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**Northern Ireland**

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# Shadow of a gunman

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Editorial

The Guardian, Thursday 29 January 2009

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Northern Ireland's resonantly titled Consultative Group on the Past - an idea every country should follow - begins the conclusions of its new report with a sentence at once wise and naive. "The group acknowledges," says the report, "that its recommendations represent significant challenges for many within society." Its authors can scarcely have expected that their prescient note of caution would be vindicated even before Lord Eames and his colleague Denis Bradley had the chance to publish their group's conclusions on Wednesday.

Last weekend, opponents of one of the central planks of their report - the one-off £12,000 recognition (but not compensation) payment to close relatives of each of the 3,500 people killed during Northern Ireland's troubles - began a very public mustering of protest. This culminated yesterday with an aggressive hijacking of the start of the Eames-Bradley press conference in Belfast. Meanwhile, at Westminster, a furious Nigel Dodds of the Democratic Unionists demanded that Gordon Brown should disavow this "obnoxious proposal". Less than 30 minutes after Lord Eames pleaded for political leaders and opinion formers to avoid "instant responses" to his ideas, Mr Brown told MPs that Mr Dodds "speaks for the whole community in Northern Ireland" - which he most certainly does not - and promptly appeared to boot the whole payment idea deep into touch.

Yesterday was a reminder that the era of the gunman still casts a long shadow over Northern Ireland politics. Presumably Mr Brown has his own reasons - keeping the DUP's nine MPs on side for difficult Commons votes like last night's on Heathrow expansion most likely - for trampling so deliberately over his Northern Ireland secretary Shaun Woodward's more sensible call for reflection and consensus on the report. It was nevertheless a crude response by Mr Brown to a report that embodies and promotes exactly the deliberately bipartisan approach to the legacy of the Troubles that has allowed Northern Ireland to make such progress towards peace over the last 15 years and which must still be nurtured far into the future.

Taken as a whole, the report is full of thoughtful ideas for carrying this process forward. At its heart is the proposal for an independent, internationally chaired Legacy Commission to shape reconciliatory habits, institutions and symbols. The report bravely says there is no place in this approach for new inquiries, which it rightly suspects of being a way of refighting old battles. But it acknowledges that the redefinition of a society like Northern Ireland in terms of a desire for truth and reconciliation is never a simple task. Yesterday's exchanges were a sobering reminder of that enduring truth.

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