe they are in a better position than forty years ago. Although there are issues and concerns, the general sensibility is that republicans are now in a position to significantly shape the current political agenda and this validates the past. In this way republicans have both a sense of the past that affirms events and a workable interpretation of the 'sacrifices' that were made. Broadly, unionists do not tend to speak of 'sacrifice' but rather, suffering and loss. This loss is experienced not only at the familial and communal level but for many through political developments. While the absence of overt political violence is welcomed, the devolved administration represents a change that is for many difficult and unpalatable. Ongoing developments are often equated to further loss leading to feelings of instability, and there is a sense of betrayal associated with a past conflict which remains unjustifiable.

Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided and unequal society, and the legacy of a conflicted past continues to influence current relations and perceptions. How to deal with this past was a critical and potentially destabilizing omission from the Agreement. The ensuing 11 years have been marred by government initiatives for victims/victimised which are ambiguous and partisan. This environment has contributed to the polarization of thinking and the politicization of victims' issues which encourages social division and negatively impacts grassroots initiatives for dealing with the past. This complex political landscape makes it even more essential that progressive, community-based individuals and groups critically explore, debate and discuss, and develop their contribution to dealing with the past.

What is clear from the research is the prevailing tendency to think at the communal rather than societal level. Discussions are framed within an overarching us/them dichotomy with observations anchored in notions of “one of ours” or “one of theirs”. Past history is understood as two (historically) antagonistic sides instead of one national story comprised of different traditions, histories, and perceptions.

While this research did not generate quantifiable data, the fieldwork did bring together participants' current attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs on what is necessary to deal with the past based on their experience of and location in communities most impacted by conflict. Through the course of discussion commonly agreed elements were identified: the past cannot be ignored or forgotten, drawing a line under the past is not an option; the notion of ‘too much truth’ or anything short of full disclosure will undermine efforts to deal substantially with the past; community-based local processes which assist in the attainment of information should be supported; individuals, groups, and organizations need to explore and develop a vision of engagement with processes to deal with the past. This research also identified several issues for further engagement and discussion: the issue of remorse and regret including the responsibilities and limitations of demanding apologies; the difference between sacrifice and suffering including implications for understanding and interpreting the past; the question of how differing interpretations of the causes of the conflict should be acknowledged; and, if and how organizations can support their ‘own’ wider community with respect to acknowledging and coming to terms with the legacy of thirty years of conflict.

**Notes**

1. Verdenius, 1985.
2. Often the term guerrilla or revolutionary is associated with legendary figures – the roguish Che Guevara, the regal Nelson Mandela or the computer-toting Subcomandante Marcos. In the context of this research the term ‘guerrilla’ is used in a general sense to distinguish agents who were ‘anti-state’ in orientation while ‘paramilitaries’ refers to those agents who were historically ‘pro-state’. The researcher is continuing to use a precise definition of terms which is worked out in her doctoral thesis.
3. Structural violence was first defined by Johan Galtung, 1969, who noted that entrenched political-economic oppression is evidenced at the local level in social inequality among citizens or at the international level in exploitative economic relations.
4. For an excellent in depth examination of the links between poverty and political instability in Ireland see Hillyard, Rolston and Tomlinson, 2005.
5. Eolas Project, 2003.
6. Hamber, 2008.
7. Chapman and Thomas, 2006; Lazare, 2005.
8. Ibid, 2006 and 2005.
9. Beyers, 2007.
10. Beyers, 2007; Hamber, 2006.

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