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Anger and loud noises may not win out over Eames-Bradley vision

THE EAMES-BRADLEY proposals symbolically launched in the Europa Hotel in Belfast yesterday were a Patten moment in British-Irish politics, a point in time when, as Lord (Robin) Eames said, Northern Ireland was offered an opportunity to take the “final step out of conflict”.

These proposals could mark a defining moment in the journey out of the Troubles, writes Gerry Moriarty

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Thursday, January 29, 2009

The Patten proposals on police reform of 1999 prefigured the radical overhaul of the RUC, which was hugely difficult for the unionist community, but they marked a transformative point in the peace process which secured SDLP, Catholic Church and GAA support for policing and prepared the ground for Sinn Féin to, much later, endorse the new policing regime.

The birth of Patten was accompanied by much turmoil and turbulence just as was the launch of the Eames-Bradley report yesterday. Lord Eames explained how the Europa was chosen because it was once dubbed the most bombed hotel in Europe but now sat “proudly as a landmark in the rejuvenated Belfast”.

It was explosive nonetheless when Protestant victims’ group representative Willie Frazer and former unionist MLA Cedric Wilson set about attempting to disrupt the opening of the presentation, the serene presence of Gerry Adams in the audience only inflaming their fire and ire.

Nationalist victims got stuck in too in response. It was raw, raw, raw, understandably so.

All that was little different to the hot-tempered presentation of the Patten reform package almost 10 years ago. Patten set the scene for powersharing politics to stumblingly, haltingly work. Without Patten there would have been no Northern Executive.

The last key elements of the Troubles are dealing with their legacy and tackling sectarianism in a serious, comprehensive way. All that is in the proposals of the Consultative Group on the Past.
Predictably, the proposed £12,000 payment to the families of all those who died in the conflict, regardless of whether they were involved in paramilitarism or British state collusion, generated the most fury. Eames-Bradley, conscious of that anger, provided a detailed rationale behind their proposal, saying they weren’t offering compensation, rather acknowledging as Lord Eames said, quoting a senior unionist, that “there is no difference in a mother’s tears”.

They believe too that the proposals allow Northern Ireland move beyond the “hierarchy of victims” argument that has dogged this issue.

There are hundreds of people who could use that £12,000, even if, for their own dignity, they could not publicly admit such a need. For Eames-Bradley to award that sum selectively could not have worked. It was pay all or pay none.

The legacy commission proposed by Eames-Bradley is the key element of the report. It is the structure that can allow the past to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. The commission will deal with issues such as sectarianism, storytelling, addressing thematic matters such as collusion and paramilitary killings. It allows for prosecutions where that is possible while acknowledging that as time goes on that will become increasingly unlikely.

Primarily, it provides a basis by which the bereaved, the tormented seekers after truth behind the deaths of their loved ones, can find that truth. That is through the proposed information recovery unit. Here, the republican and loyalist representatives such as Gerry Adams and Billy Hutchinson and Dawn Purvis and Jackie McDonald of the UDA must divvy up by ensuring the paramilitaries tell that truth. So must the covert police and British army units, and MI5 and the Garda and Irish intelligence services as well.

The point here is that if one side of the equation falls short so will the other, and the anguished victims will be left with their pain.

Honeyed or weasel words from the paramilitary representatives and the agencies of the state who can provide some element of release for the bereaved won’t wash and would be morally contemptible.

Northern Ireland politicians will be subject to all forms of selective pressure on Eames-Bradley, while unionists in particular will continue to play hard, especially ahead of European elections.

But, ultimately, just as it is for the British and Irish governments to supply the £300 million that this will cost, it is for the governments either to accept or reject the report because it is far too volatile for Stormont.

There were many loud noises yesterday but even at the end of the press conference Willie Frazer was shaking hands with nationalist victims he was earlier deprecating, which shows the value of the engagement Eames-Bradley are proposing.

It seems there just could be enough considered voices to prevail over the strident ones.

I was particularly struck by the comments of Dr Michael Patterson on the BBC’s Stephen Nolan programme yesterday morning. He is a former RUC officer who lost both legs in an IRA bombing. He later became qualified as a psychologist with an expertise in trauma. He saw merit in Eames-Bradley and could live with the £12,000 proposal.

In summary, seize the moment, was his advice. Otherwise, he warned, for the next “40, 50, 60 or 400 years for that matter, we could just be repeating the same hatred and bigotry and brutalisation of each other”.

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