

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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For: HQ **From: Belfast**
For: Secretary Gallagher **From: Joint Secretary**

Subj: Update on NI Victims Commission

1. I had a word with Ken Bloomfield this week about his work on the NI victims initiative which was recently launched by the Secretary of State.

2. He told me that, after a few weeks devoted to organisational preparations, he has now begun a round of public consultations on ways in which the victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland may be commemorated. His initial thinking is that, because of the enormous difficulty in reaching agreement on definitions of victimhood, it may be preferable to avoid the more obvious forms of commemoration (such as a monument bearing the names of all the dead and injured) and to go for, say, a block of additional financial resources to supplement existing medical, counselling, re-training or other back-up services.

3. The Northern Ireland Victims Commission, Bloomfield remarked drily, is a somewhat grand description for what he is doing. He has been equipped with a small office in Stormont House and a private secretary (after initially working from home) and is effectively a one-man operation. No specific budget has been provided for the initiative as yet. Recalling that the Secretary of State came under DUP pressure a few weeks ago because of the length of time it had taken for him to become operational, Bloomfield blamed inadequate administrative provision within the NIO for the delay. The Secretary of State had been forced to issue a press statement to reassure people that the initiative was up and running and that Bloomfield would shortly be making contact with relevant people, both through advertisements and directly.

4. His terms of reference are to "examine the feasibility of providing greater recognition

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for those who have become victims in the last thirty years as a consequence of events in Northern Ireland, recognising that those events have also had appalling repercusions for many people not living in Northern Ireland". He has been tasked to consult the various organisations concerned with the welfare of the bereaved and disabled; to consult community groups, churches and political parties; and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State.

5. He recently held the first of a series of public sessions (in the North-West) and other meetings are scheduled for the New Year. Trips to Britain are also foreseen (Colin Parry is one of a number of people who have made contact with him).

6. The problem of defining victim status is consuming much of his attention at present. There are many who will argue that the families of terrorists who have been killed are as entitled to benefit from this initiative as those of the people who have died at their hands. There are many others, of course, who will argue vehemently from the opposite point of view. Bloomfield fears that nobody will be satisfied with whatever definition he offers and is looking for a way of avoiding this issue altogether.

7. He expects to complete his consultations and to forward recommendations to the Secretary of State by May or June of next year. His main concern is that whatever emerges from this initiative should not in itself become a focal point for division but should be something capable of winning the support of all victims in Northern Ireland, however broadly defined.

8. Recalling the provenance of this exercise (among a list of confidence-building measures proposed by David Trimble), I emphasised to Bloomfield the importance of reassuring the nationalist community that it would have a value and relevance for them and would be approached in a rigorously impartial way. Bloomfield took this point and said he was particularly anxious to emphasise his independence of any interest, including the British Government. (Comment: Many will, of course, have difficulty with this proposition in view of Bloomfield's lengthy service with successive British Governments and his staunch defence of Unionist interests).

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