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## Opinion

### Viewpoint: Moving forward from a troubled past

Saturday, June 23, 2007

Northern Ireland has changed so much in recent years that it can be difficult now to recall the darkest days of the troubles. A new generation is growing up which has no memory of bombs, bullets, rioting or roadblocks.

While the new era is to be welcomed, the past cannot simply be consigned to history. Many people still bear the physical and psychological wounds of violence, while others are still haunted by painful memories.

The danger is that as peace and stability bed down, many of those who suffered such grievous loss feel the sacrifices made by their loved ones are not being given appropriate recognition. Time does heal, but many people are still struggling to come to terms with their trauma.

The victims must not be forgotten, but neither can they be allowed to impede political progress in Northern Ireland. That said, some means of closure is required which will enable the victims and the rest of this society to move on.

To this end, the Government has appointed a consultative group to draw up proposals as to how the province should come to terms with the troubles. The appointment by Peter Hain of Lord Eames and Denis Bradley as co-chairs is an inspired choice, and the members of their panel have broad experience to call upon.

As Lord Eames says, a lot of people in Northern Ireland are still hurting, and many of them feel that their story has not yet been told. The group's task is to examine various options.

Nobody will envy the team their task, and it is wise for them to start with a clean sheet. All options must be considered, but a series of costly and time-consuming inquiries such as the Bloody Sunday hearings is unlikely to be the answer.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, similar to that set up in South Africa has been mooted, but there must be doubts as to how effective it would be. The clear danger is that such a tribunal would produce more in the way of recrimination than resolution.

As Mr Hain says, the challenge for the Eames-Bradley team is to come up with a formula whereby Northern Ireland can address its troubled past in a way that heals rather than poisons. Unless that process is carefully managed, it will be all too easy to rake up yet more resentment.

If Northern Ireland is to secure the prize of a lasting peace, reconciliation must be given a higher priority. Mr Hain is right to say that no society can develop a shared future if it is always looking over its shoulder to the divisions of the past.

The establishment of the consultative group is a valid attempt to move forward. And if it can help Northern Ireland to confront its past without jeopardising its future, considerable progress will have been achieved.

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