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Tuesday, October 21, 2008

# New commission proposed to inquire into unsolved NI deaths

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Denis Bradley and Lord Eames (pictured): seeking truth recovery process

DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

A NEW commission to investigate unsolved murders of the Troubles is being actively considered by the Eames-Bradley group.

Their plan, if accepted, will see a truth recovery process established which will attempt to provide information about a murder free from threat of prosecution.

Lord Eames and Denis Bradley, joint heads of the Consultative Group on the Past, hope to propose the new international and independent body as part of their report into the legacy of the troubles. That is due before Christmas.

The Irish Times understands the new commission will run for five years and will be modelled on a similar body which is seeking information on the whereabouts of the so-called "disappeared". These were people who were abducted, murdered and secretly buried by paramilitaries.

The commission will run for five years and will follow on from the PSNI's Historical Enquiries Team which is seeking to re-examine over 3000 unsolved murders committed between 1969 and the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. That initiative has some three years still to run.

The plan, if formally recommended by Eames-Bradley, is an attempt to ease the fears of many, particularly unionists, that a wide-scale amnesty will be granted in an effort to achieve "closure".

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The proposal allows those who are keen to exhaust the judicial process room to do so in an effort to receive justice. However, the suggestion such a new commission would be independently headed by a suitable international figure will also meet demands by many victims' organisations who mistrust state efforts to uncover the truth.

The plan envisages families of victims searching for a judicial outcome for as long as practicable. However, in the event of those efforts being exhausted, they then propose families and both state and paramilitary groups becoming jointly involved in a truth recovery process. This process would be totally private. Organisations, either state or paramilitary, would be asked to provide as much information as possible about a death in question and to do so while immune from prosecution. This option would be voluntary with "no one being pushed", a source said yesterday. The objective would be truth and acknowledgement rather than prosecutions.

Such a new commission would be relatively small, with up to just five members, and appointments to it would be endorsed by both the British and Irish governments as well as the Stormont Executive.

It would also consider allegations involving security force collusion with paramilitary groups in certain cases - a job currently held by the Police Ombudsman's office.

The North's security minister said yesterday that details of informers and agents would not be handed over to the Stormont Executive in the event of the devolution of policing and justice. Paul Goggins said such issues were matters for the UK security services and would not be transferred in the event of a deal on justice devolution between the DUP and Sinn Féin.

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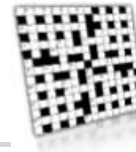
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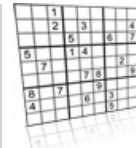
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