

Building the Future
Victim and Survivor Issues in Context

Brandon Hamber¹
INCORE, Ulster University

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I cannot, in the short time available, do justice to the rich and thoughtful comments made over the last day and half about the Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2009-2019.² Therefore, I am only going to make a few comments focused on “the future” in terms of victim issues in and about Northern Ireland. That said, as the Strategy for Victims and Survivors alludes, thinking of the future, so to speak, is also tied into how we deal with the past.

I am going to make four points and expand on each briefly. These are:

1. We cannot build the future if we do not have a common vision for the future;
2. We cannot build the future if we do not truly understand the past;
3. We cannot build the future without a holistic and collaborative approach; and
4. We cannot build a future without dealing with dominant masculine cultures.

By way of introduction, it was encouraging to hear many politicians at this conference commenting that they feel a process for dealing with the past is imminent. Let us hope that is the case. But we should also not lose sight of the fact that it has taken over 15 years to get here. No one can accuse Northern Ireland of rushing into a solution for dealing with the past. Nonetheless, there are many unanswered questions and because a package of measures for dealing with the past might finally be delivered does not mean we should not scrutinise it.

¹ Brandon Hamber is John Hume and Thomas P. O’Neill Chair in Peace based at the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE), Ulster University. He is also a Board member of Healing Through Remembering. All correspondence to b.hamber@ulster.ac.uk. See www.brandonhamber.com and @BrandonHamber.

² See Office of the First and Deputy First Minister. (2009). *Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2009-2019*. OFMDFM: Belfast.

Building a common vision: the purpose?

I want to begin by asking a simple question with a complex answer. The question is: what is the purpose of all these proposed new dealing with the past mechanisms?³ We have heard different answers to this: for our children, for victims, to embed peace. But what is the vision at a wider societal level?

The Strategy for Victims and Survivors recognises the complicated nature of reconciliation noting “an over emphasis on reconciliation between communities in the context of victims and survivors work can be misplaced”. But we have seriously to ask if reconciliation is the overall aim of all these dealing with the past processes and the various support services that are meant to complement this. Are we seeking through the mechanisms a thin form of societal connection where different communities continue to live, love, be educated and work separately, or a thicker process that aims to transform society. I would like to see a political leadership that fully backs a dealing with the past process linked to a truly transformative vision that moves beyond signing off legislation that ends up in legal knots, or agreeing now to fight battles about the past through a raft of new structures, albeit without violence.

Dealing with the past is both backward-looking and forward-looking. To this end, the Implementation and Reconciliation Group (IRG) is critical.⁴ We need to ensure it is not the poor cousin of the dealing with the past package in the Stormont House Agreement and any subsequent processes. Developing “initiatives that contribute to reconciliation, better understanding of the past and reducing sectarianism”, which is part of the IRG mandate, is key to building the future.

To talk about victims needs as if they exist outside of societal division – or are separate from truth, justice, apology or recognition – and of course economic status and opportunity – is to distort social reality. All these factors are not separate from well-being or can be compartmentalized out of an individual’s life.

³ I am alluding here to the measures in the Stormont House Agreement (Northern Ireland Office and The Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP, 2014), that remain the most likely blueprint for any future dealing with the past package.

⁴ See Northern Ireland Office and The Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP. (2014). *Stormont House Agreement*. London: Northern Ireland Office, for more detail.

Understanding the past

To fully understanding the past is key to the future. To do this the Oral History Archive (OHA) as proposed in the Stormont House Agreement is critical, as well as the work of the IRG on themes. As important as investigative bodies are they will be focused on those that lost relatives – this is important – but investigative bodies⁵ will not tell us about why events took place, highlight different narratives of the past, emphasise issues such as gender or class, or inform us about how different institutions from academia through to the judiciary operated, among a raft of wider social issues linked to reasons for the conflict and its nature. This wider focus is significant if we are to truly understand the past in all its complexity.

Finding a common narrative through processes such as storytelling or an oral history archive is not likely in the short term, and having narratives next to each other is progress in itself.⁶ But if what comes out of any official oral history archive is two main narratives or even three or four that are not particularly complex, and do not challenge each other, or if the inconsistencies between narratives are not highlighted and discussed – we have failed. Is it enough to say narratives are irreconcilable and they cannot change or learn from each other? If that is the case, what is the wider objective?

We have to ask what are we leaving behind for the next generation: an immovable set of narratives about the past or enough information for them to make up their own minds, and for interpretations of the past to change and develop over time.

Practically for the OHA this means we have to ask two question.

1. *What will go into the Oral History Archive?* By that I mean, what is the question we are going to ask when we invite people to contribute? Sounds straightforward, but it is not. Will we make a public call for *all* stories of the past to be collected, or only from victims or those who feel they were victims. Or will we ask for stories about how institutions – such as churches, schools, the judiciary, security services,

⁵ I am specifically referring here to the the the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU) and the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR) as proposed in the Stormont House Agreement.

⁶ For a wider discussion on this issue see Hamber, B., & Kelly, G. (2016). Practice, Power and Inertia: Personal Narrative, Archives and Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*. doi:10.1093/jhuman/huw001

paramilitaries, young people who feel victimized, among many others – operated, were affected and shaped the conflict? These questions have not been considered.

2. *What will come out the Oral History Archive?* Are we envisaging an archive that sits in a building only accessible if you make an appointment to view it on the premises? Will there be an outreach strategy? Will we use it for education on the school curriculum? Will politicians trust the narratives to speak for themselves and be widely available in libraries and public places?⁷

Acting holistically and collaboratively

We can only build an effective and new future if we think and act holistically. The Strategy for Victims and Survivors notes that victims and survivors work should be integrated with and can influence other government policies and initiatives. The strategy rightly notes in my opinion that it cannot address all these issues in isolation. Various representatives of institutions have told us at this conference that this is happening. But I have my concerns. Most global peacebuilding institutions have not managed to achieve joined up thinking and action, bodies like the UN are still compartmentalized in terms of functions. The Stormont House Agreement is at risk of further disaggregating needs and approaches to them. For example, how are the four new proposed bodies⁸ going to relate to each other? Could victims end up telling their story in 3 or 4 places, yet again? As well as victims having to figure out the role of a new mental health service and the Victim Support Service at the same time.

The Strategy for Victims and Survivors also talks of promoting collaborative working between statutory and voluntary organisations, community groups and others. My question is: how deep is this collaboration? Or does it invariably end up as a series of business-type relationship typified by “service agreements” that are not true collaborations or sustainable into the future. With SHA we have similar dangers. For example, the OHA is meant to link with the many

⁷ For a wider discussion on these issues and others affecting the Oral History Archive see Hamber, B., & Kelly, G. (2016). Practice, Power and Inertia: Personal Narrative, Archives and Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*. doi:10.1093/jhuman/huw001

⁸ The Implementation and Reconciliation Group (IRG); Historical Investigations Unit (HIU); Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR) and the Oral History Archive (OHA).

groups collecting stories⁹ – but will or how will this happen precisely? Or will this be functional (for example, signposting those interested to different resources) rather than a true exchange of learning built up over decades, and embedding lessons and practices at a local level.

One way to address this is to use the degree and depth of collaborative working as a key indicator of any evaluation of the Strategy for Victims and Survivors.

Changing masculine cultures

There has been a lot of focus at this conference on young people and the intergenerational nature of dealing with the past as a key factor in building the future. But one of the hidden issues we seldom mention is that largely it is men who carry direct violence from generation to generation. Yet the issue of masculinity is seldom talked about. I should add, however, that when I talk of masculinity I do not mean services or support for young men or improving their academic performance, I am talking about the way our societies are structured in masculine ways and how different hegemonic masculinities are embedded in society.¹⁰ Particularly the way masculinity is rooted in everyday life: on the sports field, in the classroom, in the home, in public spaces, in language and in the media, and within our political systems. Systems where individuals are rewarded for dominant, aggressive, and condescending ways of being.

Of course women can act in these ways too, but I am concerned with the wider masculine culture that reinforces certain types of hegemonic (often violent, silencing and oppressive) behaviour. Sit in the public gallery at Stormont or listen to politicians on radio shows or TV, and it clear what I mean. The behavior that is often modelled, justified as democratic disagreement, reinforces unhealthy masculine cultures.

Until “Big Man” politics at the wider level and even within communities, enacted with or without guns, is a thing of the past, how can we expect young people to behave differently.

⁹ For an outline of the various groups doing storytelling work see Kelly, G. (2005). *Storytelling Audit: An audit of personal story, narrative and testimony initiatives related to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland*. Retrieved from Belfast: http://www.healingthroughremembering.org/d_pubs/publications.asp.

¹⁰ See Hamber, B. (2015). There Is a Crack in Everything: Problematizing Masculinities, Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice. *Human Rights Review*, 17(1), 1-26.

There is a disproportionate focus on young people's attitudes in many policy documents in Northern Ireland, when it is the attitudes of adults, and politicians (not all of course), that should be scrutinized and modelled differently.

That said, I am not sure if issues from the past move from one generation to the next in a predictable, inevitable or generalizable way. What happens inter-generationally is dependent on what has gone before and the nature of the present. The memories and associated traumas of the past are not carbon-copied from one generation to the next, but rather take on a life of their own, manifesting in a myriad of ways. A transparent, public process of discussing the past will have a different outcome than social silence about human rights violations or where identity politics go unchallenged across the years.

Many of those I know who testified before the TRC in South Africa have become more negative about the experience over time and now you can even meet their children who express dissatisfaction with the truth commission. This is not a failure of the TRC as such, but the failure to take some of its recommendations into the present and to effect real change in people's lives.

At present in South Africa there is a lot of youth unrest, students have been protesting vehemently in recent months. These protests are about:

1. the failure of not adequately dealing with the past, for example in offering appropriate reparations or continuing investigations;
2. the inability of those who lived through apartheid to constructively unpack the past for a new generation; and
3. a frustration with the present to offer a vision of a better future.

Northern Ireland can learn from these shortcomings.

Conclusion

The context of the present continually reshapes how we look at the past, as well as how we use the past in the present. Although lessons may be learned (as the phrase goes), this does not mean we will apply them in the present. We continue to "remember" the past and "reinvent" it

depending on the ever-shifting present context, which is always open to political manipulation. This can be challenging for those who did not experience past violence directly, such as young people, who feel its after-shocks and have to live in its constant long shadow. This is negatively amplified by the reality of poverty and lack of prospect, crime and violence, and continued social segregation and under-investment in certain areas and lives.

Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland and many societies in the world, if not all, the stranglehold of the past first and foremost, remains that where you are born, and to whom. This largely determines your future and what you might achieve. This must change if we are to truly change the impact and meaning of the past in the present. But I have no magical solution how to change the macro and micro socio-economic contexts that so pervasively affect us all. To quote the French economist, Thomas Piketty, “the distribution of wealth is too important an issue to be left to economists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers” – and I would add psychologists to the list.

This, however, does not preclude us all engaging in the debate and offering our own solutions. This includes victims. As the Strategy for Victims and Survivors notes “victims and survivors, where this is consistent with their wishes and wellbeing” should “participate as part of wider society in addressing the legacy of the past”. If we accept legacy of the past is wider than talking about services in a narrow way, everyone has a role.

References

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