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Why Blair deserves bouquets for Famine apology

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TONY Blair has taken a lot of flak - and received precious few bouquets - for his statement on the Famine, read by Gabriel Byrne at last week's commemoration concert in Millstreet. While falling short of a formal apology, this was the first time that a British Prime Minister publicly acknowledged the fact that his predecessors in government had failed the people of Ireland in their hour of greatest need.

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The Labour Party leader spoke of a "defining and dreadful event in the history of England and Ireland" and of the deep scars that had been left by politicians in London who had stood by and allowed "a crop failure to turn into massive human tragedy". He also paid tribute to the courage and resilience of those Irish men and women who had triumphed in the face of this catastrophe, and said that Britain in particular had "benefited immeasurably" from their skills and talents.

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Mr Blair has been roundly criticised by sections of the British media for the tone of the statement, and his political judgment has been called into question for making it at all. Yet, there has been very little reaction on this side of the Irish Sea. The Taoiseach welcomed Mr Blair's comments, saying that he had confronted the past in a way which laid a basis for healing in the future. But, as far as I can ascertain, there has been no public response from Bertie Ahern. Two years ago the Fianna Fail leader said that "a frank acknowledgment and expression of regret about the shortcomings of the then British government (at the time of the Famine) would contribute to a much better climate of relations".

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[...] FOR many years Irish people have asked for some official acknowledgment by the British that a great wrong was committed 150 years ago. Now that the Prime Minister has tried to respond to that demand, we seem strangely reluctant to admit that something important has happened.

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The statement has been noticed in Britain, of course. It isn't easy for any country to admit that it has behaved badly in the past and there are particular problems for the British in accepting that they may have been less than generous in their treatment of Ireland. The comments have ranged from the sneers contained in letters to the newspapers, asking if it might now be appropriate for the British government to seek an apology from Denmark for the actions of the Danes during the reign of King Alfred, to more serious criticism of Mr Blair.

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40 The Prime Minister was reprimanded by the Daily Telegraph for encouraging "the self pitying nature of Irish nationalism". There was a real danger, the paper warned, that Mr Blair's letter would simply feed "the grievance culture which allows Nationalist Ireland to place the blame for all the country's ills at the door of the Brits, ultimately justifying terrorism". It was a theme taken up in the London Independent, which referred to the Irish "culture of victim hood".
45 There were dire warnings that this could start a flood of demands for apologies for perceived grievances. Bloody Sunday in Derry was quoted as an example.

HISTORIANS also voiced their disapproval, albeit in more measured terms. The argument was made that the Famine like many great tragedies of history, flowed from immensely complex political and economic causes and that it was simplistic to lay the blame for what
50 had happened on a callous or indifferent British government. To do so was to undermine the work done by professional historians in seeking out the more complicated truth.

Several writers suggested that it was wrong to judge what happened then by the standards that would probably be applied now to such a disaster. But it is one of the most refreshing aspects of Tony Blair's government that it does seem prepared to confront the gross injustices that
55 have been committed in the past, and where possible, to put them right. The decision a couple of weeks ago to pardon soldiers, including young Irishmen, who were shot for cowardice in the first world war is another example of the kind of generous imagination which has already been brought to bear on old griefs.

[...] We have seen from our own experience in the North that an expression of obviously
60 sincere contrition for having inflicted suffering can make trust seem possible in even the grimmest situation. No one who saw it is likely to forget the announcement of the loyalist ceasefire in October 1994. What quickened hope that a quite new kind of leadership had emerged from the world of the loyalist paramilitaries was the way Gusty Spence offered to "the loved ones of all innocent victims over the past 25 years, abject and true remorse". And,
65 in spite of all that has happened since, the brutal resurgence of loyalist violence in recent weeks and the almost unbearable images of grieving innocents, that hope has never quite died.

Admitting responsibility for what has happened in the past is the first step towards creating a better future. That is true of personal relations and of public life. Tony Blair has made a brave and generous attempt to lay part of our shared and painful history to rest. Perhaps, when the
70 general election is over, the new government should respond to what he has said.



Document C

Bloody Sunday: PM David Cameron's full statement

15 June 2010, source : BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/10322295>

This is the full transcript of the statement Prime Minister David Cameron made to MPs in the House of Commons on the day the Bloody Sunday report was published.

5 "The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is publishing the report of the Saville inquiry - the tribunal set up by the previous government to investigate the tragic events of 30 January 1972, a day more commonly known as Bloody Sunday. We have acted in good faith by publishing the tribunal's findings as soon as possible after the general election.

10 Mr Speaker, I am deeply patriotic. I never want to believe anything bad about our country. I never want to call into question the behaviour of our soldiers and our army, who I believe to be the finest in the world. And I have seen for myself the very difficult and dangerous circumstances in which we ask our soldiers to serve. But the conclusions of this report are absolutely clear. There is no doubt, there is nothing equivocal, there are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong.

15 Lord Saville concludes that the soldiers of the support company who went into the Bogside did so as a result of an order which should not have been given by their commander. He finds that, on balance, the first shot in the vicinity of the march was fired by the British Army. He finds that none of the casualties shot by the soldiers of support company was armed with a firearm. He finds that there was some firing by Republican paramilitaries but none of this firing provided any justification for the shooting of civilian casualties. And he finds that, in no case, was any

20 warning given by soldiers before opening fire. He also finds that the support company reacted
by losing their self-control, forgetting or ignoring their instructions and training and with a
serious and widespread loss of fire discipline. He finds that despite the contrary evidence given
by the soldiers, none of them fired in response to attacks or threatened attacks by nail or petrol
bombers. And he finds that many of the soldiers - and I quote knowingly - put forward false
accounts to seek to justify their firing. [...]

25 Mr Speaker, these are shocking conclusions to read and shocking words to have to say. But Mr
Speaker, you do not defend the British Army by defending the indefensible. We do not honour
all those who have served with such distinction in keeping the peace and upholding the rule of
law in Northern Ireland by hiding from the truth. There is no point in trying to soften or
equivocate what is in this report. It is clear from the tribunal's authoritative conclusions that the
30 events of Bloody Sunday were in no way justified.

I know that some people wonder whether, nearly 40 years on from an event, [if] a prime minister
needs to issue an apology. For someone of my generation, Bloody Sunday and the early 1970s
are something we feel we have learnt about rather than lived through. But what happened should
never, ever have happened. The families of those who died should not have had to live with the
35 pain and the hurt of that day and with a lifetime of loss. Some members of our armed forces
acted wrongly. The government is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the armed forces
and for that, on behalf of the government, indeed, on behalf of our country, I am deeply sorry.
[...]

Mr Speaker, while in no way justifying the events of January 30th, 1972, we should
40 acknowledge the background to the events of Bloody Sunday. Since 1969, the security situation
in Northern Ireland had been declining significantly. Three days before Bloody Sunday, two
RUC officers, one a Catholic, were shot by the IRA in Londonderry, the first police officers
killed in the city during the Troubles. A third of the City of Derry had become a no-go area for
the RUC and the Army. And in the end, 1972 was to prove Northern Ireland's bloodiest year by
45 far, with nearly 500 people killed. And let us also remember, Bloody Sunday is not the defining
story of the service the British Army gave in Northern Ireland from 1969-2007. This was known
as Operation Banner, the longest continuous operation in British military history, spanning 38
years and in which over 250,000 people served. Our armed forces displayed enormous courage
and professionalism in upholding democracy and the rule of law in Northern Ireland. Acting in
50 support of the police, they played a major part in setting the conditions that have made peaceful
politics possible. And over 1,000 members - 1,000 members - of the security forces lost their
lives to that cause. Without their work, the peace process would not have happened. Of course,
some mistakes were undoubtedly made, but lessons were also learned. And once again, I put
on record the immense debt of gratitude we all owe to those who served in Northern Ireland.
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Mr Speaker, this report and the inquiry itself demonstrate how a state should hold itself to
account and how we should be determined at all times, no matter how difficult, to judge
ourselves against the highest standards. Openness and frankness about the past, however
painful, they do not make us weaker, they make us stronger. That is one of the things that
60 differentiates us from the terrorists. We should never forget that over 3,500 people from every
community lost their lives in Northern Ireland, the overwhelming majority killed by terrorists.
There were many terrible atrocities. Politically-motivated violence was never justified,
whichever side it came from. And it can never be justified by those criminal gangs that today
want to draw Northern Ireland back to its bitter and bloody past. No government I lead will

65 ever put those who fight to defend democracy on an equal footing with those who continue to
seek to destroy it. But neither will we hide from the truth that confronts us today. In the words
of Lord Saville, what happened on Bloody Sunday strengthened the Provisional IRA, increased
hostility towards the Army and exacerbated the violent conflict of the years that followed.
70 Bloody Sunday was a tragedy for the bereaved and the wounded and a catastrophe for the people
of Northern Ireland. Those are words we cannot and must not ignore. But I hope what this report
can also do is mark the moment where we come together in this House and in the communities
we represent to acknowledge our shared history, even where it divides us. And come together
to close this painful chapter on Northern Ireland's troubled past. That is not to say we should
ever forget or dismiss the past, but we must also move on. Northern Ireland has been
75 transformed over the last 20 years and all of us in Westminster and Stormont must continue that
work of change, coming together with all the people of Northern Ireland to build a stable,
peaceful, prosperous and shared future. And it is with that determination that I commend this
statement to the house.”