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You are here: [Publications and Records](#) > [Commons Publications](#) > [Commons Hansard](#) > Daily Hansard – Debate

[...]

**14 July 2008 : Column 112**

## **McGurk's Bar Bombing**

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn. — [Mr. Watts.]*

**9.11 pm**

**Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab):** I have asked for this debate on behalf of only one person, who is a relative of the people killed in the McGurk's bar bombing on 4 December 1971—Mrs. Eileen Killin. I still refer to her as my aunt, and she is the sister of one of the people who was killed, Phillip Garry. She was Eileen Garry, and my grandmother is also a Garry. Others have contacted me, and I have had conversations with Patricia Irvine, who is still highly traumatised, all these years later. Her mother was killed, and she has written a number of open letters to one of the bombing team—a man who admitted that he was part of that team—asking him to explain why he did it, and to tell her who the other three men involved were and the name of the person who planted the bomb. That name has never been put into the public domain. It is only on behalf of Eileen Killin that I speak tonight.

I would like to put the facts on the record. At 8.45 pm on Saturday 4 December 1971, 15 people died as a result of a bomb explosion at McGurk's bar, 81 to 83 North Queen street, Belfast. I would like to write into the record the names of the innocent victims—people who had no connection with any paramilitary organisation—who were out for a quiet night with their wives or their friends. The people killed were: Francis Bradley, 62 years old; John Colton, 49 years old; James Francis Cromie, 13 years old; Phillip Garry, my uncle Philly, who was 73 years old; Kathleen Irvine, 54 years old, the mother of Patricia Irvine; Edward Laurence Kane, 29 years old; Thomas Kane, 48 years old; Edward Keenan, 69 years old; Sarah Keenan, 58 years old; Elizabeth Philomena McGurk, 46 years old, the wife of the publican who ran the Tramore bar, normally known as McGurk's bar; Maria McGurk, 14 years of age, the daughter of the McGurks; Thomas McLaughlin, 55 years old; David Milligan, 53 years old; James Patrick Smyth, 58 years old; and Robert Charles Spotswood, 35 years old. Some 16 other people were injured, some of whom carried their injuries to their death, including Mr. McGurk, who died at the end of 2007.

I would like to say a word about my uncle Philly. When I was a young lad, we had visits to my granny's and—people from an extended Irish family will know this—the families gathered together. My uncle Philly was a bit of a character. He was a seaman and would entertain all the kids. To me, it is no surprise to find that he was a school crossing patrolman. I can imagine that he was quite a character even then, at 73 years old. I was at university when I heard that he had been blown up by a bomb in Belfast, where the Garry family lived—some

of our family had moved to the north and some had come over to work in the steel mills of Lanarkshire, including the husband of my grandmother, Michael Plunkett.

Uncle Philly was the kind of character who left a memory, as a happy-go-lucky kind of guy. But there he was, out for his pint on that night with his friends and people out with their family, when what we now know to have happened took place. An Ulster Volunteer Force team, of which Robert Campbell was a member,

#### **14 July 2008 : Column 113**

was sent from a pub in west Belfast with the orders to blow up not McGurk's bar—that is the point—but the Gem bar in the same street. The Gem bar was an IRA pub and was known as one—it was where members of the IRA gathered. When the members of that UVF team got there, they were cowards. They did not try to plant the bomb in a pub that was run by the IRA, so they went to the nearest Catholic pub and bombed innocent people out for a quiet drink.

I see my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith), who used to live in the area. She knew the pub and, she has told me, knew the family.

**Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab):** It really is a small world. When I was very young I went to the local school, St. Patrick's, and knew my hon. Friend's uncle Philly, the school patrolman who used to lead me across the road. My father knew him too, because they used to go to sea together before my hon. Friend's uncle was a patrolman. The McGurks were a very decent and religious family, and everyone was filled with great sadness when that explosion happened.

**Michael Connarty:** That was the point—McGurk's bar was not a pub that was involved in the troubles. The bombing happened in '71. The troubles were bubbling up and there had been a few bombings in the Province, but the attack saw the largest loss of life in one bombing at that time.

As far as I am concerned, the perpetrators—Robert Campbell and his friends, the UVF hit men—were cowards. They did not try to bomb the pub that they were sent to, but, according to the evidence that he gave after his trial, they were told, "Don't come back until the job is done." The job was never done. The members of that team never bombed the Gem bar. They bombed a pub full of innocent people, putting the bomb inside a porch, which, as it happens, blew the walls out and roof off, killing the two children playing upstairs and 13 people in the public bar downstairs.

Let me turn to the role of the Army. I am not involved with any side in this business—accusations of collusion have flown around, given the fact that no Army patrols were around, and people have asked how that car got to that location in that area without being stopped, and so on. The car was never found when it was abandoned, which is interesting. However, I do not care about that. What I care about is the documents in the report, including the situation reports, which were secret until 30 years thereafter. The Pat Finucane centre submitted those reports, having found them, to the historical inquiries team. It is clear from the reports that there was a travesty involving the Army, which said in the report that the bomb was clearly inside the pub, because five men standing around it were blown to smithereens. The Army said that the bombing was clearly an IRA own goal—it said that the bomb was, in effect, in the pub in transit. That was then. The historical inquiries team report says that it was

recommended that the Secretary of State answer a question in the House confirming that story.

That was never done, but, sadly, a former Member of the House, now Lord Kilclooney, said on television and in Stormont that the bomb was an IRA bomb. He said that there was no question that the bombing was a

#### **14 July 2008 : Column 114**

Protestant paramilitary operation. After that, a terrible, scurrilous article appeared in *The Guardian*, which had clearly been briefed by the Army, confirming the account in the situation report—a secret document that was never referred to as the source—and repeating the calumny that those innocent people out for a drink were an IRA team. In fact, the people who claimed responsibility—the Empire Loyalists who phoned up—said that they bombed the bar because IRA commanders and units met there, but they knew that to be a lie. Did their operating commander think that they had bombed the Gem bar, courageous soldiers that they were in the fight against the IRA? That possibly is true, because the report was that the pub that was bombed was an IRA hotbed, when it was in fact an innocent place where ordinary people gathered for a quiet night out.

That calumny ran as the founded story in Ireland until 1977, when Robert Campbell was arrested. I must criticise the historical inquiry's report for saying that he was arrested for bombing McGurk's bar as a result of intelligence, because he was not—he was arrested because he shot a Protestant. He thought that he was going to shoot a Catholic, but he shot a Protestant; the Catholic men in the van he was targeting, who worked in a quarry, escaped. He was arrested because his own people shopped him for killing one of their own. He then asked for McGurk's bar to be taken into account and he admitted his role, saying that what he had done had troubled him ever since. He was a young man at the time of the bombing, but when they arrested him he was a platoon commander in the UVF and had no doubt carried out a number of other crimes in between. He got 20 years, of which he served 16.

**Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab):** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Michael Connarty:** No, I will not.

For six years, the approach taken in all the police reports—this is clear from the historical inquiry team's report of the police reports—was to keep trying to turn the evidence to suggest that the Army report was correct. The reports said things such as that the forensics showed there was no doubt that the bomb had been inside the pub. The forensic evidence did not come out until February, but Dr. Hall, who produced it, said that there was no doubt that the bomb had been placed outside the door or adjacent to it—not in the pub at all. However, the police reports still spread the same story, and every single inquiry in the report shows that the police tried to pin the bombing on the people in the bar to show that they had killed themselves and their fellow citizens from the community. That is unforgivable.

Another criticism that I have of the historical inquiry's report is that page 9, which discusses the killing of an Army major following the bombing, should not have been included, because it is not relevant. It is as if people are still trying to do the same thing—to say that these innocent people were somehow caught up in what happened afterwards, but they had nothing to do with it. My uncle Philly and his colleagues and friends had nothing to do with the IRA and other such organisations. If it was not for the Pat Finucane centre, I am not sure whether the

historical inquiry's team would ever have seen the secret documents that are now in the public domain and in its report.

## **14 July 2008 : Column 115**

Why am I raising this issue? My aunt Eileen does not want to see the report, which is why I have it. I am the named person because I have raised a question in the House. She does not want to see the report or to remember what happened; she is very old and does not want the trauma of it all, but she does want the peace of mind that goes with knowing that the House recognises that the things that we did as a nation—the way in which we spread malicious gossip about the people who were killed and tried to make it stick—were wrong.

I do not know whether there can be reconciliation for people such as Patricia Irvine, who wants to know who the man was who got out of the car and placed the bomb. It was not Robert Campbell, but another man who was sitting outside the bar in the back seat. I know that the McLaughlin family are very upset and still accuse people of collusion, and I do not know whether they will ever have reconciliation. However, I am looking for peace and reconciliation.

Mr. Campbell refuses to be interviewed or to give any evidence and says that he wants the right to see his life out in peace and quiet now that he is in his 70s. I do not believe that that man should have that right; he was a coward and he was part of a cowardly team that killed innocent people. He is living here in England, and it behoves him to tell the families who planted the bomb and who his accomplices were. I do not think that he has paid his debt to society.

The Secretary of State is here and he said in answer to a question that I asked on 25 June that he personally was sorry for the things that had happened and for the distortions of the truth, but I want slightly more than that. We are clearly talking about a Government-sponsored, defence-sponsored method of operation, and books have been written about it. To suggest that these innocent people did this to themselves, their colleagues, their friends and their families is unforgivable, and the Government must be prepared to apologise publicly. I am disappointed that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is not replying to this debate. He may have the weight to be able to do what needs to be done. If he does not, I will be coming back to ask someone else further up the tree for an apology on behalf of the people who were killed at McGurk's bar.

**9.24 pm**

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty) on his success in obtaining this debate. It is an important topic for him not only because of the wider public interest but also, as he explained, because a member of his family—Phillip Garry, about whom he has spoken so affectionately—was killed in the indiscriminate and callous bombing of McGurk's bar in 1971, so I want to express at the outset my deepest sympathy to my hon. Friend and members of his wider family circle. I am also conscious that 14 other people—including a 13-year-old child, James Francis Cromie—were killed and 16 were injured. Thirty seven years on, the pain remains real for their families and friends, too. My hon. Friend spoke about the trauma that people still feel. This bombing

## **14 July 2008 : Column 116**

was, until the terrible bombing in Omagh in August 1998, the largest civilian loss of life in a single incident during the years of the troubles.

We are discussing tonight one of 363 reports produced so far by Northern Ireland's Historical Enquiries Team. Established in 2005, the HET is part of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but it is operationally independent and staffed by a mix of people, including former detectives from outside Northern Ireland. Just last week, in its latest report, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee expressed themselves

“impressed by the personal commitment, sensitivity and professionalism of the Chief Constable, the Director of HET and the other staff involved in HET”.

The HET is tasked with reviewing all 3,268 deaths that occurred as a result of the troubles between 1968 and 1998, with the twofold aim of striving to bring a measure of resolution to families and ensuring that all investigative and evidential opportunities are subject to thorough and exhaustive examination. Its approach is family centred and in its review of the McGurk's bar bombing, the HET has attempted to answer more than 50 questions from family members. To carry out this work effectively, the HET has developed a five-phase process that includes the collection, assessment and review of all relevant and available material followed by focused reinvestigation and resolution. In this review as in others, the HET accessed witness statements, forensic reports, the original police case papers and intelligence information.

Every one of the deaths that occurred during the troubles is a tragedy, but each case is also unique and families will have different views and perspectives and different questions and issues of concern. Following the McGurk's bar bombing, the hurt and grief felt by all those directly affected and, indeed, by the wider community was intensified by the inaccurate commentary and reporting that it was the result of a so-called IRA “own goal”.

In summary, the HET reached the following conclusions. The bomb was located inside McGurk's bar within a small, enclosed entrance area off Great George's street, but outside the public bar area where the victims and survivors were mainly located. The original target, as my hon. Friend mentioned, was probably the Gem bar rather than McGurk's.

The Ulster Volunteer Force was responsible for the bombing and in 1978 Robert James Campbell pleaded guilty to 15 counts of murder and was given a life sentence. The HET found no evidence of collusion by the police or security services with the UVF and confirmed that the Royal Ulster Constabulary allocated substantial resources to the original investigation in 1971. Its assessment, however, was that those carrying out the investigation may have attributed more significance to the potential involvement of republican paramilitaries than the balance of evidence supported.

The HET's report also documents in some detail the media reports of the bombing. It includes the transcript of an interview with an eight-year-old boy, Joseph McClory, who gave a very clear account of how he saw a man place the bomb in the porch of the pub. Even so, there was speculation that one or more of those inside the pub might have been responsible. As my hon. Friend said, the HET report includes a copy of a Ministry of Defence document stating—this is a direct quotation from the document—

**14 July 2008 : Column 117**

“the forensic evidence now available shows quite clearly that five of the victims were killed by blast—indicating that the explosion must have been inside the bar, and raising a very strong presumption that it was caused by the accidental detonation of a bomb being carried by one of the customers—as has seemed likely all along”.

On 7 December—the Tuesday following the explosions—speaking in a debate at Stormont, the then Minister of State for Home Affairs, John Taylor, now Lord Kilclooney, said

“the evidence of the forensic experts supports the theory that the explosion took place within the confines of the walls of the building.”

He said that the Provisional IRA

“is in retreat and nothing could aid it better at this time if it could inflame Catholic opinion as a result of what occurred at the weekend.”

He called on Roman Catholics

“to think twice before they accept the type of propaganda that is being fed to them about this incident.”

When it came in February 1972, the conclusion of the forensic scientist Dr. Robert Alan Hall was rather different. He concluded that the combined findings, including the pathology reports, did not support the theory that a bomb had exploded close to a group of people within the confines of the bar area, and that the explosion had in fact

“occurred at or about the entrance door from the porch leading off Great George’s Street”.

His conclusion supported the evidence of eight-year-old Joseph McClory rather than that of the Minister.

Although we cannot speak for the Ministers who made statements at the time, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are deeply sorry not just for the appalling suffering and loss of life that occurred at McGurk’s bar, but for the extraordinary additional pain caused to both the immediate families and the wider community by the erroneous suggestions made in the immediate aftermath of the explosion about who was responsible. Such perceptions and preconceived ideas should never have been allowed to cloud the actual evidence. My right hon. Friend said at the weekend that

“one of the things politicians have to get much better at is actually taking on their responsibility and saying, I’m sorry”.

I hope that that offers some consolation to my hon. Friend and the others who have asked for an apology.

I can tell my hon. Friend—in addition to what I have said about the work of the HET—that the police ombudsman carries responsibility for investigations when a death has been caused

by the actions of a police officer, or when there is information that suggests that a police officer may have acted wrongly. Such cases are referred by the HET, and currently total 64. The police ombudsman also investigates cases in which a family, or a representative of a family, makes a complaint about the handling of a case by the police. The ombudsman is currently investigating 57 such cases, and I am aware that one relates directly to the McGurk's bar bombing. Although the ombudsman's work and reports are completely independent of the Government, I am informed that a report is expected shortly.

Northern Ireland has moved a long way since the dark days of the troubles. The UVF, which was responsible for the McGurk's pub bombing, has put its arms beyond reach—on the way, I hope, to full decommissioning. As

#### **14 July 2008 : Column 118**

the Independent Monitoring Commission has indicated, the Provisional IRA is now firmly committed to the political path, and Sinn Féin is an active partner in policing and in Government. Devolution last May put schools, hospitals and other public services under local control, and I hope that it will soon be possible to hand back policing and justice powers. This week's announcement by Bombardier about its new investment is a further sign of Northern Ireland's growing prosperity, building on long-term political stability.

However, the murders and conflict that scarred Northern Ireland for 40 years still leave their mark, which is why the work of the Consultative Group on the Past is so important. Trying to find a way of addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past in a way that does not overshadow the future remains one of the greatest challenges. The group's task is to consult widely to see if there is a consensus on how to proceed. Over the past year the group has met with more than 100 organisations, received 245 written submissions and held seven well-attended public meetings. During this process, it heard a wide range of opinions and experiences about the past and what it means for the present. The consultation period closed in January and the group is now reflecting on what it has heard. As part of its reflections, the group has considered the various mechanisms that are currently in place to deal with the past such as the Police Ombudsman, the public inquiries and the work of the HET. Indeed, during this consultation the group met the HET and some of the many families who have been through the HET process. The thoughts that these families have on this process, and all the other mechanisms in place, will be considered in its final report. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are looking forward to receiving that report later in the year. While it is too soon to speculate on what the recommendations will be or how they can best be taken forward, it is important that any recommendations made are workable and capable of commanding widespread public support.

Lord Eames and Denis Bradley—the group's co-chairs—delivered a speech at the end of May reflecting on some of the many issues raised during their consultation. It is helpful that they recognised publicly the differing views that exist, and that a public debate takes place on some of these very difficult issues.

In addition to the work of the Consultative Group on the Past, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published a helpful report only last week. It contains a number of recommendations on dealing with the past, although it also acknowledges the importance of awaiting the report of the Consultative Group on the Past before making definitive decisions.

**Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP):** I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for giving way, and I fully realise why he is addressing some of the wider issues to do with the past in terms of the broader work of the HET and the Consultative Group on the Past. Returning to the particulars of this debate and McGurk's bar, however, there is a widespread welcome for the spirit of apology offered by the Secretary of State, but he cannot apologise for everybody else. Does the Minister agree that it would be helpful if the Minister who made the offending and grossly misleading statement in the Stormont Parliament came forward and directly apologised, and will he also

**14 July 2008 : Column 119**

take steps to ensure that the apology that has come from the Government comes directly from the Ministry of Defence as well, because the Army was clearly involved in spreading this disinformation not only through a Minister at the time, but more generally through the media?

**Paul Goggins:** I hope that my hon. Friend appreciates that this evening I speak on behalf not only of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and myself, but of the Government as a whole. As for what others should say or do, that is for them. I cannot speak for them, and neither can my right hon. Friend. I can only say what I

**14 July 2008 : Column 120**

see and report what I have read, and that is on the record. We have made our position completely clear.

The bombing of McGurk's bar was an horrific attack, one of too many that occurred in Northern Ireland during the troubles. The core task of the HET is to help those families most directly affected by such tragic events to receive an explanation and have their questions answered. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk and all the families caught up in this case have been able to take some comfort from the extensive review that has been carried out and the firm conclusions reached.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Adjourned accordingly at twenty-one minutes to Ten o'clock.*

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