**ARKIV**

**ALTERNATIVE, NON-PARTISAN DEBATE ON NORTHERN IRELAND**

Arkiv was formed in 2013, its members motivated by a shared unhappiness about the way in which the Northern Ireland Troubles were being revised, uneasiness with the analysis on which this was based and concern about the public policy consequences which might flow from that revision and that analysis. This developing ‘politics of the past’, and its attendant discourse, was considered to be deeply flawed. Arkiv sets itself the task of providing an alternative contribution to the current debate on the past but does not seek to promote a partisan political agenda, either unionist or nationalist. Members come from various political backgrounds, different religious confessions or none and have no affiliation to any political party. As our name suggests, the objective is to challenge convenient myth or self-serving ideological interpretations of the past according to the ‘public record’. Narratives of the past require assessment according to what the evidence obliges us to believe. Arkiv dedicates itself to that task.

**A note on the name:**

The Danish word ‘Arkiv’ is chosen in honour of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who wrote: ‘Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.’ That sentence captures succinctly the inspiration behind Arkiv: to understand the past rigorously, not to invoke ancestral voices but to contribute to a shared future.

**Its founding members are**:

Professor Arthur Aughey (University of Ulster)

Dr Máire Braniff (University of Ulster)

Dr Aaron Edwards (Royal Military Academy Sandhurst)

Professor Thomas Hennessey (Christ Church Canterbury University)

Dr Stephen Hopkins (University of Leicester)

Professor Liam Kennedy (Queen’s University, Belfast)

Dr Cillian McGrattan (University of Ulster)

Professor Henry Patterson (University of Ulster)

Submission to the Panel of Parties in the NI Executive on behalf of Arkiv

**October 25, 2013**

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**The Context**

There is a real danger that the related issues of victims and truth recovery will become the main fronts on which Northern Ireland traditional conflicts will be waged. For while republicans and nationalists have been broadly supportive of some form of truth commission unionists have been sceptical or down-right hostile. There is a cross-community consensus that more needs to be done to address the needs of victims but little beyond that. There is a chasm between the general unionist view that there is a clear distinction between victims and perpetrators and Sinn Fein’s opposition to any ‘hierarchy of victims’.

The field of dealing with the past has been in one sense a well-ploughed one with a range of state and NGO sponsored initiatives along with the on-going activities of activist victims groups. Yet all this activity has tended to generate more heat than light. Nevertheless the current landscape is, in our opinion, dangerously slanted towards narratives of broadly shared blame and the effective equivalence of state and non-state forces. It has, for instance, been common to look to international examples of truth and reconciliation commissions as possible solutions for Northern Ireland. However there is a major difference between Northern Ireland and the vast majority of international examples of truth recovery processes: whereas in the South African and Latin American examples, which are those most referred to by those making the case for a local truth commission, it was the state and its agents which were responsible for the vast majority of deaths and traumatic events, in Northern Ireland republicans were responsible for almost 60% of deaths and loyalists 30%.[1]

There is a postmodernist flavour to many of the discussions where all narratives are treated as epistemologically equal despite the obviously one-sided and partisan nature of many of them. It is one thing to claim that all stories should be heard. It is another to claim that all stories should be equally valorised. It is legitimate to argue that all families who suffered loss suffered equally. It is illegitimate to claim that no distinction may be made between innocent victims and those who perpetrated crimes. The political effect of failing to make these distinctions is to skewer the movement of transition towards ideologically advantageous grounds. Thus, while in South Africa there was a broad consensus that the transition was legitimate and the settlement had majority support,[2] in Northern Ireland, truth recovery has become almost synonymous with a drive to legitimize political justifications for the Troubles.

The storm of opposition to the Maze conflict resolution proposal is the most recent example of the existence of dissenting unionist/loyalist voices which are deeply suspicious of the whole language of conflict resolution and truth recovery. While this may in part reflect an ingrained pessimism and an unwillingness to acknowledge Unionism and loyalism’s own responsibilities in Northern Ireland’s violent past, it also reflects a reaction to a truth recovery paradigm which is heavily biased towards state violations and crime. These are legitimate areas of inquiry but they are dwarfed in historic significance, morally and politically, by the actions of paramilitaries.

**Our Proposals**

The attachment to an overarching mechanism (pace the Consultative Group on the Past) has created instability in Northern Ireland. It is inherently problematic. The idea that dealing with the past is a task that can be agreed and dispatched within a given period is not simply an insult to the victims of violence, it is politically and historically naïve. The Irish War of Independence can still arouse passionate debates nearly a century later. The current arrangements for governing Northern Ireland are centred on two parties with less than glorious historical records during the Troubles and much of the on-going problems, manageable though they may well turn out to be, resides not in the past but in the present interests, tactics and strategies of these parties. Left to themselves they may continue to be unable to come to any agreement on these issues.

Societies have dealt with divided histories by adhering to political and constitutional principles concerning the inappropriateness of using the past and victims’ experiences to make political capital in the present.[3] Lustration of perpetrators from positions of power over their victims and an array of positive discrimination proposals aimed at victims serve as ways of enshrining ethical rather than ethnic or ideological values at the heart of society. Legislation based on the societal benefit of commemoration could be designed and would cohere with the defining principle of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement that the best way to honour the dead is to cultivate a political culture of tolerance and peace.

In our opinion as the British and Irish states did not devolve responsibility for dealing with the past solely to the devolved institutions. It is the responsibility of London and Dublin to take the lead on dealing with the past. In a recent speech, the Tanaiste, Eamon Gilmore, expressed the Irish government’s willingness to address the long-standing Unionist concern that the Irish state could have done more to curb the activities of the IRA during the Troubles. Similarly, the British state’s role in the Troubles demands investigation. Individual inquiries, like Saville or De Silva, whilst of major significance, cannot deal with broader patterns and responsibilities. In other jurisdictions (for example, across Europe and Latin America), faced with violent and contested events, governments have appointed commissions of independent historians to whom all relevant state archives are opened.[4] A commission of historical clarification, if appointed by both governments and consisting of British and Irish historians under the chairmanship of an independent and internationally recognised historian and provided with access to British, Northern Irish and Irish archives, could do a massive amount to produce a comprehensive and above all balanced account of the past. Professor Richard English of St Andrews University has well summed up the role of such a commission:

It is not that historians are free from instinctive bias …but the detailed knowledge available from scholarly historians, and the rigour ensured through adherence to proper rules of historical research, might provide one part of the foundation on which can be built a measured and sane approach to Ulster’s bloody past.[5]

There have been several calls for an informed approach to the history of the conflict within Northern Ireland. Lord Professor Bew, for example, recently warned against the ‘infantilised view of history’ that results from the constant attempts to legitimize contemporary politics through historical narratives.[6] That a political opportunity is open to contending ideas about history is unsurprising,[7] the danger the current situation possesses however is that that very openness allows for a thorough repainting of Northern Ireland’s past by dominant voices. Or, as Bew contended, ‘where there is a silence, ideology rushes in’. Michael Ignatieff has argued that the main benefit of truth commissions is to limit the number of ‘permissible lies’ societies tell about the past.[8] We believe that the current impasse and focus on an overarching approach facilitates the multiplication of lies about the past and, in so doing, contributes to the validation of political movements in the present. It is unrealistic to expect this to work given that the majority of people in Northern Ireland do not subscribe to those myths. This does not mean making historians into truth attorneys preparing a case to condemn; rather – along the lines of the sort of legal ‘opinion’ given by Supreme Court judges in the USA – the purpose is to clarify the bigger picture. We believe that a commission of historical clarification can work to circumscribe the past and fence-in historical narratives thereby helping to remove them from the political frontline.

[1] See Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles, D. McKittrick, S. Kelters, B. Feeney, C. Thornton and D. McVea (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2012).

[2] Adrian Guelke, ‘Commentary: Truth, Reconciliation and Political Accommodation’, Irish Political Studies, 22 (3), 2007.

[3] Among others, see, for example, Paloma Aguilar, Memory and Amnesia: The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008); W. James Booth, Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice (London: Cornell University Press, 2006); Mary Fulbrook, German National Identity After the Holocaust (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Andrew Schaap, Political Reconciliation (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

[4] Greg Grandin, ‘The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History, and State Formation in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala’, American Historical Review, 110 (1), 2005.

[5] ‘Coming to Terms with the Past: Northern Ireland’, Richard English, History Today, 54 (7), 2004.

[6] ‘Britain cast as villains in one-sided history of Troubles – Lord Bew’, Newsletter, 26 August 2013.

[7] See, for example, Elizabeth Jelin, State Repression and the Labors of Memory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Barbara A. Misztal, Theories of Social Remembering (Maidenhead: Open University Press); J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Time, Institutions and Action: An Essay on Traditions and Their Understanding’ in Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[8] Michael Ignatieff, Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p. 173.