



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Northern Ireland: Accountability at Risk**

**Tuesday, February 15, 2002**

**1:00 – 3:00 p.m.**

**Virtual via Cisco WebEx**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon.

I join Co-Chair Smith in welcoming everyone to today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on accountability for the human rights violations committed in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

I especially want to thank our witnesses for joining us today. I deeply appreciate their commitment and their decades of work on behalf of the rights of the victims and survivors of those violations.

Massachusetts Members of Congress have long been leaders in support of peace, human rights, truth, and justice for Northern Ireland. From House Speaker Tip O'Neill, to Senator Ted Kennedy, to our current Dean of the Delegation, Congressman Richard Neal, who has led the Friends of Ireland Caucus for many years. I'm proud that today's hearing continues that history of support for human rights and accountability.

Between 1969 and 1999, 3,500 people died in political violence in Northern Ireland. More than half – 1,800 – were civilians.

The need to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence was recognized in the 1998 Good Friday agreement that brought the conflict to an end.

This need has been reflected in many efforts over the years, including the establishment of the Commission for Victims and Survivors in 2008 and the ongoing investigations conducted by the Police Service and the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland.

The commitments in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement — to create a new Historical Investigation Unit and an independent Commission for Information Retrieval — were widely welcomed and seen as an important step forward.

But 50 years after Bloody Sunday, there just hasn't been enough progress.

But that is not a reason to stop trying, or worse, to reverse course.

Yet that seems to be what Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government proposes to do.

Although the government pledged early on to finally create the "legacy bodies" agreed to in Stormont, it later changed course.

It now proposes to end all Troubles-related investigations and prosecutions, in the name of efficiency and reconciliation. The proposals include a statute of limitations and an amnesty that, as we will hear today, is far more sweeping than the one enacted by Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1978.

Look, it is hard to come to terms with the past. We know this from our own experience here in the U.S. We are still dealing with the legacy of slavery – a crime against humanity – 150 years after it ended.

But however painful it is, acknowledging the past and dealing with it is necessary.

It is legally necessary because victims have rights: the right to know the truth about what happened and why; the right to justice, meaning the right to investigations and prosecutions; and the right to reparations – to try to restore some of what was lost during a conflict. States are obligated to do their best to fulfill these rights – even more so when they are directly involved in or responsible for abuses.

It is practically necessary because without accountability, a society never achieves reconciliation. We have seen time and again how the absence of a reckoning with the past reinforces and deepens social divisions. Processes of accountability restore victims' dignity and provide redress, and that is what makes reconciliation possible.

And finally, dealing with the past is also morally necessary. It is simply the right thing to do.

We are living in a moment when human rights are under serious attack. We easily recognize the attacks when they come from authoritarian regimes – a China, a Russia, a Saudi Arabia.

But human rights are also being undermined from within formally democratic states. I believe that the proposals we will hear about today are an example of that.

The fact that the proposals have generated such overwhelming opposition throughout the U.K. gives me hope – and it gives the government a good excuse to step back in order to avoid a major mistake.

Now is not the time to give up on accountability for the terrible human rights abuses committed during the Troubles. Instead, it is time to redouble efforts to reveal the full truth about what happened and hold those responsible accountable, in order to preserve the hard-won peace.

At this time I ask unanimous consent to include in the record:

- A statement from Brian Dooley on behalf of [Human Rights First](#);
- A statement from Margaret Urwin on behalf of [Justice for the Forgotten](#); and
- A statement from the [Legacy Gender Integration Group](#).

Thank you and I yield back.