

An Open Letter to the Families of the Palestinian Martyrs

Tony Doherty

My name is Tony Doherty. I am the second eldest son of Patrick Doherty who was shot dead by British army paratroopers, along with 12 other civil rights marchers on the streets of Derry, Northern Ireland on 30 January 1972. The massacre is referred to historically as Bloody Sunday. Almost 30 years since the killings on Bloody Sunday, a Tribunal of Inquiry, commissioned by the British Government, is currently investigating the terrible events of that day.

I am writing to you, the families of the 13 Palestinian men and boys killed in Israel in October 2000, in order that you will somehow take heart and learn from our experiences in trying to find truth and justice here in Ireland regarding the deaths of our loved ones. The historical comparisons between Palestine and Ireland are at times startling. Furthermore, although I am not fully aware of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of your loved ones, I must say that the apparent similarities between Bloody Sunday and al-Aqsa Intifada are also startling.

I was nine years old at the time of Bloody Sunday. I am now 38 years of age. I, and people of my generation, inherited an unenviable legacy of injustice stemming from the first Tribunal of Inquiry - known as the Widgery Tribunal - established two days after Bloody Sunday by the British Government. While the Widgery Report has, for many years, been completely discredited and regarded as a "whitewash," we now know, because of our own perseverance in the pursuit of justice, that the Widgery Inquiry was established to support Britain's "Propaganda War" in Ireland. The Inquiry became a tool in Britain's arsenal.

Before the gunsmoke had fully cleared away, the Widgery Inquiry was set in motion and had actually made its Report by mid-April 1972. It is now clear that, from the outset, the task of the Inquiry was to allow the British Government to quickly cover over, explain and distort the facts about Bloody Sunday before the rest of the world. This was not so clear at the time. Mistakes were made. The families had not even the time to properly grieve for the dead. Nor were they given the time to properly prepare their case. "Haste can be the enemy of truth." Because the British were in control of the proceedings, the net effect of this situation was that they were able to clear the army of any wrongdoing or crime and, incredibly, to place the blame for the massacre on the Civil Rights Association.

Because of the "success" of the Widgery Inquiry, Bloody Sunday was



allowed to pass into legal abeyance for more than 25 years. Bloody Sunday became a watershed in the history of the struggle in Ireland. It has left a terrible legacy in Derry and other parts of the north. Many young people subsequently lost their lives or spent long years in prison because they went on to resist British rule.

It also left a legacy to the families of those who were killed. The motives of the families were not borne of vengeance. "Let vengeance be the laughter of our children," wrote Bobby Sands one year before he died on hunger strike. In 1998, after many years of sustained campaigning and fighting for truth and justice, the British Government announced the setting up of another Tribunal of Inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday.

We had forced an amazing precedent in British law in that this was the first time that a Tribunal of Inquiry has been established to investigate a specific event which a previous Tribunal of Inquiry had already reported on. While the new Bloody Sunday Inquiry was announced in January 1998, it took more than two years to formally commence the proceedings such was the extent of preparation by both the civilian and army/government sides.

Preparations for an investigation into the deaths of so many people should, by their very nature, take a long time! "Haste can be the enemy of truth" is a quote, not of mine, but of Christopher Clark, QC, solicitor to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. He was referring to the unhealthy pace of the previous discredited Widgery Inquiry.

I do not profess to be knowledgeable about all the circumstances of al-Aqsa Intifada, nor am I fully aware of the recently established commission of inquiry into the 13 fatal shootings. I have recently met representatives from Adalah, the lawyers' organisation which will represent the families of the deceased. I was alarmed by what they told me regarding this investigation. The dark and deceitful shadow of Widgery hangs over it. I believe that the hearings are due to begin soon.

You should not feel compelled to attend. Time is on your side. It does not belong to the killers of your brothers, sons and fathers. The decision is yours but you should take counsel from various friendly sources. Work out whom you can trust and whom you can work with. Garnering international support for your cause is absolutely vital.

I do not need to tell you that governments that massacre innocent

people should not be trusted. The Israeli government is brutal, murderous and deceitful. However, do not be timid or pugnacious. Let your resolve and dignity be your collective strengths. James Connolly, an Irish Socialist executed by the British in 1916 once said of ordinary people: "The great only appear great because we are on our knees. Let us rise!"

February 2001

