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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Northern Ireland's 2016: Approaching the contested commemoration of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme

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Executive Summary

- Commemoration of historical events has important current political relevance in Northern Ireland where contested events from the past have the potential to both upset and enhance community relations.
- A significant body of academic research on historic and modern commemoration in Northern Ireland exists and academic researchers have expertise to offer in assisting policy-makers and practitioners.
- Policy on commemorative events can draw upon the expertise of a wide range of disciplines, including history, political science, anthropology, sociology, literature and drama, geography and education.
- A range of best-practice guidelines for dealing with contested commemoration in Northern Ireland exists to benefit those charged with organising commemorative events.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2015-16

Background: Northern Ireland's 2016

The centenaries of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme will be commemorated in Northern Ireland in 2016. These two events have important historical and political resonance with the nationalist and unionist communities respectively. The significance of such anniversaries is recognised in the Northern Ireland Executive's community relations strategy document, *Together: Building a United Community*:

'The decade we have just entered will include a number of potentially sensitive anniversaries which we can-not ignore within the context of this Strategy. The events of our past will inevitably have economic and social impacts for us now and the way in which these events are marked will also have a significant influence on our continued journey towards a united community.'

The Research Network, 'Northern Ireland's 2016: Approaching the Contested Commemoration of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme', based at Queen's University and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Republic of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, brought together a wide range of academics, practitioners and policy-makers with an interest in commemoration to suggest possible approaches to the commemoration of these events.

Why is understanding Commemoration Important?

Previous commemorations of controversial historical events in Northern Ireland had a significant political impact, especially the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising and the Somme in 1966 which are viewed as having impacted upon the emergence of the Troubles. Academic research explains and creates a greater understanding of the symbolic significance of these events to the different communities. Research on past commemorations highlights lessons that can be learned to facilitate the holding of future commemorative events in a more positive atmosphere.

The unofficial commemoration of the Easter Rising in Northern Ireland in 1966 by a broad range of nationalist organisations is seen as a significant event in the timeline that led to the outbreak of inter-communal violence in 1969. It highlighted a rejuvenation of republicanism, which led in turn to fears within unionism that the

state was under threat. The backlash against the unionist government of Terence O'Neill, which was seen as too tolerant of unofficial republican commemorative plans, was led by the Reverend Ian Paisley, whose political profile was greatly enhanced and who emerged from 1966 as one of the principal critics and opponents of O'Neill.

The Battle of the Somme provided a key moment for the Unionist narrative of sacrifice for Britain but in 1966 it took on more complex relationship to the State when a new group termed the Ulster Volunteer Force claimed the mantle those that fought in 1916. This is one of many examples of the way in which historical commemoration is used for explicitly political purposes in Northern Ireland.

Commemoration and Politics

We are all capable of remembering historical events that we consider important. Historians write books and discuss the relationship with past events and the present. However, to make a public expression of that 'remembering' is effectively to make a statement about who we are, a statement of identity. In the decade of centenaries the events chosen are very particularly designed to tell predominantly national stories. In this sense commemoration *is* politics. As such, commemoration is about who we are and, as such, what we want in the future.

Key to our political world are, what Benedict Anderson called, 'imagined communities', large groups of people who are taught to feel bonded (and bounded) to the idea of a nation. Actually these groups are so politically diverse that you will struggle to find anything that can be said to be consistently held in common except a particular view of the past. This view of the past needs to be constructed and reconstructed. That is where commemoration comes in. What is more powerful than standing in 'communion' with those (usually men) who, we are reassured, dies for us? As such, commemoration plays an important role in social cohesion. Commemorative practice of one form or another is part of most ethnic and national groups around the world.

Northern Ireland has distinctive ethno-political divisions structured by conflicting historical narratives. As a consequence of this commemoration that for one group provides cohesion is, within our society, potential

divisive. And since many of these commemorations involve loss and sacrifice they are highly emotive events. A commemoration may be an effective reminder of painful conflicts of the past but it can also, and has, provided a call to arms. David Reiff in his powerful polemic *Against Remembrance* reminds us that ‘over again, we have been confronted by the reality that nothing is more socially uncontrollable and, hence, more dangerously politically than a people who believe themselves victims’ (p.102). George Orwell in *1984* famously suggested “Those who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future.”

This raises serious questions about the way we conduct commemorative practices. It is more than just knowing ‘our’ history, it is also a claim to a political identity premised on sacrifice.

De-commemoration

Recent research on the idea of ‘de-commemoration’ raises important questions about how to deal with the by-products of commemoration, such as newly-erected monuments which may in time become controversial or no longer be considered suitable for display. Unofficial ‘de-commemoration’ can include acts of vandalism, consciously politically motivated or otherwise. Research on de-commemoration raises important questions about the legacy of commemoration that can help practitioners and policy-makers identify potential pitfalls involved in some of their plans.

Recommendations

Apply the findings of academic research

The findings of academic research summarised above highlight a number of potential problems that could arise from forthcoming commemorations in 2016, including: the potential for furthering political and sectarian divisions; the appropriation of commemorative events for political purposes; and the potential for a problematic legacy for commemorative relics. Research conducted by academics on past commemorations can help inform policy makers and practitioners about the potential benefits and pitfalls associated with planning and organising commemorative events.

A multi-disciplinary approach

Effective commemoration can draw upon expertise from a variety of fields. Historians' focus on the events as they happened and in the wider context of the time helps to eliminate many of the myths that have built up around them subsequently. Anthropologists and sociologists reflect upon the significance of commemorative displays and rituals in contemporary society, while political scientists can gauge their impact on politics. Literature and drama offer a potentially less contentious and more accessible space in which to explore the past through writings from the period, modern works that represent the past in literature and poetry, and visual performance which has the power to bring events of the past to life for audiences of varying ages and abilities. A broader cultural approach to commemoration also addresses the NI Executive's desire to use culture and the arts to improve community relations and 'encourage cultural celebration and exploration for cultures and identities.'

Employ existing best practice guidelines

A number of bodies tasked with presenting aspects of Northern Ireland's contested past to the public have produced principles governing heritage practices and commemoration that can form an effective basis for those organising commemorative events, including the 'Limavady Declaration', produced in September 2013 by the museum and heritage sector, and the Community Relations Council and Heritage Lottery Fund 'Principles for Commemoration'.

Limavady Declaration

- Embody and demonstrate respect to everyone involved;
- Make the engagement of participants in transformative experience central to heritage philosophy and practice;
- Use, recognise and name all expertise equally to ensure universal participation;
- Ensure that the motivation and outcome of heritage practice is to do good with the widest section of society.

[Source: MINOM/Causeway Museum Service, *Heritage Practice in Contested Spaces* (2013)]

CRC/HLF Principles

1. Start from the historical facts;
2. Recognise the implications and consequences of what happened;
3. Understand that different perceptions and interpretations exist; and
4. Show how events and activities can deepen understanding of the period.

All to be seen in the context of an 'inclusive and accepting society'.

Conclusion: After 2016

The research project concluded that the 2016 commemorations would be less divisive than those to follow during the remainder of the Decade of Centenaries, especially between 2020 and 2023. These years will see the centenaries of intense inter-communal violence in Lisburn and Belfast, sectarian killings by the police and IRA that still resonate strongly today in the communities affected, the partition of Ireland and the creation of Northern Ireland. All of this will occur within the wider context of the fiftieth anniversary of the Troubles and the ongoing efforts to deal with the legacy of the past through the *Stormont House Agreement* and *A Fresh Start*.

Adopting some of the strategies outlined in this paper can help to create an understanding of the nature and significance of commemoration and establish frameworks in which commemoration can be approached in a mature and responsible way that will assist in the task of commemorating these more contentious events and of dealing with the legacy of the past in general.

Key sources

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