

Attitudes Towards a Truth Commission for Northern Ireland

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Report Launch

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Introduction: The Debate on Truth Commissions, Northern Ireland and the Survey

The Four Themes:

- **Is a Truth Commission Important?**
- **Aims, Hopes and Fears?**
- **Powers and Structure?**
- **Other Ways to Deal with the Past?**

Introduction: The Debate on Truth

Commissions, Northern Ireland and the Survey

➤ Truth Commissions and Post-Conflict

Transition: The Context

➤ The NILT Survey

➤ Attitudes by Self-declared Religious and Political Affiliation

Is a Truth Commission Important?

Table 1: Is a truth commission important or unimportant for the future of Northern Ireland?

% of total and by religion	%			
	Total	Catholic	Protestant	No Religion
Very important	27	31	23	30
Fairly important	23	27	21	25
Neither	19	17	20	15
Fairly unimportant	15	14	17	14
Very unimportant	13	8	16	13
Don't know	3	3	3	3
	100	100	100	100

Is a Truth Commission Important?

Table 2: Is a truth commission important or unimportant by support for Northern Ireland's major political parties?

% of total and by major NI political party	%					
	Total	UUP	DUP	ALL	SDLP	SF
Very important	27	21	25	28	29	33
Fairly important	23	23	16	31	28	25
Neither	19	19	19	17	18	15
Fairly unimportant	15	18	18	15	15	14
Very unimportant	13	16	19	9	7	10
Don't know	3	3	3	0	3	3
	100	100	100	100	100	100

Is a Truth Commission Important?

Table 3: Is a truth commission important or unimportant for the future of Northern Ireland?

% of Total and by Age	%						
	Total	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Very important	27	34	27	30	18	25	26
Fairly important	23	31	29	19	21	22	22
Neither	19	17	20	17	22	17	18
Fairly unimportant	15	10	12	17	18	18	16
Very unimportant	13	6	10	14	16	15	13
Don't know	3	2	2	4	4	3	5
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Is a Truth Commission Important?

- Catholics were more likely than Protestants, and nationalists more likely than unionists, to feel a truth commission is important or very important.
- Overall, within each religious category and for each political party more people thought a truth commission was important or very important than not.
- Younger respondents were far more likely to feel that a truth commission was important or very important. Least likely was the 45-54 years age group.

Is a Truth Commission Important?

BUT:

- **77% of respondents had not heard of a truth commission elsewhere.**
- **The importance of the definition provided: ‘an inquiry where everyone would have to tell the truth about things to do with the “troubles”’.**

Aims, Hopes and Fears?

A truth commission would:

- 'not necessarily get to the truth':
 - 57% agreed and 26% agreed strongly
- 'help give a clean start to Northern Ireland's political future' or 'help make Northern Ireland a more peaceful and less divided society':
 - Only 27% agreed and 3% agreed strongly
- 'be just an excuse to attack the government':
 - 40% agreed and 7% strongly agreed

Aims, Hopes and Fears?

- **45% agreed and 36% agreed strongly that there are 'better things to spend money on than a truth commission'**
- **49% agreed and 16% agreed strongly that there are 'better ways to deal with the past than a truth commission'**

Aims?

- **Most popular first preference aims:**

- To get at the truth (30%)**

- To allow a line to be drawn under the past (16%)**

- To help communities get reconciled (13%)**

- To get healing and closure (13%)**

- **No other response got over 10%**

- **Differences over ‘to punish people who committed criminal offences’: DUP (20%)**

Powers and Structure

Who should be trusted to run a truth commission?

- **Around 90% did not trust any local group, body or organisation, including Governments, to run a truth commission**
- **47% would trust an 'international organisation, like the UN' to run a truth commission: Catholic 55%, 'No Religion' 48%, Protestant 41%**
- **87% felt that a 'truth commission should be an outside body independent of anyone involved in the conflict'**

Powers and Structure

Table 5: Who should be held accountable to a truth commission?

% who felt groups/organisations should be held accountable	%			
	Total	Catholic	Protestant	No Religion
British Government	71	79	67	68
Irish Government	69	71	68	66
The Army	66	79	58	65
The Police	68	80	59	68
Politicians from Northern Ireland	72	77	68	74
Loyalist Organisations	86	85	87	84
Republican Organisations	87	83	90	84
Judges	56	62	52	56
Churches	55	60	53	52
Journalists	57	61	55	55
All of These	51	55	49	51

Powers and Structure

- **Over two thirds felt that all the major groups involved in the conflict should be answerable to a truth commission**
- **Unionists less likely than nationalists to feel police and army should be accountable, but still a majority felt they should**

Powers and Structure?

Amnesties?

- **61% are opposed to amnesties, 19% are in favour**
- **71% of UUP and 78% of DUP opposed amnesties including 41% and 51% strongly**
- **54% of Sinn Fein supported amnesties including 21% strongly**

Compel Witnesses?

- **77% felt that a truth commission should have 'powers like a court to compel witnesses**

Powers and Structure?

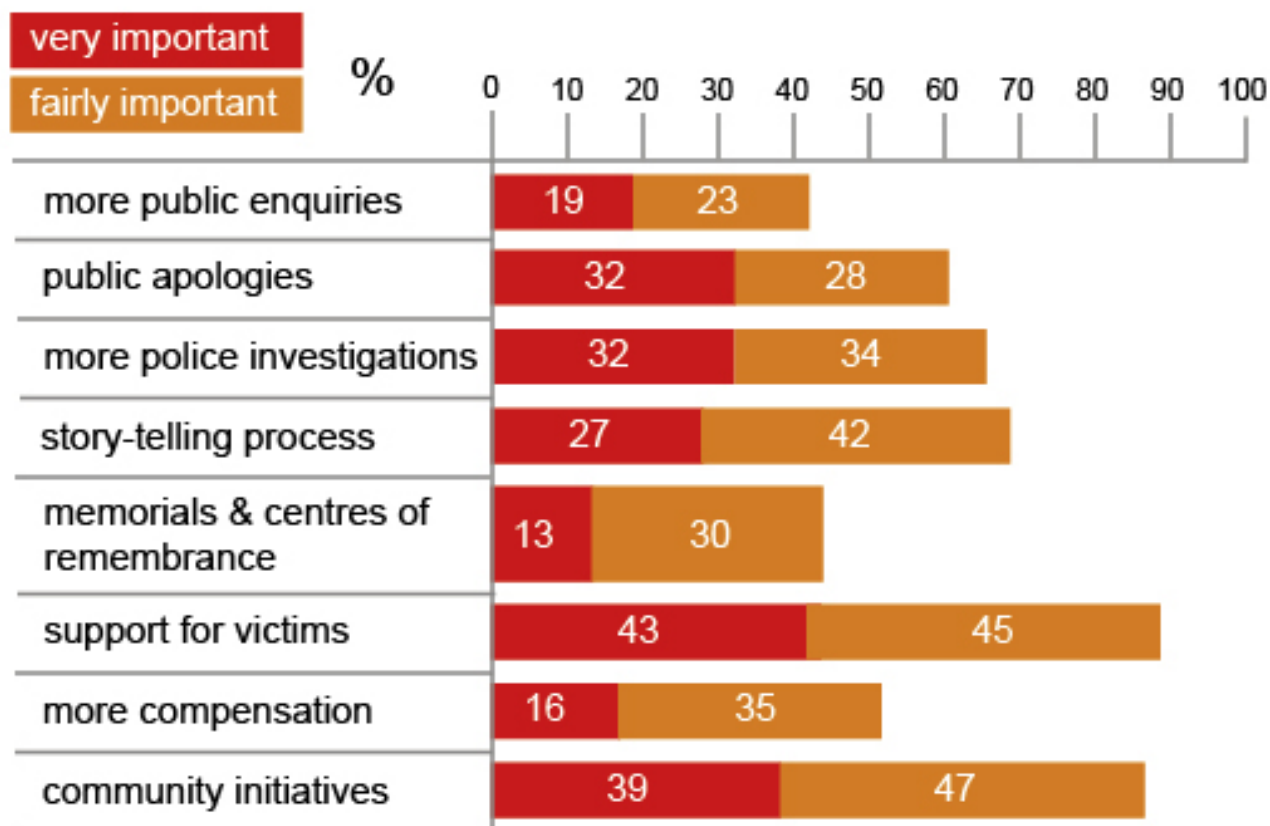
Table 6: Powers and Structure of a Truth Commission?

	%	
	Important	Unimportant
The truth commission should be held in public	82	14
Members of the truth commission should travel around and talk to people in the community	83	12
Ordinary people should get to decide who runs the truth commission	76	19
The truth commission should have powers like a court to compel people who were called to appear	77	17
The truth commission should be an outside body independent of anyone involved in the conflict	86	9

➤ **Transparency, Participatory, Independent**

Other Ways to Deal with the Past?

Figure 1: Other Ways of Dealing with the Past



Other Ways to Deal with the Past?

- Almost all other ways of dealing with the past were more favoured than a truth commission
- The most popular were 'Support for Victims' (88%), 'Community Initiatives' (86%), 'Story-telling Process' (69%) and 'More Police Investigations' (66%)
- 56% of Catholics are in favour of 'More Public Inquiries' (including 28% strongly) as opposed to 32% of Protestants
- The least favoured option was 'Memorials and Centres of Remembrance' (43%)

Key Points

More people than not think a truth commission is important

Caveats:

65% think there are better ways to deal with the past

84% think it might not get to the truth

77% do not have knowledge of a truth commission elsewhere

Did people say yes to 'truth' or to a truth commission?

Key Points

Getting the truth is a key aim, but what should the truth lead to?

Consensus on importance of impartiality, independence and transparency

Lack of trust and political pessimism

Political divisions are most obvious in relation to amnesties, inquiries, prosecutions and cost

Differences but grounds for agreement?