

SECURING THE PEACE

*The need for truth & reparations for
victims and survivors of the conflict in Ireland*

OCTOBER 2011



The untold stories of Relatives, Victims and Survivors



Paper presented by Relatives for Justice (RFJ) Chairperson Clara Reilly in the US during her visit of October 2011.

This paper reflects the key issues currently facing many of the families that RFJ work with and support - and was delivered as part of her engagements and at the AOH National President's Dinner where Clara was specially honoured in receiving the Sean Mac Bride Award for her voluntary work over 4 decades in championing human rights and justice issues during the conflict in the north of Ireland.

Written and produced by Clara Reilly and Mark Thompson, RFJ Director





In the entrance hallway into our offices a number of framed posters adorn the walls – these celebrate human rights, raise awareness about key campaign issues, and celebrate people who are globally synonymous with championing human and civil rights.

To the surprise of many visitors is a large picture of Albert Einstein and on reading the caption it becomes self-evident as to why it is placed there.

It reads ‘Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding.’

The absence of violence does not necessarily mean peace and for many years we had what was described as an imperfect peace. In many ways this is understandable – violence had stopped and the imperative was to ensure this was maintained.

17-years on from the first cessations of violence in the north - and 13-years on from the peace agreement - our society has been undoubtedly transformed for the better. Violence has largely been absent and the militarization of our communities comparatively is a world apart. The visible manifestations of war and all of its paraphernalia are thankfully gone.

The sharing of power by traditional political opponents, once unthinkable, is as natural a thing as if it were always the case.

We have much to celebrate and be thankful for.

Many observers of Irish affairs could be forgiven in believing that this somehow signifies that everything has been resolved and that the focus, the concentration once given, is no longer required. This could not be further from the reality.

I want to take the time to explain to you this evening, from the perspective of those of us supporting the bereaved and injured of the conflict, those of us seeking truth, justice and promoting human rights, that the transformation of our society has yet to be completed and that now the danger in letting your guard down could well mean that significant advancements could suffer.

Threats from Dissidents & the Military Intelligence Community

There are those who would like to bring us all back to dark days – the recent killings of British soldiers and PSNI officers have no place in our society and must be condemned. Conflict, abuse and violence have no place and should be opposed.

So too must those within the system that day and daily agitate against the gains made – the British spooks that still seek to recruit young people as informers within dissident groupings – spooks that have been exposed in directing dissident bombing operations during a time of peace - the Special Branch members that transferred into the PSNI and continue their need to prevent the truth about the past – their resentment about the changing nature and structures of power and of who is in power and driving that change.

These securocrats, as they were commonly referred to, present a danger to progressive, positive change – a change based upon human rights, justice, equality and truth – and they still exist within the system in the north and they have power too.

Policing & Plastic Bullets

We have a new police service and people have taken the political risks in embracing that service. However, this cannot be a blank cheque.

The PSNI still use plastic bullets as weapon of first resort – they still use force when required - they have introduced Tasers and used Tasers.

This year, in a period of just a few weeks, the PSNI fired 350 plastic bullets during ‘disturbances’ some relating to the forcing through of Orange marches. I use the word ‘disturbances’ carefully as these were in some instances the result of the use of heavy-handed tactics and of plastic bullets in the first instance by the PSNI.

The legacy of plastic bullets is ingrained within the nationalist psyche as part of the nationalist nightmare within the northern state.

RFJ support the families of people & children injured, disfigured and killed as a result of the use of plastic bullets.

I am the founding Chairperson of the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets (UCAPB) – I have at first hand witnessed their use - I witnessed the killing of 13 year-old Brian Stewart in Turf Lodge on October 4th 1976. Brian being buried on what would have been his 14th Birthday.

The Patten Commission on Policing recommended plastic bullets be replaced with a safer alternative - the British replaced them with an updated and more deadly version that has continued to cause extensive injuries especially to children. This ran contrary to the intended spirit of Patten.

Thankfully no one has been killed - yet. It is not good enough that plastic bullets are still being used. I do not have to spell out the civil and political consequences should someone - some child – receive a fatal injury. It’s in interest of everyone that they be immediately abolished.

The United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) & Committee on the Rights to the Child, both of whom have met with RFJ, have condemned the use of plastic bullets.

Legacy Inquests - Disclosures & Legal Aid

We also work with families still awaiting inquests into the killings of their loved ones – many involving killings by the RUC, the British army, the SAS, and in instances involving collusion. Killings that in some cases stretch back over 30 years and involved a shoot-to-kill policy by RUC.

At preliminary inquest hearings Coroners have ruled that the PSNI, who retain jurisdiction and material concerning all matters relating to the old RUC including documents regarding the planning, resourcing and sanctioning of acts of shoot-to-kill and about collusion, hand over this material to the courts.

These include the Stalker/Sampson Reports and will in the case of Gerard Slane, whose family supported by RFJ was recently granted a fresh inquest, also seek the Stevens Enquiry Reports into collusion.

The facts are that the current Chief Constable Matt Baggott, as did his predecessor Sir Hugh Orde, refused to fully cooperate and comply with Coroners decisions. Instead they have sought to challenge the Coroner regarding orders to disclose information – why and what do they fear having been in possession of these files for years?

Why in the current political environment and relative peace are the PSNI seeking so vigorously to defend the RUC? The Belfast Telegraph, a unionist broadsheet, editorialized on this matter saying that the PSNI were in danger of visiting the sins of the old RUC onto the PSNI. I happen to agree.

A key obstacle for families facing inquests into the killings of their loved ones - and there are approximately 44 outstanding inquests related to the conflict - is legal aid.

Families are not afforded legal aid as a right and given the very complex set of legal issues are somehow expected to be able to deal within a Coroners Court with all of these legal issues and the trauma it reawakens. That is apart from issues of disclosure and the separate legal battles arising thereof.

This occurs whilst at the same time the British MoD and the PSNI have a full complement of lawyers, including junior and senior counsel, and expert witnesses all paid for from the public purse – the taxpayers – essentially the relatives of those that these same institutions killed in the first instance.

All inquests now must operate under the European Convention on Human Rights Article 2 obligations resulting from RFJ, lawyers and the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) assisting and supporting families to successfully take their cases outside of the jurisdiction to the European Court in Strasburg, where the British government was found to be in violation of the investigative mechanisms used to investigate controversial killings involving collusion and shoot-to-kill.

So whilst the new Minister for Policing and Justice slashes the legal aid budget - whilst families are denied adequate resources to be legally represented - and when those lawyers who in these circumstances have decided to act pro-bono for families are publicly undermined and attacked the tactics become clear - undermining the integrity of lawyers and removing the resources is the new twin-track approach – that is in addition to the stop start nature

of the process being constantly interrupted by the separate tactic of challenge and delay to decisions made by the Coroner from the PSNI.

Many of you will think of how Pat Finucane and Rosemary were publicly vilified prior to their killings – and I am not saying that the situation is directly comparable but the strategy is quite similar and proportionate to the changing times.

Historic Cases - the need for a proper Independent Truth Recovery

As this goes on the PSNI's Historical Enquiries Team (HET) are promoted as the vehicle for dealing with legacy cases and oftentimes also turn up at inquests seeking to establish the right to investigate – again I use the term investigate liberally at best in respect to the HET.

The HET are the PSNI – they are not independent - they will not deliver the truth concerning collusion or state violence or the thematic way it was vigorously pursued by successive British governments in the north.

The HET comprises of former serving officers from within the RUC and the British army. At its core is an internal mechanism known as the Financial Monitoring Group (FMG). This determines how cases will be handled – not surprisingly this involves former members of RUC Special Branch, the NIO, and the MoD.

Nothing of controversy – that is to say past actions of the British Intelligence Services or Special Branch, the dirty war they oversaw and directed, will emerge. This is about control and management with slick PR.

The Police Ombudsman - External Interference & Current Failings

Additionally the office of the Police Ombudsman - set-up to investigate allegations of police wrongdoing, including obtaining under Nuala O'Loan the former Police Ombudsman, the powers to retrospectively conduct investigations - has under its current head, Al Hutchinson, failed families in a number of investigations into very serious incidents including the bombing of McGurk's Bar which claimed 15 lives and the Loughinisland massacre which claimed 6 lives. Loyalists injured numerous others in both these attacks.

Recent reports, conducted externally into the Office of the Police ombudsman, have found that some senior staff within the office have tampered and interfered with the above and other investigations where collusion exists.

This has resulted in the RUC getting a clean bill of health despite irrefutable acts of collusion, including the involvement of RUC agents in atrocities, existing prior to bereaved families even lodging complaints with the Police Ombudsman.

In Loughinisland it was established that one agent involved in the killings received, in an unrelated case, a Royal prerogative of Mercy exercised to the court during his trial by the

former British Secretary of State the late Mo Mowlam MP. The Police Ombudsman refused to investigate this part of the complaint.

It was also established that the NIO had been interfering with the process of investigations by the Ombudsman's office – the new Dept. of Justice (DOJ) that David Ford heads up as Minister includes people with responsibility for policing and security who simply transferred from the NIO to the DOJ. These are the very people who interfered.

This tells us very clearly that the past – what happened in that past with regards to the state and its actions - the RUC, British army and the loyalists - was indeed policy. Why otherwise would they invest so much in frustrating investigations, preventing the truth from emerging and damaging those who were intent on seeking that truth?

This was the case when the Chief Executive of the Office of the Police Ombudsman Sam Pollock, who sought to challenge that interference, was forced to publicly resign and whose resignation led to these recent revelations about external interference.

The overall Director of investigations within the Police Ombudsman's office, a former British police officer, is a close associate of a senior member of RUC Special Branch himself the subject of scrutiny by the Ombudsman – needless to say this same individual has evaded culpability. He has since resigned from the PSNI, and is now at the heart of the PSNI as a 'consultant' having taken his huge severance package under Patten.

The previous Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan conducted an extensive investigation into a series of killings by loyalists in north Belfast. Entitled Operation Ballast this took several years and was halted for a significant period due to the NIO withholding funding seeking to frustrate the investigation.

However, the report was concluded and revealed that a key agent run by Special Branch was involved in a number of murders, and was not only protected from prosecution by his police handlers, but also paid to the tune of £80,000.

The report, Operation Ballast, was presented to the PSNI for further investigation. The PSNI passed this onto the HET to trundle along with which was unsatisfactory to say the least. Under public, and international scrutiny given the unprecedented public and media attention, and the determination of families, the HET made a number of arrests of loyalists.

This appeared to be perfunctory - that is until two loyalists decided – determined - to reveal all including further implicating the agent at the heart of Nuala O'Loan's report including other agents within the UVF. Currently another very senior loyalist within the UVF is also preparing to reveal all.

Tactical changes mid-stream aimed at keeping a lid on collusion

The reality is that this threw a further spanner in the works for the Special Branch handlers

who were perfectly aware of all these actions at every step and thus are also culpable.

It is also worth mentioning that some of the most senior officers within the overall command structure of the RUC at the time are but a few steps away from these same handlers. Protecting them is imperative from the British state's position in terms of ensuring that a domino effect of blame and responsibility is averted. For them impunity is essential. For us accountability is essential.

So the case is rescued from the HET and enter quite quickly a new team of PSNI officers from Crime Operations of C2 & C3, formerly the Special Branch, and a new set of circumstances which seeks to placate the families by throwing some of the loyalists to the wolves - sort to speak - whilst absent in the dock are the very people within the powers that be who are as equally, if not more, responsible.

That process - described as the Serious Crime and Police Act (SOPA) - permits those providing evidence to receive a deal. And in the midst of this the real concern is that the Police Ombudsman, who has responsibility for investigating the Special Branch handlers and the information arising, has not advanced the matter at all. Nor have the investigators sought to focus on the role of agent handlers within Special Branch.

The PSNI Chief Constable cites the reasoning for taking this case off the HET as being that they, that is the HET, lack the necessary skills, training, and that they are part-time and thus unable to examine properly complex cases of this nature. What then of the numerous cases of collusion that are much more complex? – The arming of loyalists – the role of Brian Nelson?

So by this admission if the HET are not up to scratch why then are hundreds of killings involving collusion and state violence being handled by them?

And as a consequence of revelations about the office of the Police Ombudsman all historic investigations have been suspended meaning that families are again let down.

So as we devolve justice the irony is that we go back some three decades in terms of permitting a supergrass system – which is essentially the SOPA process concerning the current trial of a number of loyalists. However, the authorities in the north, the British, will argue that this is not a supergrass trial.

So as the process of management and control continues by the British state – the struggle for truth also continues by families and RFJ.

A Truth Commission

And at the time of drafting this speech news from the Tory party conference in Britain emerges where the British Secretary for the north Owen Patterson states that there will be no truth commission and that the HET are doing a great job.

In the words of Mitchel McLaughlin of Sinn Fein this is both arrogant and contemptible to all victims of the conflict. And yet again there is no mention – no date - of an inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane. This is shameful. Though the Finucane family are scheduled to meet the British prime minister, David Cameron, in Downing Street next week. David Cameron knows what is required, a proper independent judicial inquiry free from governmental interference.

Financial Reparations, one-sided, creating further inequality and hierarchy

Finally there is the constant process of the delivery of payments to former members of the so called ‘security forces’ throughout the peace process.

On the Patten recommendations of a severance package over a billion pounds have been spent on payments to ‘retiring’ officers - a significant number have taken the settlements and then reentered the new policing service as ‘consultants’ and on ‘civilian’ duties.

Interestingly, should any of these people be involved in wrongdoing then they do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Police Ombudsman, that is if he were to do his job – this is because they are not serving officers.

For example our Director Mark Thompson received a number of death threats from loyalists a few years ago. A PSNI ‘civilian’ worker who had access to the centralized computer took Mark’s personal details and passed these onto the UVF. The civilian worker within the PSNI who did this was eventually prosecuted, as was the person who had Mark’s details along with ammunition - albeit they received very lenient sentences.

The Police Ombudsman was not permitted to examine the extent of, and of how many times this person, and/or others, had breached their use of sensitive material. The public had demanded that as a measure of confidence this be facilitated - this was rejected by the PSNI.

That said - that illustrated - ‘Gratuity Payments’ of £20 million at the last negotiations in Hillsborough where devolution was agreed, and millions of public finances being given in a plethora of specially created schemes and ex-gratia tax-free payments for former members of the ‘security forces’ and their families, creates a hierarchy and inequality that continues especially as those affected by these same forces live in economic poverty resulting from their experiences and loss. And as groups like RFJ have difficulty in sustaining funding and who have this past week lost 5 members of staff.

Truth & Reparations required

These families live not only with denial of experience, prejudice and lack of recognition and injustice but insult is added to injury when those who perpetrated the acts are financially rewarded when what is required is truth and accountable forms of justice. Reparations both symbolic by way of a proper independent truth commission and financially are required for all victims and survivors of the conflict.

It is in this overall context that the arrogance of Owen Patterson should be viewed. The British government, involved in gross systemic human rights violations, are not in a position to tell us we do not need a truth commission - they should no longer also delay on an inquiry into the killing of Pat Finucane.

Securing the Peace through Truth, Equality, Human & Civil Rights

The dangers are that if we do not build properly on the successful advancements made more widely as a result of the peace process, then the difficulties that exist, will be allowed to gather momentum and quite possibly pose a threat to what has been achieved. It certainly, and understandably, undermines confidence within key constituencies.

The way that we must build is to challenge acts that are wrong like the use of plastic bullets – we need to provide open and transparent forms of justice - we need robust investigative processes that are independent and free from external interference by those with vested interests in shielding wrongdoing on the part of the state – we need to have confidence in the Police Ombudsman – we need a proper Police Ombudsman heading up that office – we need an independent truth commission – and families bereaved in the conflict have a legal entitlement to inquests and adequate legal aid so as they are to be properly represented.

The British government has legal obligations to ensure that this occurs.

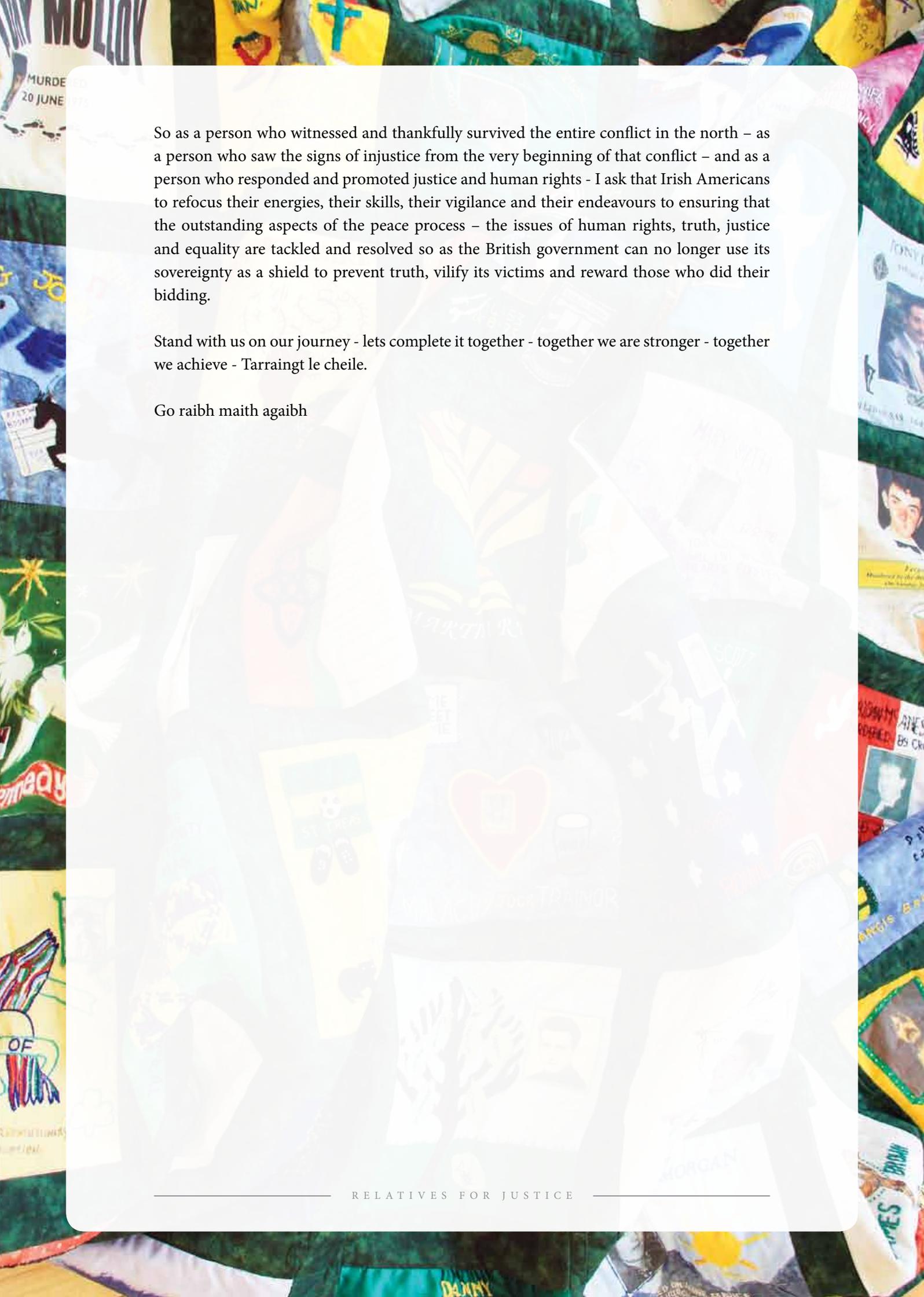
If we fail to stand up to these failings then we may possibly sow the seeds for future disharmony that could easily be translated into worse – we cannot consign future generations to the prospect of conflict – for make no mistake there are people who want to manipulate current failings for political capital and ultimately conflict.

As Albert Einstein said ‘...it is in creating understanding that we build peace...’. His words of wisdom are so apt.

We need to now create more understanding of what is urgently required in terms of truth and justice issues relating to the conflict. I say again we do need an independent truth commission. It is not up to Owen Patterson to determine what should happen.

It is precisely because of the role of the British government in the conflict, a government to which Owen Patterson is a part of, that we need an independent truth process when addressing the legacy of the conflict.

We need to transform what was once an imperfect peace to a near as can be perfect peace for those most adversely affected by the violence. Things are not perfect – of course they are better - but they could be even much better, and especially for the victims of collusion and state violence.



So as a person who witnessed and thankfully survived the entire conflict in the north – as a person who saw the signs of injustice from the very beginning of that conflict – and as a person who responded and promoted justice and human rights - I ask that Irish Americans to refocus their energies, their skills, their vigilance and their endeavours to ensuring that the outstanding aspects of the peace process – the issues of human rights, truth, justice and equality are tackled and resolved so as the British government can no longer use its sovereignty as a shield to prevent truth, vilify its victims and reward those who did their bidding.

Stand with us on our journey - lets complete it together - together we are stronger - together we achieve - Tarraingt le cheile.

Go raibh maith agaibh



ANDRÉE MURPHY

DEPUTY DIRECTOR, RELATIVES FOR JUSTICE

When the conflict began in Ireland Clara Reilly was blessed with a home and a young family around her. When the darkest of abuses began she chose to stand up for the next family, despite the vulnerability in which it placed our own - this is a courage of enormity that few can boast. Getting through the conflict with your own family in tact was challenge enough for most. Mothers standing up for other mothers' sons and daughters, no matter the threat or how serious that threat may be - with full understanding of its magnitude - places a few of those women apart in our recent history.

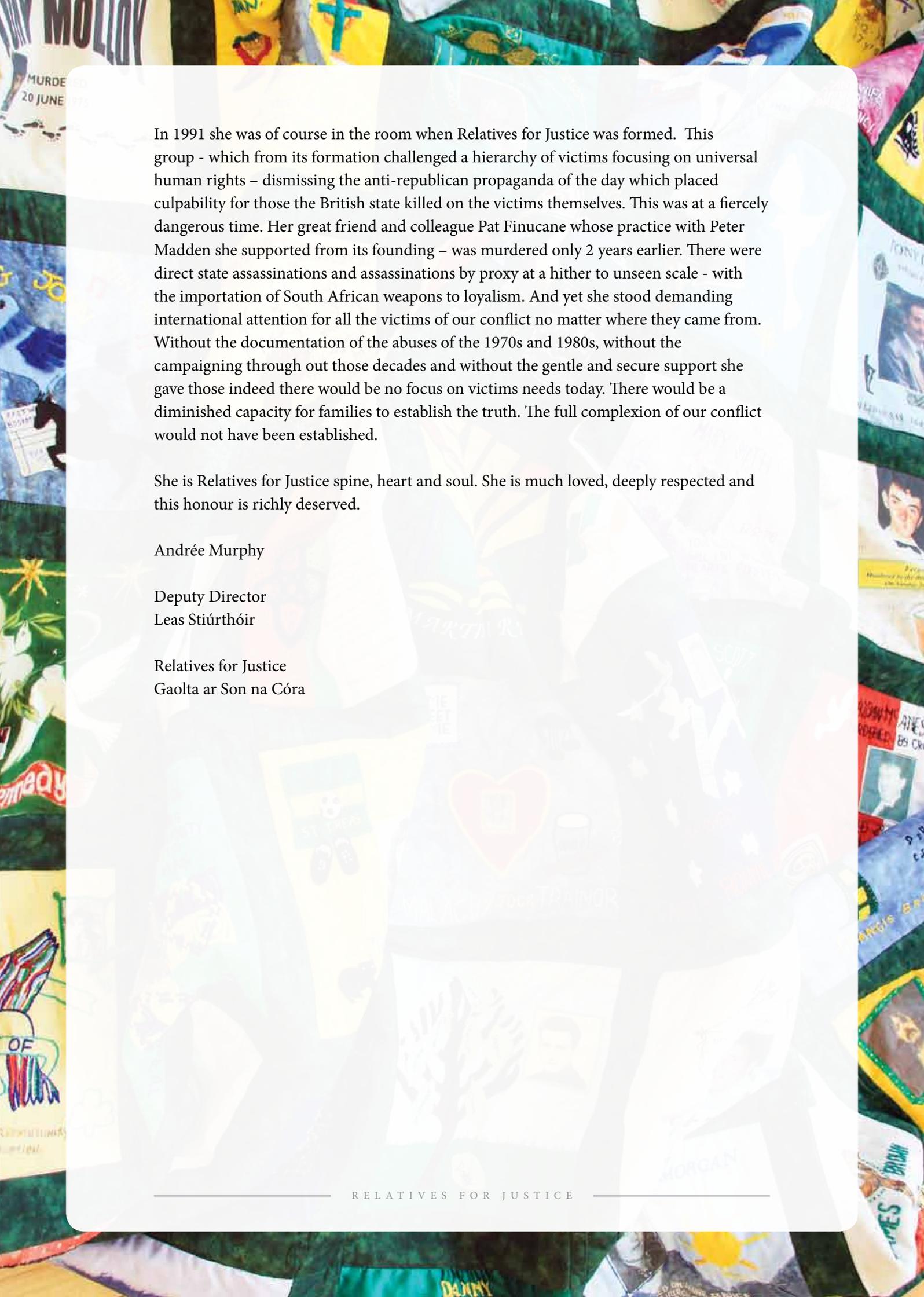
This year's recipient of the Seán McBride Award is one of the few. In the tradition of Sean McBride's own mother Maude Gonne, Clara Reilly stood up for those with no voice. Those being tortured, imprisoned without due process, being injured with no recourse and murdered with impunity Clara Reilly stood up and was counted. Regardless of the fear she felt for herself and her own young family.

With others she stood against a tide of repression and censorship and demanded that a light be shone on human rights abuses. She did it without fear or favour - challenging all abuses equally. She defended human rights and human life universally - at a time when they had lost their value in the turmoil of our recent Irish conflict.

And she did this despite all the threats and repressive measures of the British state. There are homes across Belfast and the North where people will state that when the worst of our conflict came to their door, no one else did - except Clara Reilly. She with Monsignor Raymond Murray were a support at a time when no support was available. She did this despite her own grief losing her much loved brother Jim to a British state death squad in 1981. That year she put her own trauma to one side as she travelled to the homes of others experiencing the worst of the traumas of that historic year.

Following the death of John Downes with a Plastic Bullet in 1984 she and her great friend and mentor Emma Groves (herself a mother blinded by a rubber bullet) with the other families affected by plastic bullets formed the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets. This campaign highlighted the terrible cost of these weapons on a defenceless civilian population - and what are more the injustices that surrounded these extra-judicial killings.

Together they travelled from New York to Moscow, to the very factories where they were made, to highlight the weapons of torture that they are. She fights this battle at every opportunity to this day.



In 1991 she was of course in the room when Relatives for Justice was formed. This group - which from its formation challenged a hierarchy of victims focusing on universal human rights – dismissing the anti-republican propaganda of the day which placed culpability for those the British state killed on the victims themselves. This was at a fiercely dangerous time. Her great friend and colleague Pat Finucane whose practice with Peter Madden she supported from its founding – was murdered only 2 years earlier. There were direct state assassinations and assassinations by proxy at a hitherto unseen scale - with the importation of South African weapons to loyalism. And yet she stood demanding international attention for all the victims of our conflict no matter where they came from. Without the documentation of the abuses of the 1970s and 1980s, without the campaigning through out those decades and without the gentle and secure support she gave those indeed there would be no focus on victims needs today. There would be a diminished capacity for families to establish the truth. The full complexion of our conflict would not have been established.

She is Relatives for Justice spine, heart and soul. She is much loved, deeply respected and this honour is richly deserved.

Andrée Murphy

Deputy Director
Leas Stiúrthóir

Relatives for Justice
Gaolta ar Son na Córa



GERRY ADAMS

SINN FEIN PRESIDENT

I want to congratulate Clara on receiving the AOH 2011 Sean McBride Award. This is a prestigious award hugely deserved by Clara. Clara Reilly has been a champion for justice for over four decades of activism in the north of Ireland.

As a founding member of the Association for Legal Justice in the early 1970s she gave unstintingly of her time in defence of those citizens denied basic human and civil rights in the north of Ireland.

Following the pogroms of 1969, the serious militarisation of the north by the British state, the introduction of new repressive laws and the introduction of internment Clara Reilly and a small number of human rights workers, including Leo Wilson and Fr. Brian Brady and others, worked day and night providing legal advice to families of citizens detained by the British forces.

They also played a key role in exposing the torture and brutality of the British Army and RUC toward detainees in the days after hundreds were arrested under the internment legislation.

Clara has been centrally involved in key campaigns around shoot to kill actions by the British state; demands for the right to inquests by victims families; the taking of cases to the European Court of Human Rights; policing; institutionalised collusion between British state forces and unionist paramilitaries and the use of plastic bullets by the British Army and RUC.

Despite having a young family, and receiving threats from the British state, Clara's door was always open to those in need. She travelled widely speaking out against state repression.

Her outrage at the murders and injuries, particularly on children, perpetrated by the use of rubber and plastic bullets took her to Dublin, London, Washington and beyond in her fight to expose brutal reality of these deadly weapons.

Through her work with the Relatives for Justice she has ably demonstrated the hypocrisy and double standards of the "Hierarchy of Victims" attitude of the British government and its allies.

Clara's clear and unequivocal demand for equal treatment for the victims and families bereaved by the killings of their relatives by the British Army ,the RUC and their agents and surrogates has been heard in Ireland and around the world.



COLLEEN REILLY

Clara Reilly was born and raised in the St. James district of West Belfast, the eldest daughter of 12 children born into the proud Irish family of James and Bridget Burns. She is the wife of Joe Reilly, the mother of 6 children, 18 grandchildren, and 1 great-grand child. But to us, her children, she is our teacher, our advisor, our cook, our coach, our babysitter, our role model, our inspiration, our rock; the glue that holds our family together.

When we reminisce about the good old days and not-so-good old days we find ourselves in awe of our mother's stamina, courage, sacrifice, and dedication as she balanced a house full of demanding kids, two jobs outside the home, and an arduous battle for human rights and justice in the British-occupied North of Ireland.

Our Mother's crusade began in the early 1970's, when she grew increasingly alarmed over the injustices perpetrated by the British Army and RUC, who brutalized working-class Catholics daily in the North of Ireland. She believed strongly that discrimination should be confronted and eradicated, especially discrimination committed by forces disguised as "law and order." Soon she became actively involved in the Association for Legal Justice (ALJ), where she documented, from her kitchen table, cases of torture and unlawful imprisonment of innocent people. As word spread in the area about Clara's volunteer work with the ALJ, our home quickly became the first port of call for distressed families whose loved ones had been savagely beaten and then hauled off to undisclosed locations. Our mother would offer a cup of tea and comforting words to the families, before taking their statements and commencing her barrage of telephone calls to all the British barracks in an attempt to locate the missing person. She was relentless in her pursuit – and the Brits quickly learned she would not cease until she had obtained accurate information on the victims.

(Note: Castlereagh was one of the barracks that Clara had frequent dealings with. This barracks was notorious for its atrocious methods of interrogation and in 1976 was found guilty of degrading and inhuman treatment by The European Court of Human Rights). The RUC soon took note of our mother's human rights work, as they did with anyone who challenged their tactics, and they certainly did not appreciate her persistence and her knowledge of British law. Her goal was to obtain information on detainees as well as to send a clear message that the community would not tolerate the violation of their human rights and the perversion of law. Our Mother phoned the barracks so often the RUC started to recognize her voice before she even introduced herself. On a few occasions she shamelessly had her daughter make the call anonymously, in her best attempt at a proper English accent.....Hey, desperate times called for desperate measures.



In 1972 we lived in Turf Lodge, West Belfast. There had been a lot of tension in the area and more so on one particular day when the British Paratroopers, clad in full combat uniform, were patrolling the area with their tanks and guns, harassing and arresting residents. When our mother heard screams from one of our neighbors as the soldiers set upon their 14-year-old son, punching him and kicking him with their steel-toed boots, she ran to the scene in an attempt to defuse the situation. She quickly realized these Paratroopers were ruthless, dangerous thugs who showed no respect to human beings, least of all to Catholics. The soldiers spouted vulgarity towards the women. Witnessing their depravity, the ladies retorted with slogans of resistance. Suddenly, and without provocation, a soldier aimed his weapon toward the women and fired a rubber bullet. (Note: The British army murdered 3 Catholics with rubber bullets before they upgraded to their “safer” plastic bullet which has claimed the lives of 17 people, 9 of them children.) One neighbor quickly assessed the situation and reported that no one was hit. As soon as the Brits fled the street Mom collapsed to the ground. She had in fact been struck by the bullet! Thankfully she did not sustain any permanent physical injuries. When questioned afterward as to why she did not react immediately to being wounded, Clara answered, “I wouldn’t give those British bastards the pleasure of knowing they had shot another Irish person.”

By 1973, four of Clara’s brothers were interned in Long Kesh and served years behind bars without benefit of a court trial, a basic legal right. One brother, Kevin, who had not yet been scooped, fled to the Free State for fear he would be the next victim of British tyranny in the Nationalist community. It was years before Kevin could return to the North to be with his family. This was a difficult time for Clara and her family.

In 1974 Clara’s husband Joe intervened when he saw a young lad being brutally assaulted by the British Army. Joe was subsequently beaten and arrested. He was sentenced to 9 months imprisonment for this incident. Six of those months were served in solitary confinement, a harsh punishment for an act of bravery. Our mother’s journey became more challenging as she struggled to maintain some semblance of normalcy in a war zone.

In 1976, on a quiet residential street in Turf Lodge, our mother witnessed the murder of 13-year-old Brian Stewart. Brian was killed by a plastic bullet. To this day, the British soldier who fired the shot has never been prosecuted for ending this innocent boy’s life. It was after Brian’s death that Clara became a founding member of the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets. Then and now, she has always believed, with every fiber of her being, that we must seek truth and justice, and has actively pursued both.

Early one morning in 1977, the Reilly family awoke to thunderous banging on their door. It was the British army’s “friendly” wake up call. The six children, whose ages ranged from 8 to 16, staggered sleepily out of bed. Our mother, who was well-versed in her legal rights, had passed some of her knowledge onto her children, including the fact that legally we



were only required to provide the soldiers with three pieces of information: our full name, where we were coming from, and where we were going to. One son answered: Joseph Reilly, bed, and hopefully back to bed.

Apparently, the soldiers had orders to arrest Kieran Reilly, who had recently turned 16 years old. (Note: In the 1970's it was common, albeit illegal, to arrest anyone over the age of 16 for a 4-hour screening process, during which the person would be questioned, interrogated, and in many cases beaten.) The soldiers, who could not pronounce the name Kieran and who thought it was a girl's name, decided to arrest the only female child in the house, 13-year-old Coleen. (Hmmm.....Coleen, Kieran -- close enough! Arrest her!) A scuffle ensued when the family envisioned the horrific possibilities of allowing a 13-year-old girl to be released into the hands of brutal thugs. Even the baker delivering his bread that morning joined in the protest. He loaded his arms with his best ammunition and proceeded to fire freshly baked Baps (Irish bread) at the soldiers. In hindsight it was pretty funny... We believe we were fed that same bread for breakfast later that morning -- Mother was also very resourceful! Finally, the soldiers abandoned their mission, without an arrest. They realized they had botched up the assignment and vowed they'd be back.

In 1981 we received another wake-up call, this time to arrest our Mother. The family braced themselves for another bread-tossing battle. But, our mother did not resist. For years she had taken statements from victims describing their brutality at the hands of the British government and now she too would experience the infamous 4-hour screening process. So, with a rifle pointed at her back, she was taken to Springfield barracks where the Brits attempted their routine interrogation techniques on her.....Fools! Didn't they know Clara had documented these techniques for years? She could predict their every move. Needless to say, the exasperated RUC soon released her. Clara, with the help of attorney Pat Finucane, subsequently took the British government to court for wrongful arrest. Both Pat and Clara sat side by side in High Court to hear the ruling: "The process of interrogation the RUC called "screening" was ILLEGAL." Clara and Pat were elated; they both punched the air in delight. Finally, a small victory for justice.

By this stage our mother had become a thorn in the sides of both the RUC and British Army. When she wasn't tending to her family and work, she was campaigning vigorously for justice and basic human rights and equality for all. We feared for her life back then and even more so after the murders of Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson.

During the early 1980's, the unemployment rate was very high in Catholic West Belfast, so it was with great delight that Clara's son Terry informed his family that he had been offered a job with the state-run Northern Ireland electricity service and that he would soon receive a confirmation letter. One Saturday morning Clara entered Terry's bedroom with the letter in hand. Terry excitedly sat up in bed and ripped it open. His joy quickly turned to dismay when he discovered he had been rejected. He was devastated. He



couldn't grasp what had happened since he had been verbally notified he had been accepted. Clara sadly explained to her son the harsh reality of discrimination and injustice. Clara fought the discrimination through legal channels. However, she was blocked by the British establishment. The Secretary of State had signed an order claiming Terry was a threat to national security. He was 16 years old and had never been in trouble with the law in his life. He was not alone. John Hume (MP) had later raised the fair employment issue in the House of Commons that outlined the discrimination toward applicants who were denied employment based on their religion or their family's views on British oppression. At this point the best our mother could do to console Terry was to encourage him to never accept second best. She inspired Terry and all her children to look at these discriminations merely as setbacks in life's many challenges. Moreover, she taught us to never accept the unacceptable, to never allow injustices to go unchallenged and to never give up hope.

Over the years our home had become an open door for many people from all over the world who were interested in learning the truth. Regrettably, we did not keep guest books of the hundreds of journalists, organizations, and concerned individuals who were welcomed to our humble pad, who received a warm bed, a traditional Irish breakfast, and an ordinary chat with an extraordinary woman.

There are many more stories we could share about our mother, but not enough ink and paper to do them justice here. Perhaps one day they will all be revealed in a book. But, for now, we hope the few memories we have imparted will give you some insight into this remarkable Mother's personal life. An average working-class woman with a not-so-average resilience, perseverance and courage, who managed to pursue her passion for truth and equality without comprising her family. They don't make too many woman of this caliber anymore.

In the words of our Mother's favorite singer, Tina Turner, she is "Simply the Best."

We are very proud and grateful to be the children of the 2011 AOH McBride award recipient, Clara Reilly, ar mathair.

Go raibh maith agaibh.
The Reilly Clan