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From [The Times](#) June 22, 2007

A balm for 30 years of wounds from the Troubles

Peter Hain

In the days after the amazing scenes of May 8 in Belfast, when Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness agreed to form a government together, I was constantly asked whether I thought this incredible breakthrough would last.

I said devolution was here to stay but there remains one outstanding issue that could cloud the future – how to deal with The Past.

Any society coming out of a long and violent conflict is traumatised. Northern Ireland is no exception. Nearly 4,000 people lost their lives, some 30,000 were jailed for terrorist offences. This would have been the equivalent of 129,000 people killed in Britain or one million involved in paramilitary activity.

There are mechanisms in place to deal with aspects of the past: the Historical Enquiries Team of the Police Service of Northern Ireland is looking again at more than 3,000 murders associated with the Troubles. The office of the Police Ombudsman is increasingly being drawn to look back, including at collusion cases. And there are a number of public inquiries into specific events, such as the Bloody Sunday inquiry.

But what is inevitably a piecemeal approach cannot address the issue of the past in all its complexity. Frankly, the Government has, with good reason, shied away from dealing with the past in a comprehensive way: it simply could not be properly done in the absence of political stability. But given the remarkable

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progress in Northern Ireland the context has changed and we really have to ask whether reliving the Troubles in the courtroom, the public inquiry or police investigation is the best way forward.

Is a focus on identifying issues that happened more than 30 years ago productive for a society that has resolved that conflict politically? Could the hundreds of millions of pounds involved not be better spent on the future? These are valid questions but I cannot and should not answer them as an outsider: only the people of Northern Ireland can decide for themselves.

That is why I have decided to set up a group to consult widely and suggest how Northern Ireland might approach its past in a way that heals rather than poisons. It will not be an easy task. I am delighted that Lord Eames, the former Archbishop of Armagh, and Denis Bradley, the first vice-chairman of the Policing Board, have agreed to co-chair a small, independent consultative group.

The question is how Northern Ireland might approach its past in a way that enables everyone to focus on building a shared future, not looking constantly over shoulders to a divided past. It is as simple and as complex as that. There's a great deal at stake – nothing less than the future itself.

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