

Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement

9th November 2017

I would like to thank the Committee for the Opportunity to speak to the experience and work of the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation on legacy issues on the island of Ireland.

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The beginning

Una O Higgins O Malley was one of the founders and drivers of the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation which was established in early seventies as a response to the outbreak of conflict in Northern Ireland. Described as a quiet, ladylike but resolute woman, her life was shaped by a bitter destructive civil war that in many ways has shaped politics and life on the island since, almost one hundred years ago. Her life and energy however was devoted to the building of relationships across and between traditions throughout the island through the establishment with others of the only peace centre in the south of Ireland with 'forty years of conflict in its own back yard'.

Una's father was Minister for Justice in the first government after partition and was shot dead in 1927 (90years ago) on his way to Mass by the 'other side'. She reported in a radio interview in 2005 two years before she died that the loss of her father had a profound impact on her life, one, which made her particularly sensitive to the impact of violence and loss on children and how it shaped their futures.

In a further interview to mark her 75th birthday she told The Irish Times she only once nearly succumbed to bitterness when she discovered the killer's claim that he had danced on her father's grave: ". . . and I got seized with this awful, awful unforgiving cloud, that I hadn't ever felt as badly before. I couldn't stop it; it was like this lava pouring from a volcano. . . I had so often gone to that grave. That happened on Holy Thursday and I thought, 'So much for Holy Thursday and Jesus Christ and all that'. I wanted to throw the whole thing out there and then. But on Good Friday, I made my way back to the church somehow and as I put my foot on the church porch, I had this thought: 'Have a Mass said for them all'. And that was when I felt normal again . . ."And so it happened that 60 years after the murder of Kevin O'Higgins, his daughter arranged a memorial Mass in Booterstown church for him and his killers.

Her response to his murder or execution, although she admits that living with the loss was hard to bear at times, her response was to call the sons and daughters of a bitter civil war to dialogue, many of whom came to different conclusions as a result. She devoted her life to calling 'the enemies or protagonists' together and to the creation and repairing of fractured relationships across this island.

A recent publication aptly called **Wounds** by Fergal Keane uses his experiences of civil war to write about the impact of the civil war in North Kerry where his people come from. It examines the brutality of 'cogadh na mbraithre' and 'how the ghosts of the past return to shape the present as acts of killings

reverberate through the generations' One hundred years on, we have lived a mostly peaceful life in the south of Ireland - although there have been traumatic and violent attacks on this side of the Border – we have often ignored Northern Ireland as having nothing 'to do with us'. We are though deeply intertwined – historically, politically, economically and emotionally. Their story is our story too; our legacy is their legacy too, there is no single story. What we know is that the ghosts of the past will return if we do not heal the wounds of violence in this generation. The Civil War generation chose not to address the impact of the violence and rather went for amnesia passing the responsibility on to later generations. Are we up for it or mature enough in the south over the next five years to talk about the unacknowledged hurt of those years?

Glencree's work

One of Glencree's strategic objectives for the next ten years is to deepen reconciliation within and between communities on the islands of Ireland and Britain.

Our work is done in facilitating dialogue, sharing learning and building capacities, promoting productive relationships and networks, and encouraging public discourse. Hospitality underpins all of Glencree's work, including sharing food together and accommodation when possible. Glencree views an ethic of care as central to all aspects of our engagement.

Since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998, Glencree has worked tirelessly to explore how the complex legacies and traumas of that conflict and how they can best be addressed, reckoned with, and how those affected can be helped. Our work was done through tough economic times, when many said there was no need for it, 'Wasn't there peace, it was all over' What we knew of course then is that Northern Ireland was in recovery and like any society that had experienced trauma, it would take time to recover regardless of the rhetoric and the 'peace talk'

That is why Glencree is encouraging the current generations on all sides who experienced the violence of the Troubles to hear the stories of victim/survivors so that violence will never be used again to achieve ethnic political objectives. Two years ago, in the absence of the legacy arrangements of the Stormont House Agreement being put in place, we started an inter-communal project from the bottom up where those stories could be heard in the Glencree large circle by the other side. We are very pleased that the EU Peace 4 have acknowledged our work and given us resources to roll out an extension of this programme for the next four years.

Through a process of private and confidential facilitated dialogues it will examine themes and issues which remain as obstacles to deeper understanding and the promotion of positive relations. Key groups along with other relevant parties will co-develop their own process and pace of engagement, entering into dialogue with groups and individuals with differing interpretations of what happened in the past including as appropriate those perceived to have contributed to causing harm.

No words that I can use here today will help you understand the experience and power of people being able to talk about what happened to them, to then hear what happened to others, black and white accounts of narrative turn to shades of grey as people start to walk in the shoes of the others, to see another perspective. It is neither comfortable or easy. The learning accrued through the project is expected to be of assistance to 'Victims and Survivors' groups, other interest groups, academics, policymakers, and practitioners in ascertaining how to productively engage with Northern Ireland's contentious past and this learning will be shared through publications, roundtables and an end of project Symposium. This work will also have a strong women led process recognising the often double burden that women carry during conflict.

What is needed?

Support is needed for the direct victims of the conflict, to make sense and meaning of what happened and how it all happened and what questions were left unanswered as a result of what happened. Victims of the conflict have often been forced to carry the burden of the peace process often ignored and often made to carry a burden of guilt for 'not been able to get over it' in the 'we need to move on' narrative.

Support is also needed to deal with the embedded post-traumatic stress embedded in individuals and communities which manifested itself in mental health issues and a suicide rate that recorded 3090 deaths (three quarters male) between 1998-2014, almost the same as those directly killed by the conflict in the previous thirty years. (2017, O Malley, P). This is often the unhealed emotional injury that is best worked through by the acknowledgement of the hurt experienced by victims/survivors through an inter-communal storytelling process.

Glencree works with women in working class communities to develop leadership, women who often carry a double burden in conflict, coming from a patriarchal society, economically and educationally disadvantaged caring for a family and trying to keep them safe.

Young people like all young people sometimes struggle with a sense of wanting to understand what happened while many want to know nothing about the past, others are often held in the past by a sense of betrayal if they move away from a particular narrative. Many that are also carrying intergenerational trauma.

What we have learned from Addressing the Legacy of the Past

Because there has been difficulty/delay in addressing this issue, anger and frustration have hardened and it is clear that no one size that will fit all and there are issues that could help

- **Victims have different needs.** This can include recognition for their suffering and pain to be acknowledged publicly or privately or both, by those that caused it or by those in power whether state, judiciary, politics or church.

- **Truth** Hearing the truth of what happened, regardless of whether or not it is too late for the punishment of those that perpetrated it.
- **Compensation**, monetary or otherwise
- **Language** is heard and understood differently in both traditions, we need to 'watch or language' as it can be used as a weapon to inflame, denigrate or support.
- **Relationships**: the quality of relationships, the presence of relationships and a sense that 'there is a place for everyone' on this island need to be spoken about in a spirit of generosity and service and genuineness and repeated and shown again and again.
- **Dialogue** Using dialogue to have difficult conversations enables people to stop rivalling/competing with each other, where all in the room feel safe to speak, are respectful of others and are heard without judgement creates the conditions that help enable people to find meaning.
- **Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (1998)** addressed many things including multiple identities, however the acknowledgement of the hurt caused on all sides is not embedded in the text nor a stated commitment to develop, create, recreate fractured relationships at all levels, political, social, economic, religious that will enable not just a tolerated coexistence but a genuine set of relationships.

Conclusions

Twenty years ago the GFA did not provide for a healing process. There is an urgency for the SHA arrangements and the three designated units for a five year period to be put in place as soon as possible before it is too late for this generation to heal the past. If political agreement is not possible, then the monies allocated for SHA need to be made available for a bottom up process by reconciliation groups, civil society organisations and the churches. Lastly, we must ensure that the legacy of the past is not another stage to play out tired, repetitive and old worn-out arguments that were neither won nor settled conflicts thirty or fifty years. There must be another way, Glencree knows that there is.

Barbara Walshe, Chair of the Glencree Board

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