

Progressive Unionist Party of Northern Ireland

Submission to Annual Conference of Trauma Recovery Network

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Armagh City Hotel

The Progressive Unionist Party wants to see healthy communities in Northern Ireland, healthy communities which are safe, clean, inclusive, confident, creative and connected. Healthy communities which are at peace with themselves. Unfortunately we cannot look back to a time before the troubles for a model of healthy communities here.

Politics in this country had been rotten for years before the 'outbreak of the Troubles'. Something was sick in the body politic and it led to the emetic violence we have lived through together. In the wake of this violence, we find ourselves in a landscape of pain.

It is not easy to talk about this landscape of pain, as our language is insufficient to the task of describing *the multiplied effect across a society of individual experiences of trauma, pain and loss resulting from this kind of war*. We simply do not have a word in the lexicon for this phenomenon. Those who have been traumatised, bereaved, often without sufficient information to allow proper personal emotional closure, get called 'victims'. The victims live with the pain and discomfort every day in a way that the rest of the people in Northern Ireland do not.

And we live in Europe, in what is known as a 'Western democracy'. And we share with other 'Western democracies' the expectation of entitlement to comfort, and to convenience and to rising material wealth. This expectation of entitlement to comfort is maintained by a form of 'unknowing' or cultural blindness regarding the cost of this expectation of entitlement to comfort. Our expectation that we are entitled to comfort, and therefore the actual comfort itself, is maintained at the inevitable expense of (firstly) those people who live in so called 'developing countries', (second) any of the other life forms humans live with on the earth, and (third) ultimately the earth itself. Sex tourism; trade goods other than free trade goods in our shops and homes; global warming; third world doctors in our hospitals; all this and more is evidence of the expectation of comfort and convenience within so-called 'Western democracies'.

I make this point because I think we must start any consideration of truth recovery and reconciliation in this country with an expectation that most people in Northern Ireland will have a culturally sustained vested interest in *not* being interested in anything uncomfortable and inconvenient. This lack of interest in the uncomfortable is particularly acute amongst those who have vested interests in maintaining the political status quo, so we must be aware of the way in which some seek to politicise the whole idea of truth recovery and reconciliation.

There is not a single correct discoverable version of 'The Truth': truth is multifaceted and the events of the past can be interpreted in different justifiable ways. Furthermore reconciliation cannot be imposed; a 'truth process' cannot be imposed. If we were to ask one hundred victims what it is they want from any 'truth recovery' process, we would find a wide range of different responses: justice; apology;

acknowledgement; revenge; reparations; to be left alone; but the most basic request would be simply for information.

It is the view of this Party that we do not need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for a number of reasons:

1. There exists already a wide range of victims groups, trauma and healing groups, voluntary and independent organisations, local community based organisations and statutory based agencies, including the Police Ombudsman's Office, the PSNI Historical Enquiries Team, and public enquiries looking at individual cases, all of which are providing different types of mechanisms for people to seek and find different kinds of closure.
2. The armed conflict continues as a political conflict. In South Africa the government was overthrown, here the British Government had a role in the conflict in Northern Ireland and continues as a player in a situation where no final political and constitutional settlement has been reached. In other countries, 'truth recovery' processes have been shown to be relevant only after some sort of agreed settlement to the original conflict has been reached. With the largest political parties continuing to be dependent upon maintaining the sectarian divide in the population, there is a real risk that opening up old wounds through such a process could re-ignite violence instead of consolidating existing peace.
3. The danger of raising expectations that cannot be met. The apology offered in 1994 by the Combined Loyalist Military Command was not a refutation of the political cause for which the loyalists fought. Loyalist paramilitary groups have made it clear that faced in the future with similar threats from armed republicanism as in the past, loyalist paramilitaries could be expected to respond again with armed resistance. If victims approached any 'truth recovery' process expecting political remorse from loyalists, they would be disappointed and this may be detrimental to their healing.
4. Similarly, if 'perpetrators' chose for good reasons not to be involved in such a 'truth recovery' process, they could be portrayed as callous and insensitive, widening the gap between those deemed 'perpetrators' and those deemed 'victims'.
5. There are already many 'perpetrator' / 'victim' conduits. For example, it is no secret that, in ways that no-one other than those involved need to know about, the leadership of the Progressive Unionist Party has been involved in assisting people of good faith to get what they need in relation to acts of violence committed in the past where this is possible.
6. Victims groups which pursue their aims through vilifying the organisations from which they seek information are unlikely to succeed in building the necessary bridges. Experience shows such bridges need foundations in a mutual sense of the bona fides of both parties.

The behaviour of such groups raises deep suspicions about the political motivation of calls for a 'truth process' in Northern Ireland. The danger with a state sponsored

'truth commission' will be an opportunity it provides for republicans to blame the British state and justify their war. The PUP refutes the analysis which places the violence of the recent past in the context of a war fought by republicans against the British administration in Ireland, an analysis within which the deaths of Protestant people at the hands of violent republicans [La Mon, Shankill, Teebane, Enniskillen, Kingsmills, Tullyvallen and the Disappeared] are deemed 'collateral damage'.

What is needed is a mechanism which allows for information about the past to be made available to the people whose lives have been affected in order that they may find closure. At the same time, ways must be found for the other organisations of society, the media, churches, businesses, educational institutions – the implicated but non-combatant elements of the state – to recognise and accept responsibility for their complicity.

Any truth commission is likely to be seen as a public relations exercise by the Government, it is likely to be seen as trivialising the current healing and recovery processes which are working, and be experienced as scapegoating by ex-prisoners and paramilitaries.