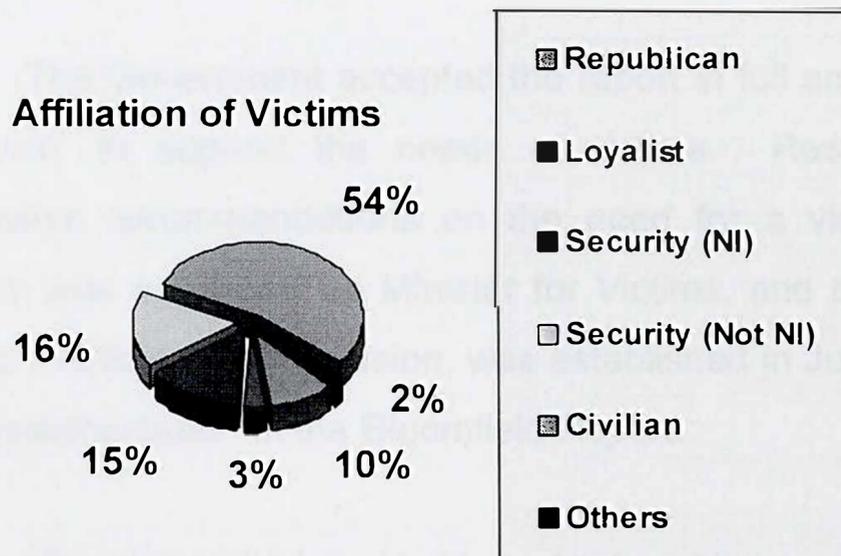


VICTIMS LIAISON UNIT

On 24 October 1997, the Secretary of State announced her intention to establish a commission: "to look at possible ways to recognise the pain and suffering felt by victims of violence arising from the troubles of the last 30 years, including those who have died or been injured in the service of the community."

2. The chart below shows that the burden of deaths has fallen mainly on civilians.



The data in the graph was supplied by the Cost of the Troubles Study.

3. In November 1997, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield was appointed as Victims Commissioner and asked to consult various organisations concerned with the welfare of the bereaved and disabled, as well as with community groups, churches and political parties, and to make recommendations.

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4. In May 1998, Sir Kenneth produced his report entitled, "We Will Remember Them". It was generally well received, although some groups believed that not enough attention was paid to victims of "state violence".

His main recommendations were on the issues of:

- compensation
- acknowledgement and recognition of victims' needs
- counselling/ befriending
- financial support for victims' groups
- pain relief/ prosthetics/ trauma care
- truth and reconciliation
- the "disappeared", the "exiled", and the "displaced"
- effects on children
- memorials

5. The Government accepted the report in full and pledged a £5m "down payment" to support the needs of victims. Responding to one of Sir Kenneth's recommendations on the need for a victims' champion, Adam Ingram was appointed as Minister for Victims, and the Victims Liaison Unit, part of Political Affairs Division, was established in June 1998 to take forward the implementation of the Bloomfield Report.

6. The Victims Liaison Unit launched a wide-ranging consultation exercise on the report, as recommended by Sir Kenneth. To date, it has also:

- established an independent review of the "fitness for purpose" of the Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme (this is chaired by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield who is due to report on 2 July)
- funded the establishment of a Family Trauma Centre in Belfast
- established a £200k fund to support victims' groups

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- established an Educational Bursary Scheme to help those whose education had suffered as a result of the Troubles
- established a Northern Ireland Memorial Fund and donated £1m to kick-start the fund
- provided £50k to fund pilot schemes in the voluntary sector
- established a Touchstone Group to advise on future policy

The political context

7. The victims' issue is linked to the political process in two main ways. Firstly, it is specifically mentioned in paragraphs 11-13 (page 18) of the Belfast Agreement. This section mentions victims in the context of reconciliation and the need to provide additional and financial support for the victim community.

8. Secondly, and sometimes problematically, some sections of the political and civic community have responded to the needs of victims in a parochial or community-specific way, often with heavy political overtones. This has created difficulties in terms of one group or community seeking higher status than, or equal status with, another group. There is, in effect, a battle for recognition between Unionist and Nationalist "victimhood", sometimes encouraged by local and national political representatives. There is of course a large, although less vocal, middle ground of victims who simply want support for all who have suffered and who would recognise the complexity of victimhood.

9. The VLU has attempted to be inclusive in its dealings with all sections of the victim community, but there is still a perception from some Unionist groups that they are not given sufficient recognition by the Government for the sacrifices which they and their families have made for their country. The Saville inquiry, the response to the murder of Rosemary Nelson, the Finucane and Hamill cases are often quoted against an "apparent" lack of interest in

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resolving corresponding murders and incidents perpetrated by republican terrorists. These perceptions have fuelled an upsurge in Unionist victims' groups often, but not always, representing ex-security force interests. The nationalist perspective is generally that they suffer because the government will not acknowledge the past "wrongs of the state". These two views, while not mutually exclusive, are often counter-productive for both sections of the community.

10. Both sides feel that the victims' issue is considered less important than, for example, prisoner releases and that the current interest in victims will dissipate if and when a devolved administration is formed. The negative effect of the early release of prisoners in work with victims cannot be underestimated, particularly within Unionism. Over-arching all of this is the general lack of progress on the peace process. The uncertainties and fears of the whole community are mirrored and often magnified within the victim community.

11. In summary, the victims' issue has assumed a high political profile, often in a negative way, which has made it more difficult to move forward in what is already a complex area.

Current position

12. The VLU has made extensive contacts with the victim community and, largely, has a good working relationship with all shades of opinion. Many individuals are also in touch with the Unit and our database of contacts is approaching 1,700. Some useful dialogue has taken place between the VLU and the individual victims' groups on the best way forward. There is, however, no straightforward response which will satisfy all interests. The Government plans to launch a further tranche of support initiatives in the near future.