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## Barry White

### Barry White: Wounds of our troubled past are still open, but we must move on

Tuesday, January 15, 2008

By Barry White

It wasn't a war, in any sense of the word, it was a time of tribal madness when everyone was chasing impossible dreams. That's the only definition of the Troubles I recognise - and, to some extent, the madness continues.

I can understand exactly why the Eames-Bradley group was asked to consider a number of options, including re-defining the Troubles as The 35-Year War. If it was a war, and the war is over, prisoners are released and, normally, all is forgiven.

There could be no more inquiries into past murders and no more raking up the past because all combatants would be equally responsible.

The paramilitaries and the security forces would be freed from the possibility of prosecution - or disclosure - and the issues they were fighting over would be pursued by strictly political means.

Making it a war would be a neat way of drawing a veil over the whole rotten business, instead of having to listen to one-sided accounts by killers, informers and others. Or having to ignore leaders who encouraged murder and hatred, but never took responsibility for their actions. We can all think of many who would stand to gain from such a declaration of 'war', and the security forces would be equally absolved. Whatever arguments there are about the definition of the conflict, no one denies that the Troubles spawned a ruthless intelligence war, on all sides.

That, too, would have to be written off, without further embarrassing examination, if it was part of a larger 'war'.

The inquiries into controversial murders, which Tony Blair so thoughtlessly wished upon us, would be wound down or counted out.

Only the victims' families, to be frank, would be appalled. Yes, there are a lot of reasons for wishing that the Troubles could be accepted as a war, to put it behind us and look to the future rather than keep re-living the past.

But the angry reaction of the public - those who took the trouble to contact the media, at least - shows that we're not ready yet. The politicians have taken over from the paramilitaries, and there's too much unfinished business to be argued over - like who's winning.

Nevertheless, I'm glad that the Eames-Bradley team have raised the question, proving not only that they're thinking daring thoughts but that their conclusions may break new ground. If they had ruled out an amnesty or mutual apologies, at this stage, I would have ceased to listen to them.

If it was a war, then a formal amnesty for all combatants - after an apology for the deaths of innocents - would be possible. But if it's not, or we're not ready for it, there can be no amnesty beyond the informal one in the Good Friday Agreement. The main point of declaring a war, followed by an amnesty, would be to encourage the perpetrators to tell the stories behind the murders that would give the victims' families some closure. Only ones with a conscience would do it and, if something would be better than nothing, could they be tempted by making anonymous statements to a priest or a solicitor?

Also, a formal amnesty would allow people living in voluntary or involuntary exile to return home without fear of arrest. The 'on-the-run' problem would be solved and presumably more jobs would be opened to ex-cons.

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A less welcome consequence of an amnesty would be that the actions of the paramilitary organisations and the state security forces would be regarded as equally legitimate, when they were not.

Planting bombs in crowded places is not the same as men in uniform taking on would-be or actual killers.

Yet we don't have to guess what the reaction of ex-prisoners would be to an amnesty, because one of them has said it. "It is a recognition that republicans should not have been in jail in the first place," one said. "Well over 10% of the population of west Belfast were prisoners. They weren't criminals, they were political prisoners."

That's why I prefer to regard the Troubles as a time of tribal madness, when a one-party state was challenged, not before time, by an increasingly well-educated and frustrated minority, and could not reform itself in time to avoid an extremist-led explosion.

The extremists got control of their tribes and it took 30 years for the moderates to wrest it back - before they were again overtaken. The tribes have learned to co-exist, after a fashion, but whether they can learn to co-govern, in difficult economic and political circumstances, has yet to be proved.

The wounds that the Eames-Bradley group hope to heal are obviously still open, but surely people who complain about the police's invisibility, on the Shankill or elsewhere, must realise that it is connected with our obsession with investigating the past. Sir Hugh Orde has spelled out the choices facing him, and us. He can allow his experts to occupy 99% of their time looking into historical events or he will have to say "stop", and put them to work on the present. He himself spends 40% of his day dealing with the past.

In other words, we have to grow up, accept our collective guilt, and try harder to move on. If we won't, or can't, we'll never agree on a transfer of policing and justice powers, and eventually devolution itself may be lost. Then what?

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