

Queen's Policy Engagement (/)

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By Professor Marie Coleman (<http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/author/qpolmarie/>)

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Politics and Democracy (<http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/category/politics-and-democracy/>)

A critical response to plans for a 'public history' of British Policy in Northern Ireland during the Troubles

Professor Marie Coleman shares some thoughts following the latest developments in the public history of British policy during the conflict in Northern Ireland.

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This article has been revised in response to representations from the Northern Ireland Office and Professor Jennifer Todd, a member of the Expert Advisory Group, that the Public History project 'does not form part of the Legacy Act' and is separate from the provisions of it. I have removed all references to the project having any direct link to the act, though I retain the view that both are parts of the same wider legacy process. The substantive point made in the original article – that it is proposed to allow historians privileged access to documents while the same access is denied to the families of victims – remains, and this was not challenged by the Northern Ireland Office in its response to my original piece.

Last week the government announced the appointment of nine academic historians and political scientists to an expert advisory group (EAG) (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/662a163a55e1582b6ca7e532/Expert_Advisory_Panel_TOR.pdf) 'to provide independent advice and guidance to the historians writing the public history of British policy during the conflict in Northern Ireland.'

These historians will not themselves write the history but will oversee a process to select 'qualified and independent historians' to write it. Previously in this forum I have expressed my concerns at the idea of an official history of the Troubles (<http://qppl.qub.ac.uk/can-there-be-an-official-history-of-the-troubles/>). I was not approached to serve on the EAG, though my views on the general topic were elicited some time ago.

I would have been surprised had I been asked as I am not a specialist on the Troubles. Had I been I would have declined and will decline to play any part in a process that I see as assisting in the implementation of the UK's wider legacy process, which also includes the Legacy Act that is so widely opposed among all sides of opinion here. It is my understanding that some other academics based in Northern Irish universities were invited and declined. The EAG does not have any members who are currently employed as academic historians or political scientists in Northern Irish institutions.

I know many of the EAG members personally and professionally and have the highest regard for their scholarship and professionalism. They are undertaking this work voluntarily and without remuneration. The criticism which follows is of the process.

A public history?

Many in the academic history profession were confused by the use of the term 'public history' as opposed to 'official history'. This is the new name for the former 'official history' series, as recommended by Sir Joseph Pilling in his review of the series (<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79a123e5274a684690af21/future-plans-government.pdf>) in 2009.

Pilling, who was the Permanent Secretary to the Northern Ireland Office between 1997 and 2005, recognised the unpopular connotations of the 'official' designation:

'The title suggests to some that the Government determines the content of books, including any judgements expressed in them, and that it is therefore propaganda'.

He recommended instead that the title change to 'The Public History Programme'.

It is far from clear if Pilling understood the specific meaning of the term 'public history' within the discipline of history. It can be summarised as 'the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world. In this sense, it is history that is applied to real-world issues. (<https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>) It includes museums, walking tours, media documentaries and many other formats in which history is disseminated to a wide public audience. Applied to the official history series it is a misnomer, likely chosen as sounding more neutral and the

Cabinet Office would be well advised to consider revising its applicability. It is notable that in volumes published since the Pilling review, the designation 'official history' remains widely used (<https://www.routledge.com/Government-Official-History-Series/book-series/SE0789>).

Independence?

The historians who will be recruited by the EAG to write the history, and the advice to be given to them by the EAG, are both described as 'independent' in the Terms of Reference. Nevertheless, this remains part of the UK government's official/public history programme, which is run under the auspices of the Cabinet Office. The EAG will be responsible for overseeing the recruitment process and this 'may involve ... making recommendations to the Secretary of State'.

The mention of any role for the Secretary of State is likely to set off alarm bells among academic researchers who might be considered suitable for this work. If the EAG recommend the appointment of a scholar whose views on certain matters are at odds with that of the government might a Secretary of State seek to veto that appointment, in the same way that an effort was made to stop the appointment of Professor Mary Beard as a trustee of the British museum in 2020 because of her opposition to Brexit. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/01/british-museum-put-mary-beard-on-the-board-despite-downing-st-veto>)

Access to documents

Another controversial aspect of this project is that of access to government archives. Pilling noted that one of the benefits of the official history series was that it allowed a history to be written in cases 'where relevant papers are unlikely to be released for several decades'. This is standard practice for the official history series. For their official histories of MI5 and MI6, Professor Christopher Andrew and Professor Keith Jeffery were permitted access, under the Official Secrets Act, to write their histories but these documents were not made available to the public afterwards.

Speaking on BBC Radio Ulster's *Evening Extra* (on Friday 26 Apr.) Professor Henry Patterson, who is on the EAG, spoke about the historians being given 'unprecedented access' to archives relating to a range of areas of British policy in Northern Ireland, including 'collusion'. The implication here is that historians will be given privileged access to files which currently are being denied to the families of victims of the Troubles in cases where collusion is alleged. The files will remain closed after they are seen by the historians. Many scholars are likely to find that deeply problematic. The balance to be weighed here is whether it is preferable to have some access given to appropriate scholars, rather than no access at all. There is also a question of how extensive this access will be, especially in cases where alleged informers are concerned.

Challenges ahead

I do not envy the EAG its task and suggest a sample of the challenges it is likely to encounter:

Personnel: Will it be possible to recruit the personnel required to undertake the work? The cool reception to date suggests this could prove difficult.

Budget: How many historians will be employed, for how long and at what cost? In Patterson's *Evening Extra* interview he referred to examining all aspects of British policy, not just security. That sounds extremely ambitious and likely to require the employment of a number of scholars for a couple of years to produce more than one volume. The starting salary for an early career post-doctoral fellow is approximately £37,000 annually. More senior scholars would likely require secondment from their institutions and replacement teaching costs (up to £45,000 per year in salary only). None of the above includes research or other expenses. The official histories also require the employment of a literary agent. It would be interesting to know if the Northern Ireland Office and/or Cabinet Office has suggested a budget?

Conclusion

What has been suggested is an official history, in spite of Pilling's efforts at obfuscation. Oversight roles for the Cabinet Office and particularly for the Secretary of State compromise its independence. Access to documents will be allowed to historians at the same time it continues to be denied to the families of victims. Above all, the entire project is politicised by its association with a wider legacy process which includes one of the most cynical legislative acts seen here for many years.

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1 Comment

By Professor Jennifer Todd MRIA

Posted 30th April 2024 at 3:36 pm



These are important points that deserve discussion . One claim is false and needs to be corrected immediately . This history project is not part of the legacy act. Clause 52 of that act refers to other proposed academic research arising from the findings of the information recovery commission, that is not in the remit of the history-of-british-policy project. i would not have become involved if it had been part of the legacy act.

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