

# The Union Group



## Drawing a line under the Past

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The Unionist Group represents an informal coming together of members of the Ulster Unionist Party since 2003. Initially a few of us met with members of Coiste na n-Irchimí, a republican ex-prisoners group at Clonard Monastery. We also met with loyalists on the Shankill Road, with members of the SDLP and Alliance as well as with the Official Republican Group, the IRSP and with Ministers of both Governments. Many of us have worked in other contexts with people from diverse traditions and parties north and south.

While we have never formally defined our aims and objectives we are committed to healing and growth in this society and to better understanding within and between all parts of these islands. We want to see societies at peace with themselves and with their neighbours and would like to see the many constructive activities that took place across the Northern Ireland border before 1969, resumed and increased.

When considering mechanisms to help draw a line under the past, we gave prior consideration to the idea of a truth commission. The core of such an endeavour, as in the South African model, is laudable and has clearly brought benefits to that country. However in order to attain success and healing in Northern Ireland - surely the goal of seeking to draw a line under the past - the model needs to be adapted to our particular circumstances. What must be avoided at all costs in this divided society is the presentation of opportunities that could be exploited to rake over the coals of past grievances.

Many people who lost close relatives and friends wish to talk about their experiences. They want to be frank, open and confident with people around them but this is only possible when the setting and context are carefully and sensitively established. Truth is subjective, as we all know, and there is a serious risk that enquiries seeking forensic or objective truth would prove partial, inconclusive and unlikely to seriously address the hurts in society.

A semi-judicial commission, if not established in the right way, could even stimulate rivalry and discord based on conflicting perceptions. It might cause wounds to fester and extend hurt into future generations. We understand why the Presbyterian Church, the largest Protestant church in Northern Ireland, was unable to endorse such a Truth Commission at this point in time. There are well founded fears that this could, like the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, gather a mass of information at tremendous cost but shed limited light on the matter under investigation and bring little healing capacity. The Agencies of the State would be expected to tell the whole truth but neither the British or Irish Governments nor the IRA and Loyalist paramilitaries or others are likely to do this. Yet if the perception was to be created that 'truth' was being fabricated or distorted for whatever purpose, more harm than good might result.

But this is not to say there should be no quest for truth or for greater knowledge and insight. Facilities and support should be provided to encourage people's ongoing search for truth and

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schools could play a greater role in facilitating understanding. But any search for a singular agreed historical narrative will, we believe, prove illusory. Present understandings are limited, influenced by very significant cultural differences and sometimes in flux and people tend to interpret limited facts in terms of their own predispositions. Any attempt to come up with final answers could leave some people feeling their story had been misrepresented or neglected. It is in any case impossible to draw a single line under the past for all time whereas healing can take place when people relate to each other and reflect together on their narratives in private, in small inclusive groups and before respectful, responsive and challenging audiences drawn from both major traditions and their subcultures.

The aim is to acknowledge, empathise and increase mutual understanding among participants, but not necessarily to agree with people's narratives. While the presence of counsellors is desirable, most participants should be drawn from ordinary walks of life. Such an exercise, to be successful, must reflect a bottom up approach and take place in free and safe spaces. Less dramatic accounts of ordinary people would be a vital ingredient. The sensitivity required if the exercise is to bear fruit means meetings should be conducted in private and without cameras. As confidence grows some may wish to face the cameras and this has its own value, but media encounters are on the whole likely to prove counter-productive and intrusive. Their presence changes the dynamics of the interaction in perhaps subtle but significant ways, however, audio recording, provided storytellers are in agreement might be a helpful means of retaining stories for future generations.

The exercise needs to be in the hands of communities all over Northern Ireland and led by local people, although the Secretary of State could quietly facilitate. At some stage a common act led by the Sovereign and President might also be appropriate. We gave some consideration to Days of Reflection, Memorials and Oral History Projects. Such exercises should coincide with extensive and widespread opportunities for personal narrative telling. It was also suggested that a shared space be created in every town and village. There a small copse of trees could be planted by local communities in order to reinforce a sense of hope and to bring communities together. Such projects could be co-ordinated to finish on a set date when samples of recorded personal histories would be symbolically buried in a time capsule underneath the trees symbolising new life and hope springing from the earth.

As a separate exercise it might be helpful if a representative group of academic researchers drawn from both major traditions could develop, as far as is possible, a common understanding of the main features of our historical conflict drawing upon the experiences of ordinary people on the ground.

Finally we would draw attention to Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's report, "We Will Remember Them" issued in April 1998 and accessible at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/victims.htm>.