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- Weather
- Archive
- Calendar 2007

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- Jobs
- Training
- Dating
- Gaming
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- RSS
- Media Kit

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- Sunday Life
- Ireland's Saturday Night

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Opinion](#)

Opinion

Troubles victims must get closure

Monday, February 12, 2007

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield says it's vital that a permanent Victims Commissioner is appointed as soon as possible - and that financial support of the bereaved and injured should have received a higher priority

Almost 10 years have passed since I first became involved in the sensitive issue of how to recognise and respond to the suffering of victims of our 'Troubles'.

My appointment by Mo Mowlam in 1997 to be Victims Commissioner was to be followed by an inquiry into the system of Criminal Injuries Compensation (with Professor Desmond Greer and Dr Marion Gibson) and my later appointment in 1999 to be a member of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains, in whose work I am still involved today.

I have often asked myself why it took so long for government and society to acknowledge the plight of victims and survivors as a key issue to be addressed in any 'peace process'. Perhaps, during our decades of violence and suffering, Ministers and senior civil servants like myself too readily assumed that a jurisdiction with developed health and social services; with active churches and voluntary groups, and with provision to compensate for death or injury, must be able to cope adequately with the human tragedies of our situation.

Designation

My work in 1997-1998 was a wake-up call to myself as well as others. Never assume that 'everything should be alright'.

Almost nine years have passed since the publication of my report 'We Will Remember Them'. It received an immediate welcome from Government, led to the designation of a responsible Minister and the establishment of official machinery to support him and a number of specific initiatives, including the establishment of a Northern Ireland Memorial Fund.

I hope and believe that these initiatives have helped to ease some of the continuing pain and grief.

Yet I have to admit to real disappointment that it has taken so long to respond to the heart and core of that 1998 report. Above all else, I argued that the victims of our violence needed a more effective voice and 'a listening ear'.

Various efforts have been made to draw upon the views and experiences of individual victims and victims' groups, but it has never been easy to receive a sharp focus from people and communities with different agendas.






Ombudsman

While I welcomed the creation of machinery within Government, I argued in 1998 and have consistently called since then for the creation of an independent office in the form of a permanent Commission or Ombudsman for this vulnerable section of our community.

I therefore warmly welcomed the appointment of an interim Victims Commissioner to lay the groundwork for a more permanent appointment. I greatly regret the fact that the appointment of Bertha McDougall in that role subsequently became mired in controversy. None of this was of her making. She was good enough to include me among those she consulted in the course of her work, and I applaud her approach and her recent report.

What we now need to do is to get a permanent Commissioner in place as soon as possible, and that individual, whoever he or she may prove to be, must not shrink from frank and fearless advice to Government. As a civil servant for almost 40 years, I learned that the pecking order of priorities is more important than the rhetoric of good intentions. In my 1998 report I chose one benchmark for the comparison of priorities; it would be odd, I suggested, if more public money were to be spent on the rehabilitation of offenders than on the support of the innocent and vulnerable.


Nowadays I reflect on the huge sums of money committed, or likely to be committed in future, to the


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investigation of specific episodes in our sad history.

There are strong arguments for every such initiative, but public expenditure is not 'a zero sum game', and I believe generous support of victims should have received, and should receive, a higher priority.

Compensation

Mrs McDougall has returned in her report to a problem confronted in our Review of Criminal Injuries Compensation. The greater number of deaths and serious injuries occurred in the earlier years of the Troubles, yet at that time the arrangements for compensation were strikingly less generous than they would later become. We therefore called in our June 1999 report for action to provide "some form of financial assistance by way of the mitigation of the inadequacy of the original award of compensation."

Too many families were left with inadequate means after a 'once for all' settlement conforming to the law at the time, but far from being adequate, let alone generous.

With my current experienced colleague Frank Murray, the Independent Commission continues its efforts to recover the bodies of 'the disappeared'. These cases may be small in number, but huge in impact upon those concerned and the wider community.

Recently, with the help and support of Archbishop Brady, the Catholic Church across Ireland has added its influential voice to a renewed appeal for further information. We cannot, alas, guarantee success; but we are determined to show that no effort will be spared in seeking to bring closure to sorrowing relatives who have borne their terrible burden for so long .

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