Dear Michael,

On behalf of the HTANI Committee and some volunteer members of your Advisory Group on Parallel Histories’ proposed study on the conflict in Ireland, we feel it is important to outline our serious and growing reservations with the direction the project has taken thus far. Since this apprehension has reached the point where we would prefer to withdraw from involvement, it is only fair that we should explain our reasons.

**Project Approach: Opposition to the characterisation of the conflict as “Catholic v Protestant”**

Youwill know that our members have resisted your insistence on characterising the two main narratives of Irish History as “Catholic v Protestant”. Whilst we have no wish to downplay the very obvious sectarian element to the centuries long conflict, or to critique your signature ‘Parallel Narratives’ methodology per se, we would caution you that using these two terms as the essential framework can only be counter-productive:

* Relying on this characterisation obscures the fact that for both sides the conflict has always been directed at primarily political objectives (such as achieving ‘independence’ or demonstrating ‘loyalty’ towards British rule)
* It also requires students to adopt a vocabulary which is deficient for understanding. Purely religious identifications are (arguably) sufficient for understanding events within the 17th Century, but not the late 19th and 20th, or any period prior to the 16th.
* Relying on this characterisation obscures historical anomalies which challenge engrained perspectives and simple assumption. Examples include the crucial contribution of Protestants to the development of movements such as Irish Republicanism, Constitutional Nationalism and cultural separatism, and ‘inconvenient truths’ such as the Pope’s support for William of Orange and the role of Irish Catholics in the British Army (especially in WW1).
* This approach is crude and reductionist compared to the academic rigour and nuance that most History teachers in Northern Ireland already apply in their lessons (such as revealing the ‘anomalies’ listed above, or requiring students to consider how dramatic events elicited very different responses across the political/religious/social spectrum (e.g. from loyalists cf. unionists).
* This reductionism sets Parallel Histories’ project against the entire canon of scholarly writing on the subject. There are simply no academically reputable historians of the Irish conflict writing for any audience or age group who describe it purely in terms of “Catholics v Protestants”. We accept that we must sometimes simplify History to aid pupils’ understanding, but we cannot undermine the integrity of the academic discipline we are trying to promote. Where real History is irreducibly complex we have to help pupils navigate it, not invent a conveniently streamlined version.
* Your experience teaching about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to pupils *in England* is not a direct comparison with teaching the Irish conflict within Northern Ireland, where this approach is more likely to entrench one-sided narratives than challenge them. Where pupils feel they have a direct stake in one community’s narrative, research has demonstrated that they develop a powerful instinct for insisting that their own narrative is wholly correct and their opponents’ wholly false, and the two must remain irreconcilable forevermore. It does not occur to them that both might be (substantially) inaccurate and unsustainable – unless a skilled teacher leads them through a proper investigation of Irish History.
* Faced with the same two well developed but weakly challenged narratives, and lacking any stake in either, pupils in other parts of the UK are likely to reach an even more relativistic and hopeless conclusion (both sides have their own ‘truth’ and it would be wrong to critique them) – or, even worse, choose one side to support because their narrative is more appealing!

**Content: Serious concern with the project’s current level of understanding and interpretation of Irish History**

To move on to our second concern, the recent ‘draft narratives’ intended for presentation to students displayed an alarming lack of understanding of basic features of Irish History. At first glance we assumed this was due to very shallow initial research; on reflection, we fear that the omissions and exaggerations are so alarming that they probably reflect the distortion caused by the insistence on viewing the conflict through a purely religious lens, for example:

* The 1798 rebellion was a “small affair” (when its death toll dwarfed that of all subsequent rebellions combined).
* The consent of the Irish people to partition was “never sought” (when the Anglo-Irish Treaty was ratified by Dail Eireann and then affirmed by the outcome of the June 1922 election).
* The Northern Ireland parliament granted “political, social and economic privileges to the Protestants” (when such privileges were never enshrined in expressly discriminatory laws).

The preceding errors could perhaps be excused by their appearance in ‘narratives’ which are meant to represent the exaggerated and distorted outlook of a particular tribe. That reasoning, however, only makes the following errors all the more extraordinary:

* Neither narrative makes any reference to Oliver Cromwell’s campaign in Ireland, the Act of Union, Catholic Emancipation or the Easter Rising. The 1912-14 campaign against Home Rule and the Battle of the Somme are barely hinted at, while the 1641 rebellion gets a passing reference. The IRB, UVF and Irish Volunteers are not mentioned, nor are the modern UVF, UDA or B Specials. Thus many of the most seminal political events, leaders and organisations in Irish History, enjoying central prominence within both sides’ sense of self identity to this day, are completely or essentially missing from Parallel Histories’ study of Irish History.

**Sensitivity: My serious concern with the project’s reckless use of controversial terminology**

We have no objection to the use of loaded language when it is used clearly and intentionally to emphasise historical perspectives, as is the case in the draft narratives. However, when it appears within the supposedly objective context of directives for historical investigation, it becomes dangerously inflammatory:

* Our members have already mentioned to you our unease with any suggestion that “the Catholics” (or indeed “the Protestants”) used violence during the Troubles. I cannot imagine any credible education project suggesting that “the Muslims” used violence to perpetrate 9/11 or the Bataclan shooting, yet this is precisely the kind of crude formulation the project seems to favour.
* Likewise, the idea that pupils would be invited to consider whether the terrorist atrocities of this century were ‘justified’ would alarm any responsible educator. So why would we wish to offer pupils the possibility that they could justify Warrenpoint, Hyde Park, Ballykelly or Brighton?
* Consider too the sense of hurt and outrage (and sectarian hatred?) such a question could stir up for any pupil who considers their family or community to have been a victim of “Catholic” or “Protestant” violence.

Hopefully you can now appreciate why the reservations of HTANI have grown to such a serious level. In fact, we are not sure what assurances you could give to convince us that this Irish History project, on its current trajectory, aligns with our own historical understanding or pedagogical principles.

Yours sincerely,