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A road map to reconciliation

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IT IS in the nature of things for people to be disturbed by divisive rather than unifying issues. Therefore, it was inevitable that a recommendation for payment of a flat rate of compensation arising from the death of loved ones during the conflict in Northern Ireland should become an immediate focus of dissent, while complex proposals by Robin Eames and Denis Bradley concerning a five-year process of reconciliation and community-building received scant attention.

As debate on the report develops, however, it is important that a more balanced response should be forthcoming.

Dislocation between the compensation issue and far-reaching recommendations affecting new inquiry procedures, reconciliation, supports for victims and survivors and the building of a shared future was evident in the relative costs. The former would cost £40 million, the latter, 10 times as much. The authors accepted the compensation proposal would cause distress to some. But they felt avoiding this highly-politicised issue would be as self-defeating as the establishment of a "hierarchy of victims along sectarian lines". So they opted for a long-term approach and prepared for short-term abuse.

The report challenged powerful interests and ingrained attitudes in its aim of not allowing the past to dominate the future. The British government is being asked to establish and fund an independent legacy commission with extensive investigative powers, along with a reconciliation forum that will address the needs of victims and survivors. First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness are invited to publicly support and advance that process. Sinn Féin is being implicitly challenged to allow the legacy commission take over the promised Finucane inquiry. The Government has been asked to co-operate by way of legislation and funding. And Christian churches are being prompted to rethink their contribution to a non-sectarian future in the area of education.

The structures envisaged by the Eames/Bradley consultative group, if adopted by the British government, will require primary legislation. So, it could take up to two years for a legacy commission and a reconciliation forum to begin work. That may operate to their advantage because the compensation controversy is likely to have faded by then. Those people who want answers – rather than compensation – will be able to approach the legacy commission in its various manifestations. And while that body will absorb the functions of the police ombudsman and the historical inquiries team in accessing records and compelling the production of witnesses and documents, its conclusions will be confined to overall, and not individual, responsibility.

The report talks about moving forward out of the shadows of the past. Tremendous progress has been made, but the divisions that led to almost 40 years of conflict are still present. The two communities are at a transition stage in recognising the validity of each other's aspirations. And, in spite of initial, negative reactions to a lesser aspect of this report, it does offer a detailed road map leading to stability and reconciliation.

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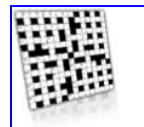
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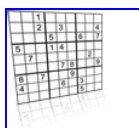
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