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Robin and Denis should be cut a little bit of slack

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By Breidge Gadd The Tuesday Column

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Archbishop Eames and Denis Bradley are tough and wily old birds. Naive they are not. Overly emotional they are not.

So I'm still intrigued as to why their report recommended the £12,000 payout. They will have predicted the reaction which in Northern Ireland terms was indeed sadly predictable, with the usual suspects producing the usual statements.

In fact the 'outraged again' stance in the peace process over the years has come to be strangely comforting. It is a weird but nevertheless effective war/peace dance in which we engage, perhaps to allow ourselves time to absorb difficult and even seemingly unpalatable change.

We start off with a government-appointed commission established to recommend a way forward. They draft a report, after consulting widely (and I'm sure after agreeing recommendations with British and Irish government ministers and senior civil servants) they present their findings. Our local politicians, often before they have had time to study or even read the report, express fury about some unacceptable aspect of it. The media have a week of outraged quotes and pictures of outraged people. But then people – certainly those most affected by the Troubles, do go off, study the content, talk among themselves and across community. And gradually what sounded preposterous initially becomes just that wee bit more acceptable as time goes on.

Remember Patten and the great anger in the days after its publication? Now almost everyone has come to terms with our PSNI, a modern, progressive service taking us forward not backwards.

So maybe we should cut a bit of slack for Robin and Denis and ponder with our heads rather than our hearts what they were trying to achieve with this, on the face of it, highly contentious recommendation.

It could be that the suggestion is deliberately designed to draw the early fire, to be so hard to swallow that it enables us to digest other bits of potential contention more easily. Such an approach, albeit a mite cynical, is a tried and tested tool of negotiation and change management and often, after moving things forward, is quietly dropped.

Then it is just as likely that the 12K proposal was not a stalking horse but a for-real proposal.

Two thoughts occur to me about this possibility. While the proposal does touch a raw nerve among many people now and for all the reasons well rehearsed before and since the report was published, our reaction is within a comparatively short time span. When in the fullness of time historians analyse the last 40 years, there will be a range of different interpretations on who the good and the bad guys were and indeed who was

responsible for starting and prolonging the years of war.

Then where do you start in defining victims?

For example, when we look back on the vicious civil war fought in Ireland in the 1920s, nowadays few of us would want to argue the deserving and undeserving case with regard to those killed or those doing the killing. Rather, now in hindsight we are more likely to see all as victims of a historical situation that transcended individual culpability. So it will also become with this phase of the conflict.

My second thought is that the people who rush to give voice to anger should step back and give those who will benefit from the money the time and the space to decide. We have learnt from Lord Eames that in private there was widespread support for this proposal. Those of us coming through the Troubles relatively unscathed might actually contribute positively by supporting calmed-down debate about this initiative. Each potential recipient could be encouraged to find a way to use the money to best memorialise their loved one's life. This will mean a myriad of different opportunities to make peace with their grief – a grandchild's education, a dream holiday, a donation to a favourite charity, a thank-you gift to a friend, a memorial, a sculpture, or even a new bathroom.

So, in order to draw a line in history, the taxpayers of the British Isles make a gift to those bereaved to help them move into the future. Is that really so preposterous?

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