

Coiste na nIarchimí represents a constituency of approximately 17,000 Republican former political prisoners and their families. We mostly work on issues to improve the lives of that constituency by advocacy, lobbying, networking and general contact with statutory, semi state, voluntary and community groupings. Our groups provide a range of assistance including – welfare advice, housing, benefits, counselling, family support, employment, employment assistance.

With reference to today's topic of discussion I wish to advise you that five years ago we, along with representatives of several other Nationalist community based groupings set up a group called Eolas in order to examine what we then thought was an imminent issue – that of a Truth Recovery Process.

We held no direct views on whether or not the time was right for such a process but what we did want to do was be ready in case the then British Secretary of State decided to impose either the process or initiate a debate on the matter. We wanted people to be up and running with ideas on the broad concepts and definitions linked to truth and reconciliation and wanted to draw up, from our perspective, a number of competing ideas on the issues. We presented these some months later. Many of you will have read them. Some will remember them. We came down on no side – whether or not to have the process altogether, nor the type of process to engage in, if there was to be one – be that legal, voluntary, compulsory or what – we merely examined three broad models and the possible positives and negatives related to each.

So today I believe we were a little ahead of those who are now talking about and examining the issues concerning reconciliation, truth recovery etc. But what I do want to stress here is that we were pro-active then and are now, in wanting to engage with people to view the past and move to a better future. We cannot undo our past, nor do we wish to. And it is far too banal to state that we must learn from it. Of course we must – but there has to be **more** in order to get people/communities truly involved. As Republicans, former political prisoners and many of us being former activists **we** have suffered - as have our families. Many of us were unjustly imprisoned and many subjected to the horrendous rigours of the likes of Castlereagh and Gough Interrogation Centres – our claims strangely enough vindicated by the Amnesty International and the British Government's own inquiries concerning torture, brutality and interrogation techniques – but the likes of mentioning that somehow seems out of order at a gathering like this. Yet we regularly – at events like these - meet with 'experts,' mostly well intentioned and very clever academics who would tell us of world experiences and what others have done. Whatever worked for other arenas of conflict obviously was appropriate for them. But they are not us. Their information is valuable and appreciated but we surely must have a little caution and not rush to the feet of the next Guru. It is not dissimilar as a concept to the amnesia which sets in with so many academics and former powerful politicians, and media when we mention the fact that something was wrong with this state prior to 1968. That, or, someone had put something into the water in Nationalist areas at that time!! Why, we asked, did the British Government subsequently impose so many changes on the political set up eg introducing direct rule, changes to policing under the Bennet Report, housing by setting up the Housing Executive, employment practices by establishing an independent Fair Employment body etc etc in the 1970's if there had been nothing wrong with the political and social structures here?

Uncomfortable questions must be asked **by** us as well as **off** us as to what were the circumstances which gave rise to so many people opting out of adherence to law and order in this state. Do we really need to look at these issues – are these ‘Truths’ which must be recovered in order to reconcile the Unionist with the Republican/Nationalist? Is this all just ‘Republican propaganda’ – the usual defence by those who cannot/will not accept the reality of the State’s structural violence? Who decided on housing allocations, who decided on location of investment, who decided on road infrastructure, who decided on job allocation – and who ignored it all until the tolerance for it broke? You all will have your views, but this is how we examine the situation and our conclusions were contained in our actions. I hope that you will acknowledge that our political analysis is as valid as anyone else’s.

For many years we - the Republican Political ex prisoners under Coiste have worked in private with a broad range of groups – Loyalist, Unionists, Orders, Churches, individuals – meeting to discuss on-going current, important issues and we have learned from those encounters. Nowadays with the political scenario as it is, with politicians all interacting, it is safe- indeed appropriate to do this – but we now openly say to you – we did the heavy lifting when it was hardest and we intend to continue lifting because it is the right thing to do. Even the British Government has acknowledged the role played by Political prisoners and the political ex prisoner community in selling the ideas of peace to the broad Republican community. People have suffered, greatly, during this conflict – some more so than others – and we acknowledge this. Anything **we** can do to help anyone in anyway to understand us or our motivations in taking the actions which we did – we will talk with. This is not an offer to be ‘held to account’ but an offer to engage with you.

In the same way in which we make this offer to you, we sincerely hope that you will be of like mind. There is a major need for us to work – in whatever way we can -to make the future better for us all. We will not be able to do this if we all hold onto a mindset that holds **us** in a place different from **others** with a hint of being more worthy or more righteously pained than others. We have to move forward as equals in all respects and with respect for others.

We urge you to look to other places and other conflicts and make the efforts those people have made. Indeed look to Britain and Germany, France, Japan and the United States of America and see how they, who slaughtered in the millions, have adapted their attitudes to changes.

Reconciliation to us means the major mind-set change in order to work together in common purpose, willing to understand, accept and appreciate the other quite simply as different from us but equal in all regards. But it also infers a localised coming together of minds. Not to us. We have not and will not accept the line of the British Government and its media outlets that this conflict has its basis in internal conflict. The British government and its agencies **were** our enemies, not the people per se. This was an International conflict, not primarily a ‘sectarian’ issue and the International input to the ending of the conflict supports our analysis.

That is our truth. This is where we come from. Our motivations were based on Irish Republicanism, not Catholicism as some would peddle. We understand much of your hurt, because we have worked hard to do so. It is not easy to modify long held views

but we have and we have changed in many ways. We regret many outcomes of our actions and have said so publicly- but not the doing of them. In the changed political environment it is very difficult to grasp how things really were during the three decades of armed conflict. Those days must never be repeated. On this we all agree. But how do we progress as individuals, communities and society?

Therapy can come and can be presented in many forms but we suggest that a major contribution in that can be in fact participation in the first two topics of the title of this conference, Truth Recovery and Reconciliation. But **we all** have to buy into it and truly want to participate in a pro-active, constructive manner.