

Time is running out

The people killed or injured during the Troubles came from all walks of life and many were part of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Our congregations have buried too many of their members, have pastored loved ones and the injured, and have supported those who lost homes, farms and businesses. As a people we therefore have some understanding of the pain and trauma that was inflicted on the community over the years by unjustified acts of terrorism.

We are also very aware of the deficiencies in the status quo in relation to the past – some of which have been articulated here in the *Newsletter* in recent weeks. There is broad agreement that the current arrangements are not delivering. The status quo is not acceptable.

Over the summer we have invited responses from within the church and talked to various groups and individuals about the Secretary of State's consultation – all in the hope that we can help to shape a way forward for the benefit of victims and survivors, and for wider society.

Building on the work of Eames-Bradley and the Haass-O'Sullivan talks, the Stormont House Agreement proposed a broad framework with four main elements: investigations, information recovery, historical analysis/storytelling, and a reconciliation aspect. We believe that this broad framework represents an opportunity to find an agreed and acceptable process which could command cross-community support.

However, the outworking of this, as set out in the Secretary of State's proposals, is not currently acceptable. It needs considerable amendment. But with that amendment, however, we believe there is scope within these proposals to address the legacy of the past in a way that is significantly better than what we have at the moment.

Realistically there are only two options on the table - the status quo and a significantly amended version of what the Secretary of State has proposed. A blanket rejection now of the proposals will likely set this issue back for many years, or maybe forever. This will add even more distress to that already endured, as more victims and survivors pass away without the help, support and information they need. Time is running out.

Of course, we must recognise the limitations of each of the four elements. In particular the number of prosecutions resulting from the work of the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU) is likely to be very small and many families will not receive all the information they seek.

In this context it would be deeply wrong to raise the expectations of victims and survivors, as this will only add to the hurt and pain already experienced. Yet we also acknowledge that for some families there is a possibility of a degree of comfort or closure from the institutions proposed, if they can be made more acceptable.

Rather than start again in the future from a blank page it is much better to seek to improve what is in the Government's consultation document. For example, we believe that any of the families who have received a Historical Enquiries Team report should have the option of requesting an HIU investigation.

There must also be greater assurance and clarification around the role and responsibilities of the Irish Government. This is essential to ensure that relatives of those killed outside of Northern Ireland, or in cross-border incidents, have full access to a proper investigation.

It seems increasingly unrealistic that the HIU and the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval can work effectively in parallel – the operating model needs to be reconsidered. The Oral History Archive simply will not work well unless it is designed to reach out and work with other groups and organisations that command the trust of those who might contribute. And a great deal of work needs to be done to clarify and develop the role of the Implementation and Reconciliation Group in promoting reconciliation throughout our society.

These are just some of the points that we will be taking up in more detail when we submit our response to the consultation in the coming days. We will also take the opportunity to raise some very important issues, which seem to have been deliberately left out of the consultation. A Mental Trauma Service and a pension for the severely injured must be included in any comprehensive package that seeks to address the legacy of the past.

Furthermore, a serious effort must also be made to deal with the sense of moral outrage and hurt caused by the current definition of a victim, which draws no distinction between the perpetrators and those attacked. Progress will be very much more difficult if this distinction is not faced in some coherent way.

Much has been said about other inadequacies in the consultation document – especially about investigations into alleged offences of members of the security forces. We share those concerns. However, in our response we will focus on other issues that have not received adequate public attention. It may be a cliché, but the devil is in the detail, both of what is already in the consultation document, and what is not. Detailed scrutiny is very important if any worthwhile progress is to come from this consultation.

Very Rev Dr Norman Hamilton OBE is Convener of the Council for Public Affairs of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

This article appeared in the Wednesday 20 September 2018 edition of the *News Letter*.