

WARNING: Former US special envoy to Northern Ireland Mick Mulvaney said an amnesty 'will not draw a line under the Troubles'



A case of quite literally getting away with murder

MICK Mulvaney, the former US envoy to Northern Ireland, has urged the UK government to avoid the mistakes the US made in understanding its troubled history since the American Civil War.

"My country is still wrestling with having, in many ways, ignored issues of race, slavery, reconstruction, segregation and the like from our past," he said.

"That is in large part because what were once facts, known and provable to and by living people, have morphed into mythology. And myths have little room for facts.

"People in Northern Ireland know an amnesty will not draw a line under the Troubles. It will simply lock them in a box. For now. Sooner or later, they will find their way out.

"When they do, they will no longer be real people or real events. They will be the stuff of legend. People fight over their legends. And facts are weak against them."

It was best summed up in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

Ransom Stoddard: "You're not going to use the story, Mr Scott?" Maxwell Scott: "No, sir. This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Or, putting that another way, when fiction has morphed into fact, print the fiction as fact. It usually suits somebody's interest.

In Stoddard's case he built a long political career on a lie: the lie being he had shot and killed a notorious outlaw, Liberty Valance. And even when he tried to set the record straight in a lengthy interview and give credit to the person who had killed Valance, the editor wasn't interested.

I think it was the legendary film critic Pauline Kael who noted, "Trying to unpick a legend always leads to trouble."

Which ties in with something else Mulvaney said: "This amnesty will make things easier for politicians, for sure. And it arguably may be easier for the citizenry. But only for today. It will inevitably make things harder for the generations to come."

Aye, there's the rub. The only

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people who could possibly benefit from it are those who fear the emergence of evidence which links them to one or more brutalities.

It is a case, quite literally, of getting away with murder. Getting away with bombing. Getting away with terrorism. Getting away with leaving someone paralysed for decades. Getting away with ruining lives. Getting away with condemning widows, widowers, sons, daughters, and entire families to relentless headache. Getting away, full stop.

I know the chances of many of these people being held to account are already extremely limited. But as my friend Ann Travers responded to the news of the amnesty: "I would find myself apologising to my sister and my dad in my head. But this is extinguishing the very faint hope left. For the prime minister to say that changing the law will 'draw a line' is grossly insulting."

Ann is, of course, correct. It is monstrous that a government should even consider offering an amnesty to those – irrespective of whether they were paramilitaries or security

forces – who believed they were entitled to be judge, jury and executioner.

There is no amnesty for grief. No amnesty for never-ending pain. No amnesty to replace the empty chair or eradicate memories.

Brandon Lewis and Boris Johnson should be ashamed of themselves. But they won't be. They probably won't even give it a second thought.

But what an amnesty does do, though, is allow the rewriting of history and the reshaping of narratives to bolster particular agendas.

Aye, there's another rub. The absence of truth, the absence of an agreed narrative, will simply allow the enmities and divisions to fester for another few generations. And it won't matter if those new generations are in Northern Ireland or a united Ireland.

If peace doesn't begin and end in truth it will neither take root nor survive.

If republican and loyalist paramilitaries, security forces, political parties, governments, and community groups are allowed to invent and promote their own competing, contradictory versions of history, then don't be surprised if reconciliation will always be impossible.

If a truth process doesn't underpin an amnesty, then don't be surprised if supposedly former enemies remain enemies and continue to manufacture new battles.

As Mulvaney concludes: "There is an opportunity to address the violence of the Troubles while the people who lived it are still able to stand up in public and talk about it. Still able to write it down. Still able to have their say, and their day."

"And that goes for everyone: veterans, loyalist paramilitaries, IRA members, and the victims on all sides."

"There is a chance to agree on what actually happened. But that chance will not continue for ever."

An amnesty closes down the chance for ever. And despite what some say in public, I suspect many of them will be glad to avail of it – for entirely the wrong and selfish reasons.

ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 20 1921

Specials Indicted

THE adjourned inquiry into the death of Mary McGowan (13) who was fatally wounded at Derby Street, Falls Road on Sunday, July 10th was resumed by the City Coroner.

District Inspector Dignan (RIC) read the deposition of Mr Frank Harkin [Nationalist politician] in which he stated that on Sunday, 10th, at 4.30 p.m. he was in Derby Street and saw the deceased standing at her own door.

When her mother came to take her in three shots rang out from a motor lorry of Specials which was stationary in Ross Street and Mrs McGowan and the deceased fell as the result of gunshot wounds received.

Examined by Mr B Campbell – Did you see a lorry full of police in Ross Street? – Yes.

At that time were there any people in Ross Street? – Not a sinner.

Before the appearance of the police in Ross Street did you hear any firing? – No, not for half an hour before that.

As soon as they turned into Ross Street, did they do anything? – Yes. The little girl that was killed looked up at the car and for five minutes nothing unusual occurred. Then suddenly there was a burst of fire from the car and the little girl fell. Her mother was also shot.

To Mr Harkin: Was there any necessity for firing down that street? – Absolutely none at all.

At the time of the shooting were houses actually being burned by incendiaries in Norfolk Street and Cupar Street – Yes, two hundred yards from where the lories were.

What was the religious persuasion of the people whose homes were burned? – They were all Catholics.

And these constables were then in Ross Street? – Yes, and fired deliberately at the little girl.

Head Constable Pakenham said he was in charge of the Specials. In Ross Street there was firing going on by both police and civilians.

Were there houses burned in Cupar Street? – There were, unfortunately.

A juror: You would not swear that this girl was not killed by your men? – Oh no. I would not swear that and no matter how the little girl was killed, I am very sorry for her.

The jury found that Mary McGowan, 16 Derby Street, aged 13 years, 'died of a gunshot wound in the thigh, the result of being fired at by the Special Constabulary. We think in the interests of peace the Special Constabulary should not be allowed into a locality occupied by people of an opposite denomination.'

(Incidents such as the unprovoked killing of little Mary McGowan by Specials in an armoured car convinced nationalists of the unacceptability of this deeply sectarian force.)

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