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£12,000 pill too bitter to swallow

Thursday, 26 February 2009

From the first moment that Lord Eames and Denis Bradley aired their controversial £12,000 'recognition' payment proposal, this newspaper has opposed its implementation.

While there is no doubt that the two men meant well in the suggestion that the next-of-kin of everyone killed in the Troubles — innocent and terrorist alike — should be given a one-off payment in recognition of their loss, it was a fundamentally flawed proposal.

No matter how they tried to describe it, the payment was always going to be regarded as suggesting that every victim died in equivalent circumstances. Relatives of dead members of the security forces or uninvolved civilians could never accept that their deaths were the same as those of terrorists killed in feuds or in the commission of crimes.

Lord Eames and Mr Bradley said that relatives of victims had pressed them to include the recognition payments in their final report, but it was evident from the response of some victims' groups and al

most all political parties that it was a step too far in a province where emotions are still raw.

Now the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, has announced that the Government is not going to accept this proposal. There is not "remotely enough consensus" to proceed with it at this time, Mr Woodward added.

That would appear to be a fair summing up of the public and political mood in the province and recognition of what this newspaper has argued from the outset. Lord Eames and Mr Bradley would have been far better advised to have 'floated' the idea before drafting their final report. The public reaction then

would have meant they could have dropped the idea quietly and concentrated on the other parts of the report.

For, as the Secretary of State agrees, many of the other 30 proposals contained in the final report of the Consultative Group on the Past are excellent and worthy of careful consideration by the Government and society in general. Now that the controversial payment proposal has been laid to rest, perhaps the other suggestions will get the attention they deserve. It should be self-evident that this community needs to come to terms with the past, if it is to create a shared future for everyone.

The proposals from the Eames/Bradley report offer potential ways to create that shared future. They range from societal and civic issues such as more investment in areas of greatest deprivation that suffered disproportionately from the conflict of the past to more personal responses such as social and health care for the bereaved or methods of letting people talk through their pain. There are also justice issues such as the pursuit of past killers or truth recovery mechanisms to let people know how and why their loved ones died.

There is one thing that everyone can agree on as regards the report. As Lord Eames put it — the report may not be perfect but it is honest.

Those who would impugn the integrity of the members of the Consultative Group do them a great disservice. That said, how many of their recommendations will be acted upon is debatable. Implementing the report — even without the recognition payments — would take around £300m and that could be a difficult sum to raise within the timeframe envisaged.

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