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Local & National

Eames: State allowed innocent people to die

Thursday, May 29, 2008

By Brian Rowan

Innocent people were allowed to die because elements of the State acted outside the law, Lord Eames said today.

In a keynote speech delivered at Belfast's Titanic Quarter this morning, the retired Church of Ireland primate and his co-chair in the Consultative Group on the the Past, Denis Bradley, issued a hard message to republicans, loyalists and the State.

Mr Bradley spoke out on the wider issues of unsolved killings, warning that as "each day passes securing justice becomes less and less likely". In some quarters those comments will be interpreted as a signal that the book is to be closed.

Speaking before an invited audience including the Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde, politicians and the victims commissioners, Lord Eames and Mr Bradley challenged the IRA to prove it will never take up arms again and loyalist paramilitaries to decommission. However, Lord Eames also had a damning assessment of the role of the State during the Troubles.

"Elements of the State, on some occasions, acted outside the law and through handling of intelligence it could even be said innocent people were allowed to die. We cannot ignore that ... In fact the State sometimes acted illegally," he said.

"If we are to move out of the past in a healthy way then the State itself needs to acknowledge its full and complex role in the last 40 years ... Having to confront the State about acknowledging its wrong doing must not take away from the majority of men and women in the RUC and UDR/RIR who did their duty and suffered appallingly and unjustly as a result."

This speech, some months before the Consultative Group delivers its final report and recommendations, had many messages and challenges:

- the IRA was told: "Apologising to non combatants just isn't good enough ... Republicans need to convince their neighbours that they will not take up arms again to advance their political cause. They have to say — it must never happen again";
- UVF and UDA leaders were warned: "In 1994 the loyalist paramilitaries announced their ceasefires and offered their innocent victims abject and true remorse. During our consultation we heard from those victims — but loyalists need to follow this through and match those words with action, including on decommissioning ... We also want to hear from them — that it must never happen again";
- and there was a message for victims: "Victims and survivors have many health and welfare issues — we are not convinced all these are being met"

But the Consultative Group also has concerns that the victims issue is being used by some to "score political points".

"Sometimes it seems as if the conflict is now being fought through victims and survivors," Lord Eames said.

Denis Bradley's comments on justice were clearly designed to be heard by a much wider audience.

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"Many people have put their faith in the criminal justice system delivering for them," he said.

"Even while knowing people would only serve a maximum of two years under the early release scheme, it was important for them that justice was seen to be done.

"We sympathise with this desire for justice," Mr Bradley added.

"However it is difficult for us not to listen to those experts who are telling us that the reality is that as each day passes securing justice becomes less and less likely."

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