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Opinion

Pain never ends for the victims

Tuesday, February 13, 2007

Every combination of family and personal relationships has been touched by the wave of death and destruction that has dominated Northern Ireland for what is now four generations, says Chris Ryder

I have a friend who lost his leg in an explosion in 1976. He has long since adapted to the loss of mobility, but what is far more troubling for him is the unremitting pain he has suffered on every one of the 3,650 days and nights since.

Sometimes it is tolerable, at other times unbearable, defeating even the most potent painkillers that his doctor can prescribe.

What is equally difficult for him to come to terms with is who singled him out for attack and why.

On the night of the incident, he came out of a city centre pub in Belfast and, as he drove away, a small explosive device hidden under the front wheel-arch of his car detonated, severing his leg. If it had not been for the prompt attention of a nearby soldier, who staunched his bleeding limb, he would have died at the scene.

The device itself yielded no clues about the identity of the bomber or motive. No individual or organisation has ever admitted responsibility for the attack and, as far as he knows, no one has ever been questioned about it or charged. My friend therefore suffers on in ignorance and dignified silence.

There are many, many other victims like him throughout these islands who nurse the mental and physical scars of The Troubles in similarly discreet circumstances. Widows grieve privately for murdered husbands. Sons and daughters silently mourn a parent they never knew. Parents quietly regret the unfulfilled life of an offspring.

Every combination of family and personal relationships has been touched by the wave of death and destruction that has dominated Northern Ireland for what is now four generations.

There are other wounds. People who survived the conflict, like the man I know, are now living with the consequences of trauma and serious injury, the effects now often aggravated by age.

In many of these cases, the survivors and the dependents are also living in straitened financial circumstances thanks to parsimonious compensation payments, especially in the early years, and the increasing cost of coping with physical and emotional frailty.

Many of these silent victims - and they come from every spectrum of the conflict - share another important disadvantage in that they have been denied the right to justice because nobody has been tracked down and imprisoned for killing their loved ones or maiming them. With some two-thirds of Troubles murders officially unsolved, a large number of people are affected.

More hurtfully, in many cases, the injured party knows who was responsible and in small, tightly knit communities may even encounter the gunman or bomber in a shop or on the street.

Stunned by grief and crippled by the lack of access to frequently well resourced and articulate pressure groups, they are now having to endure renewed torment and anguish as second-class victims while the bandwagon to unravel the 'truth' about the past gathers ever increasing momentum.

What is most appalling about this ever more cacophonous phenomenon is its selectivity. The primary target appears to be former members of the security forces. The Police Ombudsman has spent some £42m investigating past transgressions by the police. For nearly a decade the Bloody Sunday Tribunal has been reconstructing the Army's role in Londonderry on January 30, 1972, when 13 people were shot dead, and racked up costs approaching £200m.

Although they have yet to begin what will undoubtedly be protracted public hearings, other tribunals into notable cause celebres, such as the murder of Billy Wright, have already cost £20m and if the 'truth' campaigners have their way, the number of inquisitions will not halt there.

Many atrocities

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It is, however, notable that there is virtually no pressure on, for instance, Sinn Fein to account in similarly rigorous judicial circumstances for the excesses of the IRA on occasions such as Bloody Friday or the Shankill fish shop bombing.

Equally, loyalists are not under serious pressure to atone for and explain their many atrocities.

The only note of balance is being struck by the police who have established a historical enquiries team to review each of the unsolved murders, whoever the likely perpetrator, but despite the advance of forensic technology, there can be little optimism that this work, seriously compromised as it by the lapse of time, will greatly impact on the vast legacy of hurt, grief, frustration and injustice that has flowed from the years of conflict.

All of this highly selective picking at the scabs of the past and the enormous cost involved, creating as it does a hierarchy of victimhood, might be justified if the outcomes of the various investigations would, in the fashionable term, bring closure or contribute to a new beginning in our deeply divided society. It is already clear they will not.

Hard question

Despite the thoroughness with which the Bloody Sunday Tribunal has probed the minutiae of that event, its eventual verdict will only generate fresh controversy. There will be demands for prosecution of the soldiers concerned and some people will never disown the notion that the Army action was entirely justified anyway.

Therefore, we should ask a hard question of ourselves. Would it not be a better outcome to declare a general amnesty and draw a veil over one of the most shameful and self-destructive periods in our history? We cannot change the past but we can influence the future.

Would it not be a better option, therefore, to apply the vast sums of money being demanded for a 'truth process' to directly benefiting the relatives of the victims and the survivors? We should, without limit or qualification, provide them with additional compensation, pain relief, psychiatric and respite care - everything that money can buy to meet their needs and ease their plight.

It will not, of course, restore their loved one, or their health, but it will tangibly mark our communal disapproval of the violent process that injured them.

That is a debt we should and must pay to all those affected.

There will clearly be individual injustices in such a sweeping approach, and it will not be easy to shut down and overcome the deep-seated resentments and grievances that help perpetuate the deep divide in our troubled society.

Although the level of actual violence has subsided, hatred still persists to the point where even public hangings might not satisfy the bloodlust.

But if we take care of those who have been hurt the hardest as generously as we can, it might help ignite the spark that would lead us from concepts of revenge to a measure of reconciliation and enable us to move along the path towards creating a more stable, united and tolerant community.

Whatever its inherent flaws, such a process is surely a more positive option than an endless period reliving the years of conflict in courtrooms at great public expense, aggravating raw wounds afresh and, most dangerously of all, perhaps inspiring yet another generation to resort to politically motivated violence.

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