

Acknowledgement, Apologies and Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland

Kieran McEvoy
February 2014

Haass Document on Acknowledgement (i)

- Sincere acknowledgements are a foundational step in the effort to contend with Northern Ireland's past.
- They constitute powerful gestures that those responsible for causing pain are prepared to accept their responsibility
- After conflict and division comes the difficult task of reconciliation.
- Such gestures, if multiplied and sustained, are apt to lighten the shadow that Northern Ireland's past casts on its present and unlock significant potential for progress toward a shared and peaceful future.

Haass Document on Acknowledgement (ii)

- Now is a time for all citizens of Northern Ireland, and the governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland, to reflect on the previous decades.
- Blame for the violence is not equally shared across society.
- The burden of the past rests most heavily on those, whether paramilitary or state actors, who acted outside the rule of law.
- The vast majority assiduously eschewed violence, yet some may have contributed to the environment within which it flourished.
- To publicly acknowledge these realities does not equate them, but all such acknowledgements will help bring about a better climate.

Haass Document on Acknowledgement (iii)

- To advance reconciliation and healing at both the individual and societal levels, acknowledgments should be more than apologies. Saying sorry is necessary but not sufficient. Full acknowledgements would include an;
 - unqualified acceptance of responsibility.
 - express an understanding of the human consequences for individuals and society.
 - and include a sincere expression of remorse for pain and injury caused.
 - Statements of regret and reconsideration are also welcome.

Haass Document on Acknowledgement (iv)

- Individuals, organisations, and governments should work together on specific statements of acknowledgment to discuss language, timing and other matters privately before public statements are made to ensure that such acknowledgements are carried out in ways that contribute positively to healing and reconciliation.
- We (the signatories) commit to working to build an environment in which full and constructive acknowledgements, whether individual or corporate, can be expressed and can build on one another.
- This process should aim to be as inclusive and as complete as possible, involving all those who played roles in the conflict.
- We hope that statements of acknowledgment by leaders will encourage others to make similar statements or gestures of acknowledgment, including participating information recovery.

Acknowledgement : Major Themes from International Context (i)

- A recognition of a hurt deliberately or negligently inflicted
- An admission of individual, organisational or collective responsibility for that hurt
- An acceptance of the humanity of the 'other'
- A public commitment to non-recurrence

Acknowledgement : Major themes from International Context (ii)

- Relationship between acknowledgement and truth recovery
- Relationship between acknowledgement and reconciliation
- Relationship between acknowledgement and memorialisation
- Relationship between acknowledgement and apologies

Apologies

- Apologies can be poorly or well drafted, delivered and received
- Some examples from Northern Ireland
- Workshop participants can decide for themselves which appear more effective, sincere etc and why.

Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) Ceasefire Statement 13 October 1004

“In all sincerity, we offer to the loved ones of all innocent victims over the past twenty years, abject and true remorse. No words of ours will compensate for the intolerable suffering they have undergone during the conflict.”

IRA Statement 6 April 2002 (just before the 30th anniversary of Bloody Friday)

‘While it was not our intention to injure or kill non-combatants, the reality is that on this and on a number of other occasions, that was the consequence of our actions. It is therefore appropriate on the anniversary of this tragic event, that we address all of the deaths and injuries of non-combatants caused by us. We offer our sincere apologies and condolences to their families. There have been fatalities amongst combatants on all sides. We also acknowledge the grief and pain of their relatives’.

INLA Ceasefire

22 August 1998

“We acknowledge and admit faults and grievous errors in our prosecution of the war. Innocent people were and injured and at times our actions as a liberation army fell far short of what they should have been. For this we as Republicans, as Socialists and as Revolutionaries do offer a sincere, heartfelt and genuine apology. It was never our intention, desire or wish to become embroiled in sectarian or internecine warfare. We accept responsibility for our part in actions that hindered the struggle. Those actions should never have happened. We have however nothing to apologise for in taking the war to the British and their Loyalist henchmen.”

Prime Minister David Cameron Response to Saville Report, 15th June 2010

“I am deeply patriotic; I never want to believe anything bad about our country; I never want to call into question the behaviour of our soldiers and our Army, which I believe to be the finest in the world. And I have seen for myself the very difficult and dangerous circumstances in which we ask our soldiers to serve. But the conclusions of this report are absolutely clear: there is no doubt; there is nothing equivocal; there are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable...But what happened should never, ever have happened. The families of those who died should not have had to live with the pain and hurt of that day, and with a lifetime of loss. Some members of our armed forces acted wrongly. The Government are ultimately responsible for the conduct of the armed forces, and for that, on behalf of the Government-indeed, on behalf of our country-I am deeply sorry.”

What is an effective apology ?

- is carefully crafted
- names the wrongs in question
- acknowledges the hurt
- accepts responsibility
- expresses regret
- promises non-repetition
- is not demanding of forgiveness,
- is delivered with suitable dignity

Other Key Issues regarding Apology

- Sequencing (when - before, during or after truth recovery)
- Delivery e.g.
- -who delivers
- 'on behalf of who',
- Choreography with other events (e.g. apologies from other actors or institutions)
- victim involvement in drafting,
- media strategy,
- public versus private