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Ray of hope for bitter families as clash ends in handshake

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By David Young
Thursday January 29 2009

They stood head to head, eyeballing each other, trading insults, fighting back the tears.

On one side the brother of a teenage [IRA](#) member shot dead by the British army in [Derry](#), the other a daughter who lost her parents in an IRA bomb attack on a fish shop on the loyalist Shankill Road, [Belfast](#).

[Daniel Bradley](#), a Catholic already incensed by unionist protests which delayed the start of proceedings, could barely contain himself as [Michelle Williamson](#), a Protestant, let fly.

It was as if years of bitterness and pain for each other's traditions suddenly exploded. A sad and distressing exchange between two people who had never met before.

With contrasting opinions on the contentious Troubles legacy report, they traded angry words for almost five minutes in a Belfast hotel yesterday, both making sure the other knew exactly how much pain they had suffered.

Then suddenly, just as the row looked destined to end in recrimination and resentment, Mr Bradley tentatively reached out his right hand. Ms Williamson took it cautiously and in a remarkable act of conciliation the pair wished each other well.

"We need to move on," he said as he clasped her palm.

It was a rare shaft of hope on a day when many of the North's dark shadows ominously reappeared in the [Europa Hotel's](#) grand ballroom.

Angry

Ms Williamson was there to protest -- angry at the proposal to compensate relatives of dead paramilitaries, like [Mr Bradley](#).

"He told me his brother died for the cause," she said afterwards.

"Well my mother and father died with shopping bags in their hands, they were innocent victims.

"But we shook hands. That does give me a glimmer of hope for the new [Northern Ireland](#)."

Well-known victims' campaigner [Willie Frazer](#), who lost five family members at the hands of the IRA, was among the loud dissenting voices.

Drawn mainly from the unionist tradition, they focused much of their ire at [Sinn Fein](#) leader [Gerry Adams](#), who was among the 300 guests in the grand ballroom.

Few expected the launch of the Consultative Group on the Past's recommendations to pass without incident, and the inclusion of the controversial proposal that all those bereaved -- including the relatives of dead paramilitaries -- receive a £12,000 payment ensured that it

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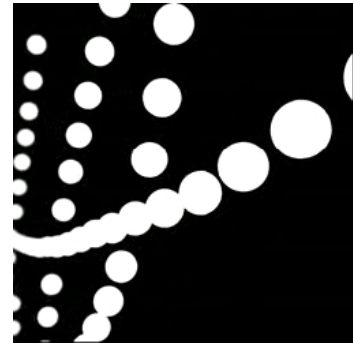
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wouldn't.

Report author Denis Bradley said the angry scenes underlined the need to heal the open wounds and conflicting versions of history, which would otherwise dominate politics and burden the justice system.

His co-author [Lord Robin Eames](#) said that if the proposal for a payment to acknowledge the suffering of all victims was badly timed or too sudden, they apologised, but he stood by the recommendation.

The two men last night urged Northern Ireland's political parties to back their unprecedented proposals aimed at healing the sectarian wounds left after decades of violence.

The British and Irish governments promised to carefully consider the £300m fund, investigate its murders and battle sectarianism.

- *David Young*

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