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Opinion

Cash concerns cloud search of past atrocities

Dealing with the past always seems to run into money trouble - too much or too little. Chris Thornton reflects that history may not be written by whoever also writes the cheques.

Friday, September 07, 2007

Follow the money. The phrase was made famous by Deep Throat, the shadowy source who was the key guide for the journalists breaking open the Watergate scandal, but it's instructive in all sorts of areas: not least in understanding the intentions of governments.

So as the Government sends Lord Eames and former Policing Board vice chairman Denis Bradley off in search of the past, or at least a route to the past, it may be instructive to consider where they are - or are not - putting the money.

Into the Historical Enquiries Team? A week ago, it appeared not.

Dave Cox, who heads the police unit reviewing Troubles murders, complained that the Government had not delivered on promised funding - £32m - for their investigations. He said the PSNI was having to use its ordinary budget to pay for the HET.

At the Policing Board's meeting in Belfast yesterday, Sir Hugh Orde indicated that things had been resolved, or were on their way to being resolved, and that the funding question was really one of accounting.

"My view when we started was of a completely ring-fenced £32m. That was what we thought we had achieved," he said.

"I'm absolutely confident that the Minister will make sure we get the money in the way we predicted."

However, the Government has already point blank refused an extra £1.5m a year to allow the HET to concentrate on the murders that the Police Ombudsman linked to a police informer earlier this year.

The NIO has also indicated that they will undertake a "stock take review" of the HET's work. The Government insists it's routine and Sir Hugh and his senior officers say they're relaxed about it, although no terms of reference have yet emerged.

The stock take is coming at a relatively early stage. The HET has looked at less than 300 cases and have yet to move into many of the major incidents of the Troubles, like the La Mon Hotel bombing.

Outside the PSNI there are concerns that the Government might intend to slowly choke off various examinations of the past.

There have been rumblings about the Police Ombudsman's effectiveness also being limited by budget constraints.

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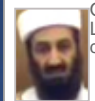
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It's certainly clear that the Government hopes the Ombudsman's office will concentrate on more current policing issues, rather than the past, when Al Hutchinson takes over from Nuala O'Loan in a couple of months. But it is difficult to argue that the Government's agenda is to choke off investigations of the past when so much has gone, and is going on, public inquiries.

Yet, so far, the inquiries seem to be an expensive way of choking off substance.

The Bloody Sunday Inquiry has taken the best part of a decade and cost almost £200m without yet producing its report. Their findings have already missed the 35th anniversary of the incident on which they will report.

The more recently established collusion inquiries are not spending as much, but the cost is significant and they are finding extensive problems in collecting evidence. Documents have gone missing and some witnesses have raised lengthy procedural fights.

It's been four years since the collusion inquiries were recommended - three since they were established - and none of them have heard substantive evidence.

So it seems that so far the Government has dabbled in two ways of dealing with past: spending a heap on a method that produces little in terms of results, or spending a lot less on methods that might have something to show sooner.

Both might indicate a certain reluctance to explore the past. They could also show that as far as the past is concerned, all the Government's eggs are in the Eames-Bradley basket.

They certainly demonstrate that the outcome will always depend on whoever controls the money.

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