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Mr. Nolan, Mr. [unclear], Mrs. Mc Intyre → This will be a thread on 17 Nov in Forum
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 C.C. d/p

Note on Conference in Belfast of Support Groups for Victims of Violence

L.F. 24-10

cc PRISONERS

cc IRA of [unclear]

cc Mr. Mc Intyre

cc Mr. [unclear]

1. I attended a conference in the Lansdowne Court Hotel Belfast on the above on 10 October. It was organised by WAVE, itself a voluntary-sector victims support group. About 100 people attended, drawn from several other organisations involved in the area. Of particular interest was the attendance of the Disabled Police Officers Association (DPOA). Represented by founding member Sam Malcolmson and Secretary Hazel McCready, this was the first time that they had appeared publicly at such a gathering.

The format of the conference was two set-piece presentations on traumatic stress and bereavement, followed by workshops in the afternoon. One of the keynote speakers was Dr Marie Smyth from Magee College in Derry (Dr Smyth was one of the panellists at the Forum session on victims of violence in January last). She repeated the point that she had made at the Forum that her research into the families of the victims of Bloody Sunday had shown that some 20+ years after the incident itself, roughly half of those in question were still displaying symptoms of stress disorder (insomnia, panic attacks etc). Multiplied across Northern Ireland, this represented possibly as many as 50,000 people silently carrying "hidden legacies" of incidents which in many cases had long passed out of public memory. In the question-and-answer session after her presentation, there was an interesting exchange on forgiveness. Many victims resented the pressure which the wider community and the Churches put on them to "forgive". Forgiveness was seen as an indication that victims had moved on; society had a vested interest in moving on, hence the pressure on victims to forgive. Moreover, this attitude on the part of the wider community carried the implication that if victims could not forgive they were somehow "lesser" people.

Workshop

3. I sat in on a workshop chaired by Marie Smyth. The group of about 10 people included Pauline Hegney, the widow of Karl Hegney, a Catholic from the Markets area of Belfast, who was shot dead by loyalists in 1991, Alan McBride, whose wife was killed in the Shankill fish-shop bomb in 1993, Brendan Bradley, a community worker with Ardoyne Community Centre who lost three family members in the Troubles and Sam Malcolmson and Hazel McCready of the DPOA. In an intense and moving session, Pauline Hegney, herself a member of WAVE, recounted her story, focussing in particular on the impact of her husband's murder on their four young children. She had received no compensation - the NIO having ruled that the short spell which her husband had spent in prison as a sixteen year old disqualified her from receiving any funding ("even the funeral costs"). She was left therefore to support four children on a widow's pension of £78. Another point of note was that she had received no visit or support from any agency, state or church, since her husband's death, her contact with WAVE being the first outside connection. In the interim she had got a job at the Europa Hotel.

4. Alan McBride identified strongly with Pauline Hegney's position on compensation. In his case, because his wife was working, there was insurance cover and he would receive compensation (he had as yet received nothing). He felt that the NIO's position on Pauline Hegney was wrong, as, he felt, was the principle whereby a the family of a victim who was unemployed received less compensation than that of a victim who had been in work. In a moving exchange, Brendan Bradley said directly to Alan McBride that Thomas

Begley, the IRA member killed planting the Shankill bomb in which Mrs McBride had died, had come from his (Bradley's) community - "we as a community have a responsibility for that fact". At that point, Sam Malcolmson asked Bradley if he was able to make that point openly in his own community. It was clear that his reply - "yes I can and I do" - was noted carefully and with interest by Malcolmson. Bradley, however, also pointed out that 168 people in his immediate community had been killed in the Troubles - "yet there are only two of us here from that district today". There was a big job to be done in reaching people. The issue of compensation seemed to be a uniting factor among what was a very diverse group. Hazel McCready noted LEDU's current campaign to attract emigrants back to Northern Ireland. She felt that the generous grants involved compared starkly to the difficulties that they had all experienced in getting help and support in their cases - having regard to the fact "that we are the people who stayed on and took the heat throughout the 25 years".

5. Marie Smyth mentioned to the group that she was seeking to draw together a partnership of different victim groups to explore the taking of more cohesive approaches on such issues as compensation. Interestingly, the DPOA have already agreed to be part of such a wider network. Dr Smyth is arranging a meeting of interested groups in November.

DPOA and the Forum

6. I had lengthy conversation with Sam Malcolmson and Hazel McCready on the issue of their making a presentation to the Forum. Referring back to the dinner meeting that the Chairperson, the Secretary-General and myself had with them earlier this summer, I reiterated that the Forum's door remained open and that a presentation by them would be greatly valued. They indicated that the issue "is constantly on our minds"! Mr Malcolmson said that he personally was ready to come but that it was an issue of ensuring that he had the support of his membership. That point had not yet been reached - but hopefully would be soon. [Interestingly, when I told them that we understood that the Orange Order had agreed in principle to come to the Forum, Hazel McCready's reaction was "Sam, we must get down to Dublin before them - otherwise people will say we only went because the Orangemen cleared the way for us!"] Sam Malcolmson wondered whether the Forum had any intention of coming to Belfast. I explained that a proposal to do so remained on the table, although there were clear sensitivities attaching to the issue. He said that he could not say for sure that it would make a difference, but thought it was something worth exploring on his side.

Billy Mitchell (PUP)

7. I spoke briefly to Billy Mitchell, who was also at the conference. He said that he and Liam Maskey of Sinn Fein (who have been working on a joint project in North Belfast) were keen to come to the Forum to present their ideas on the initiative. He stressed that he would be wearing that - rather than his PUP - hat. I said that we would be very pleased to hear from them.

Janet Quilley (Quakers)

8. Janet Quilley asked me if the Chairperson/Secretariat would be prepared to meet privately with Kevin McQuillan of the IRSP. He is regular visitor to Quaker House. Mrs

Quilley says that the IRSP are "lost" at the moment. McQuillan seems to be seeking to steer the INLA and IRSP down the political road, but his difficulty in even securing meetings with people is "not helping his case in selling politics to the hard men". I explained that the IRSP did not meet the criteria for membership of the Forum, but that it was open to them to make a submission (and that we had already conveyed this information directly to the IRSP). Mrs Quilley wondered whether we could meet them if only to explain the logistics of the process. I undertook to check and get back to her.

Comment

9. Overall, it was a useful occasion. It is clear that the issue of support for victims is an emotive and difficult one, in relation to which much work remains to be done. The diversity of background of the groups attending the conference highlights the broad base of the issue. Its importance as a vehicle for reconciliation is also obvious. It was helpful that we were represented (Marie Smyth made a supportive reference in her speech to our work and my presence at the conference). Our connecting up of Dr Smyth with the DPOA last January is also beginning to bear fruit in terms of the easing of their sense of isolation - it is clear that Dr Smyth has built up a strong relationship of trust with them. As to the prospect of their coming to the Forum, they appear to be inching ever closer and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that this might yet happen before the end of the year.
10. On the wider issue of a further session on victims of violence, it might be that Marie Smyth's initiative in pulling together a network of support groups (see para 5 above) might be a useful context for such an occasion.

Q. C.

T O'Connor
Forum Secretariat
11 October 1995

cc Chairperson
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