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Families do not want a line drawn under past

(Susan McKay, [Irish News](#))

The woman who has spent eight years exposing appalling police corruption and collusion has an answer for the venerable men who are queuing up these days to warn us about the dangers of too much digging into the past.

"Victims, all victims, have rights and the state has obligations towards them," Police Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan says.

"It is perfectly normal across the world for police to be expected to investigate murders fully.

"We are asking communities to sign up to a constitutional process and the rule of law.

"If the government doesn't uphold these, they will be discredited and the police will be brought into disrepute again."

Operation Ballast gave a shocking glimpse into how policing in Northern Ireland worked in the not very distant past, with loyalist assassins working hand in glove with Special Branch officers while a blind eye was turned by those who could have cried halt.

Mrs O'Loan points out that as a direct result of that investigation, the PSNI discharged almost a quarter of its informants.

Such a past simply can't be assumed to be over and it is a crucial and honourable part of our new attempt at democracy that the police be scrutinised so that it is clear the tentacles of old bad practices have entirely been cut away.

Mrs O'Loan has done a brilliant job. However, here is another thing she has to say: "I have had to fight for every penny, every year."

We know she had to go looking for more funds for the Ballast inquiry and that she was not given anything like as much as she told the NIO she needed.

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As a direct consequence, funds that should have been allocated to other, equally important, investigations by her office, got swallowed up.

The other cases are now in a long queue, while new cases are added every day.

Mrs O'Loan told me yesterday that she does not even know if her office is to be funded next year.

So far, no funds have been allocated after March 2008. She is unable to guarantee that her office will have the ability to investigate even the cases that are already on her desk, let alone any new ones.

The PSNI, the PPS and the forensic services are all allocated their funds on a six-year basis. The police ombudsman has to make a case each year for a budget which has proved entirely inadequate.

This is simply outrageous and it strikes me that the venerable men ought to have something to say about it.

We don't know yet who will be appointed to replace Nuala O'Loan, whose term of office ends in a couple of months.

Let us hope the government proves willing to appoint another fighter.

In weak hands, the ombudsman's office could simply collapse on top of a heap of unexplored cases, any one of which could prove as explosive as Raymond McCord's.

The NIO has now asked Robin Eames and Denis Bradley to chair a panel that will spend a year looking at ways of dealing with the past. Lord Eames would hardly consider it an insult to be spoken of as an establishment figure – he is a peer and has just been given the Queen's order of merit. He has done much good, though as head of the Church of Ireland, he attracted criticism for the conservative view he took of his authority to intervene in the Drumcree dispute. Mr Bradley said last year that the British government, instead of backing down on its on-the-runs legislation after victims groups protested, should have "gone the whole hog and imposed an amnesty".

He said that we had allowed "the sorrows and hurts of the past to claim and sustain an undue influence".

Like Lord Eames, he has had a long and distinguished career.

Both men will no doubt be open minded and thorough in

their work. However, they have probably not been chosen as people who are liable to rock the boat very hard.

There are ominous signs that the government is keen to draw that line under the past. It has less than honourable reasons for wishing to do so.

Finding ways of dealing with the past is not easy. Ask the decent people of Loughinisland who were quoted in *The Irish News* yesterday saying they felt betrayed and frustrated and that they had been treated "like mugs" by the police.

What sort of country treats the bereaved survivors of a massacre like that?

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