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# Attitudes towards a Truth Commission for Northern Ireland in Relation to Party Political Affiliation

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**ABSTRACT** *In Northern Ireland there has been a long-term and often heated debate, particularly within civil society, about how to address the legacy of the conflict and unresolved issues of the past. This paper critically examines the first large-scale survey to focus specifically and in depth upon the question of a possible truth commission for Northern Ireland. The paper analyses responses in relation to self-declared support for Northern Ireland's five main political parties (Ulster Unionist Party, Democratic Unionist Party, Alliance Party, Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Fein). The results of the survey reveal a mixed picture on attitudes towards a possible truth commission but suggest that despite obvious, sometimes serious, community and party political differences on a number of important issues, there are also clearly grounds on which consensus exists.*

## Transitional Justice and Truth Commissions

Since the early 1970s there has been a proliferation of truth commissions varying in remit and style in countries as diverse as Uganda, Argentina, Guatemala, South Africa, Ghana, East Timor and Morocco to mention but a few (Hayner, 2002). The rationale for initiating truth commissions stems from a desire within post-conflict society to uncover 'the truth' about past injustices and wrongdoing that in many cases has been deliberately 'silenced'. This is often, but not always, linked to authoritarian regimes where there has been a break-down in the rule of law and where human rights abuses have been carried out with impunity. A growing number of commentators are of the opinion that drawing a line under the past is not a viable option for such countries and argue that truth commissions can bring positive benefits including 'closure', 'healing', catharsis, 'reconciliation' and may assist society in general to move forward by working through a violent past (Biggar, 2003; Hamber, 2002; Hayner, 2002; Ignatieff, 1996; Kritz, 1995). As one commentator put it, 'it narrows the range of permissible lies' (Ignatieff, 1996: 113). Underpinning

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such processes is a restorative rather than a retributive conception of justice. There are also numerous criticisms of truth commissions, not least that they reopen old wounds and may generate further polarisation; 'the truth' delivered is often partial and limited; their 'top down' nature can marginalise victims, and there are often unpalatable tradeoffs between truth and justice on the one hand and stability and pragmatic politics on the other (Hamber, 2003; Lundy and McGovern, 2007a; Posel and Simpson, 2002; Wilson, 2001). Moreover, they tend to have a narrow focus, dwelling upon individual violations resulting in the exclusion of a range of socio-economic injustices. This in turn prevents an adequate analysis of the broader causes of conflict and often serves to mask a larger system of abuse that may prevail (Mani, 2002). This assumes particular importance in light of the role of poverty, discrimination and inequality in generating conflict.

### **The Debate in Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland there has been a long-term and often heated debate, particularly within civil society, as to the best way to deal with the legacy of the past. Central to this debate is whether or not there needs to be some form of official 'truth recovery' process or truth commission. The arguments for and against such a process in the Northern Ireland context are complex and are discussed in detail elsewhere (Bell, 2003; Lundy and McGovern, 2007b; McEvoy, 2006). What follows is a brief synopsis. The Good Friday Agreement (GFA), signed in 1998, signalled the end of over 30 years of armed conflict. The Agreement included a series of measures that addressed the legacies of the conflict, including the reform of policing (Mulcahy, 2005), the disarmament of armed groups, the release of conflict-related prisoners (McEvoy, 2001), the provision of services to victims (Hamber and Wilson, 2003) and a review of the criminal justice system. As Christine Bell (2003) has argued, taken together these elements of the Agreement mapped out a 'piecemeal' approach to the past. There is the view that this piecemeal approach was and is in effect a 'bespoke' method that emerged organically from within the Northern Ireland context (McEvoy, 2006: 69). Not only was the idea of a comprehensive mechanism for addressing outstanding truth and justice issues absent from the Agreement, it was virtually not discussed in the multi-party talks that led up to it. Indeed, avoiding talk of the past, rather than addressing it, was the defining leitmotif of the Irish Peace Process in the 1990s. That said, the state did introduce a series of measures to deal with what became known as the 'victims agenda' including the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, in 1997 who issued a report the following year ('We Will Remember Them'), both of which became highly contentious within the nationalist community. The Bloomfield Report, as it became known, was criticised by nationalists for failing to adequately address outstanding issues of truth and justice and excluding any mention of British state violence. A debate on what became known as the 'hierarchy of victimhood' subsequently developed. In the intervening years the 'victims' agenda' and truth and justice debate became one of the most highly contentious issues and key 'sites of struggle' within civil society and

the wider political arena. Nowhere is this more fraught and seemingly polarised than the debate over whether or not there should be a truth commission.

As the peace process unfolded within the nationalist/republican community locally based groups and initiatives emerged to contest, consciously or not, this dominant official discourse and a steady momentum in favour of uncovering 'the truth' as a means of dealing with the past emerged. This is reflected in the work of a variety of groups campaigning for public inquiries and (re)opening of contentious cases relating to state killing and collusion, community-led inquiries and in other initiatives such as oral history or 'story telling' projects which not only documented accounts of the conflict but also proposed mechanisms for dealing with the past (Bell, 2003; Kelly, 2005; Lundy and McGovern, 2001, 2005; McEvoy, 2006; Rolston and Scraton, 2005). Both of the main political parties representing this constituency, Sinn Fein and SDLP, have stated an interest in some form of organised truth recovery process and welcome a debate on the topic. It is perhaps overly simplistic to suggest that there exists consensus within nationalist/republican circles in favour of a truth commission, despite being assumed and articulated by opponents. In particular there remains distrust of the state's motives and its willingness to cooperate fully in uncovering the truth. The Sinn Fein discussion document on the topic refers to 'genuine doubts and fears concerning the issue of truth' (Sinn Fein, 2003: 3). Having said that, there does appear to be a growing appetite within this particular constituency for uncovering 'the truth' and revisiting the past in order to establish how and why their loved ones were killed. For advocates of truth recovery, dealing with the past and uncovering the truth is regarded as a key cornerstone and basis upon which trust can begin to be built and society can move forward. The nuances of such views are reflected in the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey and discussed in detail below.

Some of the strongest opposition to truth recovery has come from within unionism and loyalism (EPIC, 2004; Lundy and McGovern, 2005; McEvoy, 2006; Unionist Group, 2006). A key concern appears to be that it is viewed as a 'Republican Trojan Horse' and part of 'nationalist revisionism'; this is related in other complex ways to general political disenchantment, a lack of confidence or trust in 'self' and distrust of the 'other' community. Loyalists in particular have expressed unease at the danger that they might be used as a convenient scapegoat and they regard their communities as being most at risk of being portrayed in a negative light and thus losing out in any truth recovery process. Further concern amongst loyalists is that such a process could contribute further to the criminalisation of loyalist political violence, particularly from 'middle unionism' (EPIC, 2004: 7–8; Shirlow *et al.*, 2005). There is also apprehension that because truth recovery is so emotive and partial it has the potential to cause more harm than good and might even stimulate rivalry and discord based on conflicting perceptions. For others the political situation remains too volatile and a truth commission should not take place unless the conflict can be said to have truly ended (EPIC, 2004).

The main Unionist parties, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), have in general expressed a lack of confidence or outright opposition

to the establishment of a truth commission. In particular, the DUP is strongly opposed to the creation of such a process and argues that it 'would serve to hold accountable only those who served in the Crown Forces while terrorists could hide behind the cloak of anonymity' (DUP, 2003: 9). The party has called for continued police investigation of 'unresolved murders'. The UUP is currently in the process of an internal discussion on the subject but several of its key members have in the past expressed negative views and misgivings about such a process (Trimble, 2004). The Alliance Party appear to be in favour of truth recovery and at its party conference in 2004 called on the government to establish a victim-led taskforce to determine the most appropriate means to deal with the past.

In the spring of 2005 the British Government concluded that there was insufficient consensus on the question of how to take truth recovery forward. It was argued that the political timing was not right and Secretary of State Paul Murphy announced that the emergent consultation process on truth recovery was to be suspended. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) Report echoed this stance but did not rule out the possibility of such a process in the future (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2005). Other prominent players have consistently argued in favour of establishing some form of truth recovery. The Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Sir Hugh Orde, has contributed to this debate and recently stated: 'the past has the potential to destroy all the effort and real change policing has delivered in the post-Patten world ... in order to deliver 21st century policing, we require a radical solution to the past'. He added the Historical Enquiries Team is the Police contribution to dealing with the past (Orde, 2005: 2). Northern Ireland Policing Board chairman Des Rea used his keynote speech at an international policing conference held in Belfast March 2007 to call on the British Government to take 'speedy action' to deal with outstanding issues relating to families whose loved ones have been murdered during the Troubles and called for the establishment of a truth commission. However, without the political appetite for a structured or far-reaching truth-recovery process the 'patchwork' or piecemeal approach continues as a means of dealing with the past.

## **Data and Methods**

This article is based upon responses to a questionnaire on attitudes towards a truth commission for Northern Ireland that formed part of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. In late 2004 and early 2005 1,800 adults, randomly selected to reflect the population of Northern Ireland, were interviewed in their own homes. The full data was made available in the summer of 2005 via the ARK/NILT (Ark-Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive).<sup>1</sup> The authors were responsible, both for funding and, in consultation with members of the ARK team, for designing the questions and the content of the module on attitudes towards truth commissions and related issues. Variables considered to ensure a representative cross-section of the population included: age, gender, ethnicity, religious group affiliation, party political

support, location and social class. These variables were chosen as a means to analyse community attitudes toward post-conflict truth-telling processes.

The authors developed the following series of questions in order to analyse attitudes towards a truth commission and/or truth recovery mechanisms for Northern Ireland's future. These included: knowledge of truth commissions elsewhere; whether or not a truth commission was important for Northern Ireland's future; what should be the character and purpose of a truth commission and what is the likelihood of its success; what should be the aims of a truth commission; who should run it and be accountable to it; what hopes and fears would people have of a truth commission; and what powers should a truth commission have. A series of questions on attitudes towards victims was also conducted but falls outside the focus of this article.<sup>2</sup>

## **Results**

### *Knowledge of Truth Commissions*

The starting point for the survey of questions on a truth commission was to establish two things: first, to examine how aware people were of what truth commissions are and, second, to what extent respondents regarded a truth commission as important or unimportant for Northern Ireland. For the purposes of the survey a truth commission was defined as 'an inquiry where everyone would have to tell the truth about things to do with the "troubles"'. In order to get some idea about the level and extent of current knowledge about the nature of truth commissions, respondents were asked whether or not they had heard of any other truth commissions having taken place anywhere else in the world.

While it may have been expected that many people sampled would not have heard of truth commissions elsewhere, the fact that this was true of over three in every four respondents may perhaps be more surprising. Of those respondents who had heard of a truth commission internationally it may come as less of a surprise that, when asked which truth commission they were aware of, 91.5 per cent referred, either solely (88 per cent) or in a combination with others (3.5 per cent) to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

There was some difference in knowledge of other truth commissions when broken down by self-declared party political support. Of the five main Northern Ireland-based parties, supporters of the Alliance party were far more likely to have heard of a truth commission (51.3 per cent) and supporters of the DUP clearly the least likely (17.4 per cent). That unionists were generally a little less likely than nationalists to have heard of another truth commission was borne out by the figures for the UUP (25.3 per cent) as compared to those for the SDLP (29.9 per cent) and Sinn Fein (29.0 per cent). However, what is perhaps most significant is that (Alliance party followers aside) those unaware of other truth commissions outnumbered those who did by at least three to one.

This evidence of a limited level of public knowledge about truth commissions internationally needs to be taken into consideration when assessing the findings

presented in this research. In itself, this pattern of answers does not constitute absolute proof that respondents had limited knowledge about the issues at stake in relation to some of the questions they were asked. However, it does suggest that the knowledge upon which their responses were founded may not have been based on evidence from, or the workings of, truth commissions elsewhere.

### *Should there be a Truth Commission?*

As will become apparent, the evidence of limited awareness of truth commissions internationally has partly informed the reading the authors have made of other findings in the survey, elements of which appear to be contradictory. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the responses to the question whether or not respondents believed that it was important or unimportant that Northern Ireland should have a truth commission: 49.6 per cent of respondents indicated that they believed a truth commission was important, including (26.4 per cent) that it was very important for Northern Ireland; on the other hand, 28.5 per cent expressed the view that a truth commission would be unimportant, and only 12.9 per cent expressed this view strongly. Therefore, more people than not, although just short of an absolute majority (49.6 per cent), stated that they thought a truth commission was either fairly or very important for the future of Northern Ireland.

As Table 1 illustrates, of those people who declared support for each of the main Northern Ireland-based political parties, more agreed with the statement that a truth commission was either important or very important for the future of Northern Ireland than disagreed. There were absolute majorities supporting that position amongst supporters of the two main nationalist parties (SDLP, SF) as well as the Alliance party indicating that the idea of a truth commission is relatively more attractive to nationalists than to unionists. Supporters of the main nationalist parties the SDLP (57.4 per cent) and Sinn Fein (57.9 per cent) were more likely to state that a truth commission was either fairly or very important than those of the main unionist parties, although Alliance voters were most likely of all (59 per cent). However, more supporters of the two main unionist parties, the UUP (44 per cent) and the

**Table 1.** Attitudes towards whether a truth commission is important or unimportant for Northern Ireland, by % of supporters of Northern Ireland's major political parties

	Fairly important or very important (%)	Neither important or unimportant (%)	Fairly unimportant or very unimportant (%)	Total no. of Respondents (N)
UUP	44.0	19.7	33.8	381
DUP	41.5	18.4	37.1	290
Alliance	59.0	16.6	24.4	78
SDLP	57.4	17.6	22.6	294
Sinn Fein	57.9	15.2	24.1	141

DUP (41.5 per cent), said that a truth commission was important than those who said it was not (33.8 per cent in the case of the UUP, 37.1 per cent for the DUP). The responses indicate that there are some grounds to view attitudes towards the prospect of a truth commission as being significantly divided along the traditional party political lines of unionist and nationalist, although perhaps these are far from being as polarised as might often be assumed.

At first sight, therefore, it would appear that there is support for the idea of a truth commission for Northern Ireland, although by no means overwhelming. As we will demonstrate below, this apparent support for a truth commission needs to be treated with a degree of caution. It may be necessary to keep in mind that the question is couched in terms which declare that a truth commission is a mechanism where parties to the conflict 'tell the truth' and that there may therefore be a mix of motivations behind such expressions of support for a truth commission. For example, that 41.5 per cent (the largest single group in this set of figures) of DUP supporters feel that a truth commission is 'very important' may be born quite as much out of a desire to see traditional political opponents (i.e. republicans) publicly made to 'tell the truth' as it is from a hope of pursuing other possible truth commission goals. These figures do therefore need to be seen in the light of expressed attitudes to the possible aims of a truth commission and those towards other possible ways of dealing with the past (i.e. criminal prosecutions, discussed below). As we will demonstrate, it may well be that what many respondents felt was important or unimportant was not so much the specific question of a truth commission but rather the issue of ensuring that 'everyone would have to tell the truth'. It should also be noted that even the headline figure of 49.6 per cent expressing approval for the idea of a truth commission for Northern Ireland may represent a decline in enthusiasm for such a mechanism. Research conducted by Cairns and Mallett in 2003 found that a majority of respondents (64.7 per cent) were in favour of a truth commission (including 42.9 per cent who agreed strongly).

It is perhaps best, therefore, to examine many of the attitudes described below toward the potential aims, structure and powers of a possible truth commission as much as an indication of general attitudes toward the principles that might guide the devising of any mechanisms intended to deal with the legacy of the past, as with a truth commission as such.

*What should be the Character and Purpose of a Truth Commission and what is the Likelihood of its Success?*

In order to further gauge support or opposition to the idea of a truth commission respondents were presented with a series of seven descriptions, both positive and negative, on the possible outcome, character and likelihood of success of a truth commission. If there was a generally lukewarm response to the idea of a truth commission these answers revealed a large degree of scepticism as to whether or not it could achieve its ends. Certainly (and seemingly a telling blow to the prospects for a truth commission) people did not seem to rate highly the likelihood of its success



in achieving what was also seen as its key goal; to 'get to the truth'. As Table 2 indicates, when faced with the statement that 'you wouldn't necessarily get the truth for a truth commission' a huge majority (83.4 per cent) agreed, including 26.4 per cent who agreed strongly and 6.1 per cent disagreed. The vast majority also thought that there were more important things to spend money on than a truth commission (81 per cent). On the other hand, there were far fewer takers when it was proposed that a truth commission could 'help clear the air about the past conflict' (41.4 per cent), contribute to giving 'a clean start to Northern Ireland's political future' (29.7 per cent) and make it 'a more peaceful and less divided society' (25.4 per cent). More thought that such a process could be 'just an excuse to attack the government' (46.5 per cent) and more again, roughly two-thirds that 'there are better ways to deal with the past than a truth commission' (65.3 per cent).

Generally speaking, supporters of the main unionist parties tended to be more sceptical and suspicious of what a truth commission would entail than those of the main nationalist parties. For example, while a third of nationalists (36.9 per cent of the SDLP and 33.8 per cent of Sinn Fein supporters) thought that a truth commission might be just an excuse to attack the government this rose to over half for UUP voters (54.2 per cent) and nearly two-thirds for those of the DUP (60.9 per cent). Scepticism about the capacity of a truth commission to 'necessarily get to the truth' was also a fairly general feeling amongst all respondents when broken down by party political affiliation. A total of 83.1 per cent of UUP supporters agreed with the statement (including 28.1 per cent strongly) and 85.6 per cent of DUP voters concurred (32.1 per cent strongly). There was virtually no difference amongst nationalist party supporters. A total of 84.4 per cent of SDLP voters also felt that a truth commission would not necessarily get to the truth (including 23.3 per cent strongly). For Sinn Fein supporters, 81.3 per cent agreed with the statement (including 23.4 per cent strongly). Despite being amongst the most positive about the desire for a truth commission supporters of the Alliance party were statistically the least likely to believe that a truth commission would necessarily get to the truth, 85.9 per cent of Alliance voters agreeing with the statement, including 26.9 per cent strongly so.

Again, there is no direct correlation between believing that a truth process should happen and belief that it will necessarily achieve what many, as we shall see, regard as its central goal. Of course, this apparent unanimity needs to be set against the likelihood that different party political supporters may have very different ideas about whom or what might stop a truth commission getting to the truth.

What is certainly significant is that there was a definite swathe of opinion that there were 'better ways to deal with the past than a truth commission'. This certainly suggests that even amongst those who initially appeared to support the idea of a truth commission, it may have been the idea of 'getting the truth' about the past, rather than the specific mechanism of a truth commission, to which they were agreeing. This reading appears to be confirmed by the fact that, of those who stated that a truth commission was either important or very important, 56 per cent of the former and 43.9 per cent of the latter also agreed that there were 'better ways to deal with

**Table 2.** Attitudes towards the character, purpose and likelihood of success of a truth commission

Attitudes towards a truth commission	Agree strongly (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree or disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Disagree strongly (%)	Don't know (%)	Total no. of respondents (N)
Having a truth commission would help clear the air about the past conflict	9.1	32.3	15.0	32.4	8.5	2.7	1800
You wouldn't necessarily get the truth from a truth commission	26.4	57.0	8.6	5.7	0.4	1.9	1800
A truth commission would help give a clean start to Northern Ireland's political future	2.9	26.8	18.3	39.2	9.8	3.1	1800
There are more important things to spend money on than a truth commission	35.6	45.4	8.0	9.1	0.8	1.2	1800
A truth commission would help make Northern Ireland a more peaceful and less divided society in the years to come	2.8	22.6	19.5	39.1	12.4	3.7	1800
There are better ways to deal with the past than a truth commission	15.9	49.4	15.3	12.1	0.6	6.7	1800
A truth commission would be just an excuse to attack the government	6.6	39.9	21.3	24.1	1.1	6.9	1800

the past than a truth commission'. Of those who felt a truth commission was unimportant, 90.6 per cent also thought there were better ways to deal with the past.

#### *What should be the Aims of a Truth Commission?*

The research sought to explore what aims and objectives people in Northern Ireland would see as important for a truth commission if such a process were to be established. A list of possible aims based upon the sorts of goals set out by various truth commissions that have taken place elsewhere was provided. Respondents were asked to indicate which of these their first and second preferred aims were.

As Table 3 shows, some interesting figures emerge in terms of a breakdown of these responses by declared support for each of the main Northern Ireland-based political parties. Amongst DUP supporters the picture was stark. The top first preference choice was again 'to get at the truth', with 29.4 per cent of self-declared DUP voters choosing this option. However, significantly different to the responses of all other party political supporter groups was the particularly large group that made 'to punish people who committed criminal offences' their first choice (20.1 per cent), followed a long way behind by 'to help communities become reconciled' (11.4 per cent), 'to get healing and closure' (11.0 per cent) 'to get the story straight' (8.7 per cent) and to 'draw a line under the past' (8.4 per cent).

For Sinn Fein supporters the leading first preference choice was also 'to get the truth' (29.7 per cent) followed some way behind by 'to draw a line under the past'

**Table 3.** First preference choices for what should be the main aim of a truth commission, by % of supporters of Northern Ireland's main political parties

Aims of a truth commission	UUP (%)	DUP (%)	Alliance (%)	SDLP (%)	Sinn Fein (%)	Total no. of respondents (N)
To get at the truth	34.0	29.4	25.6	24.9	29.7	359
To punish people who committed criminal offences	9.0	20.1	0	5.0	4.8	117
To get compensation for victims	2.0	2.3	3.8	1.3	1.4	24
To allow a line to be drawn under the past	16.6	8.4	26.9	22.6	17.9	205
To help communities get reconciled	13.6	11.4	21.8	16.6	9.0	167
As an opportunity for people to tell their stories	1.3	1.7	1.3	2.3	1.4	20
To find out if institutions abused their power	0.8	2.0	2.6	2.7	10.3	34
To get healing and closure	12.8	11.0	11.5	16.9	9.7	157
To get the story straight about what happened during the conflict	4.3	8.7	5.1	4.0	13.8	79
Other	0.8	0.7	0	0.3	0.7	7
Don't know	4.9	4.3	1.3	3.3	1.4	45

(17.9 per cent) and to 'get the story straight' (13.8 per cent). Sinn Fein supporters were the only group to place much emphasis on 'finding out if some people or institutions abused their power' (10.3 per cent) and this was then followed by 'healing and closure' (9.7 per cent), 'to reconcile communities' (9.0 per cent) and only then 'to punish people who committed criminal offences' (4.8 per cent). Far and away the most common second choice preference amongst self-declared Sinn Fein voters was 'to get healing' (23.8 per cent), followed by 'to reconcile communities' (15.4 per cent), to 'find out if people or institutions had abused power' (11.9 per cent), to 'draw a line under the past' (11.2 per cent) and 'to get the story straight about what happened' (9.8 per cent). The percentage of Sinn Fein respondents who chose 'to punish people for criminal offences' fell to 4.9 per cent and was, in fact, the least popular answer in this section.

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that there are some significant differences here between the supporters of various political parties as to what the goals of a truth commission might be and the consequences of what 'getting at the truth' might entail. The strong presence of 'to get at the truth' as the top answer may have to be considered in light of the definition of a truth commission (as an inquiry where everyone would have to tell the truth about things to do with the 'Troubles') provided to respondents earlier in the survey. Nevertheless, that 'getting the truth' would lead to 'punishment' and 'drawing a line under the past' does seem a relatively more appealing outcome to unionists, particularly DUP supporters, than for nationalists. The emphasis of the latter tends to lean more to 'healing' and 'reconciliation' as outcomes of 'getting at the truth', with at least some Sinn Fein supporters also indicating that for them revealing the 'abuse of power' is something of a priority. What truth therefore means to different groups of politically defined constituencies may have some important differences of interpretation and consequences.

#### *Who should Run and who should be Answerable to a Truth Commission?*

Clearly, when looking at responses to a series of questions on who should run and who should be answerable to a truth commission it needs to be kept in mind that such a process was only seen as important, or was the preferred option. However, as well as providing specific information on attitudes to possible truth commission mechanisms we might be able to see here issues relevant to any past-focused process, and those that help to explain the reticence of some to support a truth commission itself.

The survey asked respondents who they would 'personally trust to run a truth commission' should one be set up. A list of 11 different groups, bodies and organisations was provided. Responses to this question showed an almost universal distrust of all the organisations, parties and agencies that had been involved in the conflict to run a truth commission. This would seem to underpin the contention that a general sense of disillusionment with almost all sources of political leadership in Northern Ireland, and with the far from steady progress of the peace process at the

time of the survey, may have been impacting significantly on attitudes toward truth recovery and justice issues.

So, for example, as Table 4 illustrates, 91.5 per cent of all respondents did not trust the British Government to run a truth commission. The Northern Ireland Assembly did little better (89.2 per cent) and the Irish Government even worse (97.1 per cent). Perhaps not surprisingly, republican and loyalist groups did worst of all (both 99.4 per cent). However, less predictably, judges (95.1 per cent), churches (87.8 per cent), community groups (90.3 per cent) and even victims (92.6 per cent) fared little better. A quarter of respondents (24.6 per cent) did say they would trust 'ordinary people' to run a truth commission, but of course that left three-quarters (75.4 per cent) who did not.

The only figure that appears to lift this apparently all-pervading sense of suspicion was the 46.6 per cent of people who felt that international organisations like the United Nations should be trusted to run a truth commission. In terms of political party support, perhaps reflecting unionist concerns that 'internationalising' the issue would be part of a nationalist agenda, DUP voters were the least likely to support the involvement of international organisations (35.5 per cent saying yes), just under half of UUP supporters were in favour of the suggestion (45 per cent) while this rose significantly for followers of Sinn Fein (60.7 per cent), the SDLP (63.5 per cent) and the Alliance party (66.7 per cent).

One caveat to this seemingly bleak picture of attitudes toward the trustworthiness of local governmental, political, social and community leadership is that it was not possible (given the potential complexity of such answers and the limitations of space within the survey) to see what combinations of such groups and bodies might

**Table 4.** Attitudes toward who should be trusted to run a truth commission

Name of group/organisation to be trusted to run a truth commission	Yes		No	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
British Government	153	8.5	1647	91.5
Northern Ireland Assembly	195	10.8	1605	89.2
Irish Government	53	2.9	1747	97.1
Victims groups	134	7.4	1666	92.6
International organisations (such as the United Nations)	839	46.6	961	53.4
Loyalist organisations	11	0.6	1789	99.4
Republican organisations	11	0.6	1789	99.4
Judges	85	4.7	1715	95.3
The churches	219	12.2	1581	87.8
Community groups	173	9.6	1627	90.4
Ordinary people	442	24.6	1358	75.4
None of these	102		1698	

have been acceptable to people. However, it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that, if people do not think a truth commission will get to the truth, then it is partly because they lack confidence in the governments, parties, groups and bodies most likely to be involved in the running of a truth commission to do so. On the other hand, there is at least a large body of opinion that sees the involvement of outside, international agencies as desirable (if not necessary) in order for a truth commission to be trusted and impartial. The apparent high level of distrust in such responses would suggest that, if any truth recovery mechanism is embarked upon, there is at least some value in ensuring that an international component is evident to enhance public confidence and trust.

Respondents were also asked who they felt should be asked to account for their past action if a truth commission were created. Again, respondents were provided with a list of what were considered to be ten relevant groups. In an almost exact mirror image of the responses given above, most respondents felt that almost all the groups, organisations and parties involved in the conflict should be held to account for their conflict-related past.

As Table 5 shows, there were some differences in the pattern of responses according to declared party political affiliation. For example, supporters of the main nationalist political parties were more likely than unionists to feel that the British Government should have to account for its past actions; including 80.0 per cent of Sinn Fein supporters and 82.1 per cent of those of the SDLP. Although it may be worth noting that the highest figure was found amongst supporters of the Alliance party (84.6 per cent). However, a still high 65.7 per cent of UUP supporters agreed, as did 63.2 per cent of those for the DUP.

**Table 5.** Self-declared supporters of the main unionist parties and attitudes toward what groups should be held accountable for their past actions should a truth commission be created

<i>Group/organisation to be trusted to run a truth commission</i>	<i>UUP Yes</i>		<i>DUP Yes</i>	
	N	%	N	%
British Government	257	65.7	189	63.2
Irish Government	261	66.8	198	66.2
The Army	229	58.6	155	51.8
The Police	233	59.6	164	54.8
Politicians from Northern Ireland	275	70.3	188	62.9
Loyalist organisations	342	87.5	257	86.0
Republican organisations	353	90.3	272	91.0
Judges	203	51.9	139	46.5
Churches	202	51.7	143	47.8
Journalists	223	57.0	139	46.5
All of these	164	41.9	114	38.1

As indicated below, 79.4 per cent of those who claimed to support the SDLP felt that the British Army should be held accountable if a truth commission were created, a figure that rose to 82.8 per cent amongst supporters of Sinn Fein. Amongst unionists, on the other hand, 58.6 per cent of UUP supporters and 51.8 per cent of DUP followers agreed with this statement. The figure was 78.2 per cent for Alliance party supporters. Apart from when republican and or what were perceived as pro-nationalist bodies (i.e. the Irish Government) were concerned, this pattern of marginal but significant difference tended to be repeated, with nationalist supporters (and those of the Alliance party) more likely to support calls that groups be held accountable for past actions than their unionist (and particularly DUP) counterparts. That said, a majority of unionists still tended to support calls for most of the key agents involved in the conflict to have to account for their conflict-related past.

### *What Fears would you have of a Truth Commission?*

We asked people about the fears they might have for a truth commission and again provided a series of possible options, several of which they could choose if they wished. These included: 'allow the guilty to go free', 'be one-sided', 'cause more damage than good', 'undermine faith in our existing institutions', 'create greater tension', 'start people fighting again', 'be a waste of money', 'all of these' and 'no fears'.

As far as fears respondents held of a possible future truth commission were concerned, there were some differences according to self-declared party political support that tended to suggest that, in general, unionists were more pessimistic or concerned than their nationalist counterparts. That said, these differences should not be over-exaggerated and in many instances fears were as likely to be shared across traditional political lines as not. The fear that a truth commission might prove to be a 'waste of money' was clearly the most widely held, particularly amongst unionist supporters. This echoes, to some extent at least, the earlier finding where 80.1 per cent of all respondents felt there were important things to spend money on than a truth commission: 60.1 per cent of UUP supporters and 62.2 per cent of DUP supporters declared this as a fear they had of a truth commission; this compared to 43.2 per cent and 44.8 per cent of SDLP and Sinn Fein supporters respectively. The wider debate over the costs of previous truth and justice initiatives (such as the Bloody Sunday Inquiry) is likely once more to have had an influence on these differences of response. There was a similarly significant divergence in relation to the fear that a truth commission might result in 'allowing the guilty to go free'. This was expressed as a fear by 45.0 per cent of UUP affiliates and 54.2 per cent of those of the DUP; 26.6 per cent of SDLP and 24.8 per cent of Sinn Fein agreed. This reinforces the difference apparent in the earlier responses to whether or not the aim of a truth commission should be the prosecution of wrongdoers or not.

*What Powers should a Truth Commission have and how should it be Organised and Run?*

Respondents were asked a series of questions concerning the possible powers a truth commission might have, and the form it might take. These questions were based on some of the issues (such as the granting of amnesties for past perpetrators giving evidence before a truth commission) that have arisen in the work of truth commission internationally. While it was difficult to build up a complex picture of precisely what powers a truth commission might have, two issues in particular were picked out to garner opinion; amnesties and the power to compel witnesses. The question of the power to grant amnesties for those giving evidence to a truth commission is one that has largely arisen in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Respondents were asked whether or not they agreed with the idea that a truth commission should have the power to grant amnesties for anyone giving evidence to a truth commission. An amnesty was defined as granting 'freedom from prosecution for all past actions, including killings'. Overall there was very little support for the amnesty principle: 19.4 per cent agreed that a truth commission should have the power to grant amnesties (including only 4.3 per cent who strongly agreed), while 60.5 per cent of respondents disagreed with the idea that a truth commission should have the power to grant amnesties (including 31.1 per cent who disagreed strongly).

When analysed according to party political support it was clear that unionists were overwhelmingly opposed to a truth commission having amnesty granting powers, and only amongst Sinn Fein supporters was there a (narrow) majority in favour (see Table 6). Unionist opposition to the amnesty principle could not have been much clearer. Only 13 per cent of UUP supporters and 7.3 per cent of DUP supporters agreed with the suggestion that a truth commission, if it were to be created, should have the power to grant amnesties. This contrasted with 70.4 per cent of UUP supporters and 78.2 per cent of DUP supporters who disagreed with the statement, including 40.7 per cent of the former and 50.8 per cent of the latter who did so strongly.

**Table 6.** Attitudes by self-declared party political affiliation, toward whether or not there should be the power of amnesty for anyone who gives evidence to a truth commission

Party political affiliation	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree or disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Don't know	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
UUP	8	2.0	43	11.0	48	12.3	116	29.7	159	40.7	17	4.3
DUP	7	2.3	15	5.0	32	10.7	82	27.4	152	50.8	11	3.7
Alliance	1	1.3	16	20.5	12	15.4	24	30.8	21	26.9	4	5.1
SDLP	11	3.7	84	27.9	53	17.6	81	26.9	53	17.6	19	6.3
Sinn Fein	30	20.7	48	33.1	16	11.0	35	24.1	16	11.0	0	0



Supporters of the Alliance party were a little more inclined to support amnesty granting powers, but this was still very much a minority position: 21.8 per cent of them agreed with the idea of amnesty powers for a truth commission and 57.7 per cent said they disagreed with the idea. SDLP supporters were more likely again to be in favour of amnesty powers (31.6 per cent). Only among Sinn Fein supporters was there a majority in favour of a truth commission having the power to grant amnesties (53.8 per cent).

Respondents were asked a series of other questions concerning the possible powers and structure of a truth commission. These issues were raised as ones which had been of some significance for other truth commissions and touched on questions of transparency, accountability and the compellability of witnesses. What was striking in the responses to these questions was the very high degree of consensus that emerged amongst the overwhelming majority of respondents. Some 82 per cent agreed that it was important, if a truth commission was created, that it should hold its meetings in public. Similarly, 75.9 per cent said that it was important that ordinary people should get to decide who runs the truth commission. This would certainly suggest that if a truth commission was set up then public confidence in its workings could very much depend on its ability to show openness to public scrutiny, accountability and reflect the views of the wider public. There was virtually no difference in response to these questions on the basis of party political support. People were also keen that a truth commission would have the powers to compel witnesses to appear before it. Some 77.4 per cent of respondents felt that having 'powers like a court' including the power that 'if people were called [before the truth commission] they would have to appear'.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent that the issue of truth recovery is surrounded by a certain sense of scepticism and pessimism. This is not true of all, but certainly of many. Different views on the conflict, the peace process and ongoing political and constitutional uncertainty are likely to have framed the attitudes reflected in this study not only to the specific issues associated with a truth commission for Northern Ireland, but for the wider questions of how to deal with the divided past. The British Government's suspension of the devolved administration in 2002 and the emergence of the DUP and Sinn Fein as the dominant electoral political forces were followed by a prolonged political stalemate. This context was probably an important factor in the downturn in optimism and support for a truth commission that had previously been evidenced in Cairns' research, conducted in 2001 (Cairns, 2003). In similar vein, the immediate circumstances that pertained while the survey was carried out may need also to be taken into consideration (for example, the Northern Bank robbery carried out in December 2004 and the killing of Robert McCartney in the Short Strand area of Belfast in January 2005).

All that said, the impression still remains that the need for some sort of mechanism to get at the truth of the past conflict does seem to find a resonance for many,

and very likely a majority. On the other hand, precisely how to get to the truth, what mechanisms are best suited to do so, and what might be done with it afterwards, is far less clear. Moreover, when the respondents were asked specifically whether or not there were 'better ways to deal with the past than a truth commission', 65.3 per cent agreed. People, it seems, generally want to know the truth about the conflict, they just do not wholly agree on how to get at it. Indeed as the research also found, respondents were generally more likely to agree on alternative approaches to dealing with the past (such as 'more police investigations and prosecutions', 'public apologies' and certainly 'support for victims') than with the idea of a truth commission (Lundy and McGovern, 2006: 64–67). There may be many reasons for this, but one could speculate that the relative unfamiliarity of a truth commission and what it might entail, in comparison to some of the alternatives cited above, could be an important factor. Certainly this is something that advocates of a truth commission would have to take on board in putting such a mechanism in place. The impression also emerges clearly that, whatever approach to truth recovery is pursued, people are also fairly sure that they may not get the truth at all. Indeed, a certain scepticism of political processes may be one of the dominant themes that emerges throughout, again possibly linked to the political circumstances of the day.

Yet, despite obvious, sometimes serious community divisions on a number of issues, there are also clearly grounds on which a consensus in attitudes exists. The need for independence (possibly by an international dimension), transparency and grassroots engagement in any truth recovery process are positions held in common by most. So too is the desire that, if a truth recovery mechanism were to be created, all those actively involved in the conflict should be answerable to it, whether state or non-state, republican or loyalist, politician, armed agent or even prominent social organisation. These commonalities and the principles which underpin them may provide some fruitful ground for future dialogue and exploration on how the legacy of the conflict might be satisfactorily dealt with in the context of building peace in Northern Ireland.

## Notes

1. In the March 2007 election voting patterns polarised within nationalist and unionist camps. This does not significantly distort the survey findings discussed in this article as it offers insight into attitudes towards a truth commission within the broad nationalist and unionist communities.
2. The data from the NLT survey was made publicly available online in the summer of 2005 and a Research Update summarising the findings, written by the authors, was published by ARK/NILT in 2005 (<http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>). The authors published a full research report the following year (see Lundy and McGovern, 2006).

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