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


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Opinion

Our politicians should be speaking up for victims

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Will the new Victims Commissioners really offer value for money, asks Jude Collins

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

Ok, consider this. A man says to you: "I've got a house for sale, and if you give me a quarter of a million pounds, it's yours." Before you answer, you'll want to know about the house, right? If you find it's an elegant building in good condition in a nice neighbourhood, you might be happy to pay a quarter million. If it's tiny, leaking and in lager-lout-land, you might want to keep your money in your bank account.

So when I hear that four victims' commissioners are to be appointed here, with an annual salary of £65,000 each, I find myself asking "What will I get for my money?" And yours.

Even before they start working, the constituent elements of the four-person team perform one useful service: they clarify who can be seen as a victim. The original Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 declared a victim to be " someone who has been bereaved as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident". An open and inclusive definition for sure. So a victim might be the widow of an RUC officer or a UDR soldier killed by the IRA, but equally it might be the widow of an IRA man shot dead by loyalists or the British Army, or the two acting in collusion. Any narrower interpretation of the Order seemed impossible.

But that was before October 2005. That's when Peter Hain appointed Bertha McDougal as interim Victims Commissioner, and in doing so he gave a heavy hint that the definition of victim had changed. Mrs McDougal, it emerged, was the widow of a police reservist killed by the INLA. Regardless of her personal integrity, her appointment by Hain made clear that those whose loved ones had died while serving in the police or the British Army were victims, but placed a large question mark over the application of the term to those whose loved ones had died while involved in paramilitary activity. A court ruling condemned Mrs McDougal's appointment as "improper and politically motivated".

This week's appointment of four commissioners appears to have corrected that error - or rather, the inclusion of Patricia MacBride has. Ms MacBride's father Frank died after an attack by loyalists and her brother Tony was an IRA volunteer shot dead by the SAS. Her inclusion makes clear that the interests of all victims, unionist and republican, will be addressed by the commission.

Her republican background provides a counter-weight to Mrs McDougal's unionism, with Messrs McAllister and Nesbitt adding a liberal (and male) nationalist/unionist colouring. £260,000 a year? If the make-up of the team has settled the who-is-a-victim question, it's already been worth most of the money.

But commissions don't just exist, they actually DO. And what will this four-person team do? Well, the original Order says the commissioner's job is to "promote an awareness of matters relating to the interests of victims and survivors and of the need to safeguard those interests". Or as Ken Bloomfield has termed it, their job is to act as a megaphone for victims. Mmm. So what are MLAs, MPs, TDs and MEPs for, then? Public representatives are paid to represent to Government the concerns of their constituents.

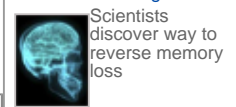
Given that down the decades members of the House of Commons, the Dail and the European parliament have been loud in their condemnation of those who meted out suffering during in the Troubles, shouldn't

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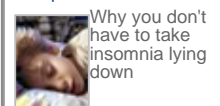
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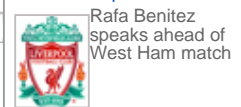
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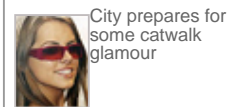
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they now be equally loud in championing the needs of victims?

You probably noticed that in recent months members of the Commons and the Dail voted themselves a juicy pay-rise. Becoming the megaphone for victims' concerns would be a good start in justifying such an increase.

The fact is, if our political system was working as it should, victims wouldn't need another layer of intermediary for their interests to be properly attended to.

Their elected representatives would already be doing the job. I've just started reading the new novel by that excellent Downpatrick writer David Park.

It's called The Truth Commissioner and it examines in fascinating detail the appointment of - you guessed it - a Truth Commissioner here.

In the early pages the Commissioner reflects on the naivety of his team of young lawyers: "More than anything they are children, bright-eyed with idealism and the belief that the report they will present in a month's time will illuminate the way forward, that they will have played an important part in constructing the way out of the morass, in building a new bridge to healing and forgiveness.

"So how would they feel if he were to tell them now that it's all been for the optics, that what will happen and how it will happen has already been agreed, mapped out, and the fixity of the main boundaries established like every continent after every war? A few small disputed areas still exist that might be left as neutral or placed under joint administration, but by and large it's a done deal."

Yes, I'm certainly glad the victims commission has been created.

I'm less certain they have, or should have, worthwhile work to do.

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