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## Victims have once again been used by politicians

**Susan McKay**

By Susan McKay

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Crisis? What crisis? Look, everything is fine, we've got millions of pounds for victims! The practice of burying bad news has rarely been so cynically used as in the attempt last week to deflect attention from the cancellation of another executive meeting by announcing more money for victims and victims' groups.

Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness may not be able to run the executive together but they can sling out

“unprecedented levels of funding” to what is now called “the victims’ sector”.

The title is worrying, suggesting that victimhood is being institutionalised.

This is the first £3.5 million out of 10 times that amount which is to be spent over the next three years. There will be an automatic increase in funds for all victims and survivors’ groups and a doubling of the amount available to the Community Relations Council for its development grant scheme.

So nobody even has to show that their group needs a substantial hike in funds, has a coherent strategy for the future, or that it has the ability to put the money to good use. Some groups will no doubt find some of it useful for travel expenses to disrupt the various public meetings at which those attempting to direct public policy on how to deal with the past attempt to meet the victims. Others will not, since the knowledge that the aggressive victims will be out in force is enough to keep others away.

There are around 60 victims and survivors’ groups, and rising, and many of them do excellent work with those who have been most hurt by the conflict. It is essential that these groups should be supported and funded to continue and develop constructive work which addresses the many and changing needs of their members. Many of these groups have been in an uncertain position because of gaps between funding rounds. This should not have been allowed to happen.

However, there are groups which are demonstrably doing more harm than good and giving them money without scrutinising their activities is not going to help anyone. Among them are individuals who are belligerent and there are those with a hunger for revenge.

Far from helping people to heal, in my view, there are those who actively work on keeping victims hurt and angry.

There are also groups in which therapies and counselling and other activities are offered, often by well-meaning people but the value of such activities is open

to question.

The Community Relations Council inherited a grant-giving role in 2002 which was intended to last for two years.

Four years on from this it still has no effective way of evaluating the work of groups in such a way as to incentivise effective projects while discontinuing funds for others. Such evaluation would, obviously, have to be transparent, based on broadly agreed principles and open to independent review.

Now the CRC is suddenly to be given a large amount of money to disburse in the months that remain between

now and the end of the financial year next March. There will be no time to devise new grant giving programmes and no time to assess applications properly.

In any case, the new 'Victims' Strategy' is only on the point of being "put out for consultation". The four victims' commissioners have yet to say what it is they think they can do with the extremely limited powers available to them.

There is no sign of the long since proposed 'Victims' Forum'. The Eames/Bradley commission has yet to report.

Meanwhile, those groups whose members primarily want to seek some measure of justice continue to be thwarted. Neither the DUP nor Sinn Fein have shown any willingness to lay bare dirty secrets about the conflict to which they are privy.

A huge element of the cost of inquiries held to date, or held up to date, could have been, and could be, avoided if the British government simply agreed to cooperate.

The announcement may also have been intended to pacify victims who were dismayed by the unfair attack on the work of the Historical Enquiries Team by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster.

The intended message is, "we care".

The truth is, victims have been used by the politicians once again.


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