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Payment for all who died would re-open old wounds

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By Maurice Hayes
Monday January 26 2009

There can be no better indicator of the difficulties involved in dealing with the past and the legacy of the Troubles in the North than the controversy engendered by the first leaks of the Eames/Bradley Report.

It would be hard to think of two more thoughtful, more compassionate or better informed men than [Robin Eames](#) and [Denis Bradley](#), both of whom have been around the highways and byways of [Ulster](#) politics, and have displayed high levels of tact and diplomacy in other fields.

Archbishop Eames has guided the Church of [Ireland](#) in turbulent times and has been a major figure on the wider Anglican stage. Denis Bradley has been a wise counsellor to many over 40 years, and contributed mightily to the modernisation of policing as vice-chair of the Policing Board.

And yet when these two, and like-minded people on the Consultative Group on the Past, draw back the veil on their ideas, having consulted widely for most of a year, and reflected deeply on the issues, all hell breaks loose.

So, far from prescribing a cure, they seem to be reopening old sores and setting back the healing process.

The group was set up by the Northern Secretary, faced with demands for serial public inquiries into the events of the past four decades, in the belief that a better way must be found of establishing the truth, where this could be done; of getting people and groups to accept responsibility for their actions; and of meeting the needs of victims, their families and survivors.

There were those who argued that it was not possible to build a new society in an atmosphere of constant recrimination involving the constant retreading of old ground. And there were those who argued equally forcefully that a new society could not be built until the ghosts of the past had been laid, every last fact discovered and responsibility pinned on those who were culpable.

It would, of course, be sensible and courteous to await the publication of the full report which is due later in the week. That may be expected to provide a rationale for the recommendations -- of which the proposal to make a cash grant to the families of all those who died, although the most controversial, is only one -- and put the whole thing in context.

A press briefing on the report made it inevitable that the focus would be on the most controversial elements, that these would be presented in the starkest terms to an unprepared public, and that politicians, required to make an instant response, would do so reflexively and take up positions from which it will be hard to retreat.

The group, it appears, are proposing a cash grant of £12,000 to the family of every person who died directly as a result of the Troubles, irrespective of whether they were perpetrator or victim, policeman, soldier or paramilitary or simply innocent bystanders.

This pitches them immediately into the problem of defining victimhood and identifying the

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victim, a matter already of some controversy.

The First and Deputy First Ministers spectacularly failed to agree on the appointment of a single Commissioner for Victims, and finished up appointing four, with no very clear idea what they were supposed to do.

The group, for their part, have declined to create a hierarchy of victims, to differentiate between the innocent dead and the culpable dead.

The logic of the group's position would seem to be that all were equally victims of the situation in which they were placed by history and external events and factors.

Whether society is ready to embrace such an expansive version of charity is another matter.

It has often been noted that the two communities in the North tend to interpret events through two different sets of theological spectacles. There is the strict Biblical principle on the one hand of an eye for an eye and strict retribution, and the sometimes more emollient Catholic approach. To the extent that political divisions in the North reflect religious differences, this is likely to be the point of cleavage.

But not universally. There are people on all sides, and not only victims, who will be appalled, who will question the equity, if not the logic, of treating all alike. By this dispensation, [Patrick Rooney](#), a child killed in his bed by reckless police shooting, is rated the same as [Lennie Murphy](#), the Shankill Butcher, a psychopathic sectarian killer; the man who placed the bomb to blow up the [Miami Showband](#) is rated the same as the murdered bandsmen; [Thomas Begley](#), the Shankill bomber, is rated the same as those he massacred. The list is endless.

The likelihood of the proposal being accepted is extremely slim. Whatever about the British and Irish governments -- who are expected to share the cost -- there is absolutely no hope of agreement in the Assembly, and every possibility of a bitter and divisive public debate.

The sad thing is that the controversy will deflect attention from the other wide-ranging proposals in the report and may torpedo them, too.

Sadly, too, the victims (however classified) remain in need of social, financial and emotional support. The problems of memory and truth-retrieval have to be dealt with.

To the authors, one can only echo the words of Sir Humphrey to the hapless [Jim Hacker](#): "What courage, Minister". What courage indeed.

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- *Maurice Hayes*

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