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## Opinion

### Politicians have let down victims

Wednesday, February 14, 2007

Dungannon minister the Rev Dr David Clements, whose father was killed in the Troubles, has been an advocate for victims for more than a decade. Here, he says victims have been let down by local politicians, who should have known better

I am grateful to this newspaper for the series being run this week on victims - and for the invitation to contribute. Indeed, I am grateful that over the past 10 years or more, I have regularly been given space to express opinion on issues related to victims of the Troubles.

A little while after my first piece appeared in print, commentator Maurice Hayes came up to me at a meeting and said: "You must keep writing. Victims will too easily be forgotten."

I was surprised he even knew who I was, but I appreciated his words and have not forgotten them.

The plug for this series in last Friday's Belfast Telegraph posed a very powerful question which struck a chord with me. It said: The victims - have they been betrayed by the peace process?

Betrayal is such a strong word. It suggests deceit, damage, connivance with the enemy, distrust and deep disappointment. As with the arch-betrayer, Judas, the deepest wounds are caused by those who should be trusted.

Victims have been let down. We have been let down by local politicians who should have known better. Some of them have sometimes talked a good game. Some of them have been caring and compassionate with individual families.

#### Refreshing honesty

I will never forget that my Member of Parliament came to visit our home with a box of chocolates on Christmas morning, a few weeks after my father was murdered.

However, in terms of addressing the wider issues, they were useless - the whole lot of them! When I first got involved with WAVE in the early to mid-90s, we wrote to all the local parties asking about their policy on victims.

Most didn't reply, though one did, with refreshing honesty, to say that they didn't have a policy on victims' issues!

There is a paragraph in the Good Friday Agreement on victims. I have it on reasonable authority that it was slipped in rather late in the day, at the behest of the Women's Coalition, as a dim light dawned in the minds of some that releasing a flood of paramilitary prisoners might have some impact on their victims.

After the Good Friday Agreement, and with two important reports around about the same time from the Social Services Inspectorate and Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, the Commissioner for Victims, some progress was made.

Adam Ingram was appointed as a Minister for Victims. He asked local parties to nominate people to liaise with him on these matters.

It took several months and repeated calls from his office before some parties even supplied him with a name.

#### Political football

Ever since then, it seems to me that our local politicians have continued to let victims down. Some may have worked hard on a particular issue, and no doubt individual families may be grateful for specific help, but in the bigger picture victims are a political football.

The emotional capital is used to advance one political cause or another, but the needs of victims are rarely

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the main cause of concern.

They are like a football belonging to an immature child - kicked aimlessly for a while and then left under the stairs, forgotten about for ages.

Space will not permit me to address the same question in relation to Government - and for most of the time that has not been in the hands of local politicians - nor in relation to statutory services, churches, schools, or society in general. In each category - and more could be cited - I could tell stories of deceit, distrust and deep disappointment, of expectations raised but left unfulfilled.

Does this amount to betrayal? Some would say it does, though I would like to be a bit more positive (at least this once!).

Over the past 10 years, I have often been disappointed, frustrated and angry over victims' issues and sometimes that has been expressed on these pages.

The last time was in early December, when I wrote about the Interim Victims' Commissioner.

#### Concerned

While concerned about the process of her appointment, I expressed the hope that her report would see the light of day. I am glad that Bertha McDougall has made her report. It is weak on recommendations regarding vital support for the work being done in the voluntary and community sector (though it does recognise its crucial role). Nevertheless, it makes some valuable contributions. Progress is being made.

I have a hope that the new Victims' Commissioner, to be appointed in the next few months, will see progress accelerated.

I noticed that, at the end of December, this newspaper carried a letter from 'David Hanson - Minister Responsible for Victims Issues'. He began: " The Belfast Telegraph has recently carried some criticisms on Government support for victims ... "

He didn't cite my aforementioned article, but a quotation suggests he read it.

He outlines the money spent by Government on victims over the past eight years (well spent, for the most part, though the total is still less than one quarter of that spent on one public inquiry).

The minister concludes: "Of course, I agree that more needs to be done. That is why a commissioner has been appointed. I think we need a period of continuity of effort in which everyone with a concern for those who have suffered works with the Government and the commissioner so that we can look forward to an even better future for everyone in Northern Ireland."

I am sure that Mr Hanson does not intend to sound patronising, and in my new-found effort to be positive rather than whingeing, I hope that more progress will be made.

Have victims been betrayed by the peace process? May I borrow a trick from the politicians and refuse to answer the question directly? Will local politicians take over the reins and, learning from their past failures, vigorously and radically address the outstanding victims' issues? Perhaps.

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