

DEALING WITH THE PAST CONFERENCE

COMMISSIONER'S OPENING STATEMENT

25 FEBRUARY 2014

Good morning everyone and a very warm welcome to the Commission for Victims and Survivors Dealing with the Past Conference.

First – the housekeeping bit – in the event of an alarm sounding please make your way in an orderly, if slightly anxious fashion to the car park.

If it is important to you that you check your mobile phone please ensure that you have it switched to silent and be mindful and I think the word is “mannerly” when checking it. Novelty ringtones heard during the Conference sessions will incur a fine. The worse the ringtone, the higher the fine.

Lavatories – I’m sure you’ll manage to find your way. I have been criticised previously for not indicating that people are free to take toilet breaks when they need to. If you need my permission – there’s a problem.

Social media – I’m confident that some of you will be unable to resist using social media. Please can I remind you that this event is being run under the Chatham House rule so please do not identify other participants. Please also remember that inappropriate use of social media can land you in a very lot of trouble.

Photos are being taken and a recording is being made of the beginning and the end of the conference. There will be no recording of any of the workshop sessions and please can I remind you that if you do not want to be identified in those recordings then please let a member of Commission staff know as soon as possible.

A word if I may, about language – Different people use different words to describe things. They don't set out to cause offence but it's their language. My colleagues from the Forum will pick this point up shortly, but by way of introduction, in our discussions in the Victims Forum we agree that different people have a different world view and that's okay. What isn't okay is to be deliberately provocative and offensive. It is our expectation that all today's participants will be mindful of the need to be respectful in this area and understand the need for heightened awareness and consideration of others.

So – why are we doing this? Why are we holding this Conference? It's a question we have asked ourselves in the Commission many, many times during the planning of this event. The reasons are many and various. I have been asked about the agenda for this event. When I have replied by sending a copy of the agenda you have in front of you, I have been asked:

“No. What’s your real agenda? What is it you are really trying to do?”

Our agenda, our objective, our rationale, our output, our aims – call it what you like and I have been asked at different times to justify each one – is very simple. We want to make sure we have the broadest range of views, we hear from as many people, we listen to as many voices on “dealing with the past” before we submit our advice to Ministers.

This event then is part of a *process* of consultation. It is not the final part and it’s not the first part– it’s just another way of finding out what you think. One of the things that has become clear in our planning for this event, and this came out of the seminar we held to plan for this event, is that we must take more time to better understand the different experiences of different parts of Northern Ireland, so some of the next steps will include spending time in border/rural areas, in different parts of the city of

Belfast. We will be going to meet people in Derry and in Londonderry. We want to be sure that we have listened.

This conference, this process, is about listening. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

If the conference is about the commission listening to your views, it must also be about you listening to each other. Respectfully and carefully. You might vehemently disagree with someone else's view. It's their view. They are entitled to hold their view however misguided or wrong you might think it is.

We must ensure that the voices of the many are not drowned out by the volume of the few.

We at the Commission think Victims are real leaders in many ways. I know the Haass/O'Sullivan report is contested, however there is one section I would like to think you might agree on. It is this...

“In many cases, victims have become prominent voices in the effort to heal divisions across communities – an extraordinary example of leadership from which all in Northern Ireland could learn”

This conference is a way for victims and for those who support them either in groups or in formal statutory agencies, to lead and to contribute their views to the continued debate. I am very pleased to welcome representatives from a range of statutory agencies. Thank you for being with us.

I’m also grateful to those of you who have travelled from England, from the Republic of Ireland and to the US Consul General for your attendance today.

I am glad to have so many participants whose wisdom and commitment to this area are so widely respected.

As I look around the room I can see that there are many representatives from groups, political parties

and organisations who have been powerful advocates for Victims and Survivors, in some cases for decades. Despite the very real differences in perspective and view, your shared qualities of tenacity and determination, willingness to challenge and sustain that challenge are to be admired – however difficult these challenges might be for many others.

I also know that many of you here today are victims yourself. You have suffered bereavement, physical injury, psychological injury. You know exactly how painful that is. I would like to thank you especially for your participation. We owe it to you and to the memory of your loved ones, we owe it to them and to the sacrifices they made and we owe it to you and the suffering you have endured to be dignified and respectful in our deliberations.

The themes of today's workshops – acknowledgement, truth, justice and reparation, are difficult and thorny issues.

We have to discuss these them. In my, albeit limited experience, it is not necessary to ask people to share their opinion. However my team have asked me to ask you to make sure you tell us what you think. It is unlikely you won't but i have fulfilled an obligation to remind you!

Victims must continue to show leadership. We must listen to victim's views. Without a careful and considered conversation we cannot begin to think about the future .

Indeed, “a better and shared future” is a pipe dream for many victims – just words that take no account of the burning rage about the lack of justice, the not knowing, the grief that becomes all consuming and the pain of physical and psychological injuries.

Today is your opportunity to have your say. It's your opportunity to inform what the Commission will advise Ministers on “Dealing with the Past”.

I am very grateful to our partners, Queen's University Belfast, University of Ulster, Transitional Justice Institute and Healing Through Remembering. These organisations collectively and through individual contributors bring an unparalleled level of knowledge, skill and experience in this area. Our commentators Brian Rowan and Susan McKay, have a unique ability to interpret a situation and describe it clearly, sensitively and eloquently. Both are rightly considered to be the authoritative voices and we are very fortunate to have them with us today. To be clear, Brian and Susan are highly respected journalists - they are not here as journalists today, rather to help us summarise the discussions.

I am very grateful to those who attended the preparation seminar. Your contributions were very welcome and your input much appreciated. We have tried hard to accommodate your views. You asked us to change the structure of the day to

ensure more inclusive conversations, rather than have speakers. We have done that.

Thank you also to our Forum Members. The Victims Forum is a group of people who I look to for advice on a range of matters. The Forum meets frequently, far more than was originally intended. Every member of our Forum is a volunteer. Every member of our Forum gives their time to promote a common theme; “It should never happen again”.

You will appreciate that given the diverse backgrounds of Forum members, that discussions can be lively and uncomfortable. It is a credit to their determination and diligence that the Forum has found an accommodation one with another to move forward.

It is a testament to their generosity of spirit and their desire for progress. Today, it will be the Dealing with the Past group of the Forum who will present to you. The group is facilitated by Rev. Dr. Lesley

Carroll. Lesley is another one of this society's unsung heroes who has supported Forum members address the theme of Dealing with the Past. I would now like to hand over to Lesley who will introduce the speakers from the group.