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Work of HET must continue

Pro fide et patria

Editorial

24/07/08

The Historical Enquiries Team was set up to examine the hundreds of unsolved murders from three decades of violence.

Given the scale of the task, the extent of collusion and the police failure to adequately investigate cases at the time, it is fair to say hopes were not high that this unit would make a significant difference.

But there was also a recognition that more had to be done to provide answers to families, many of whom had

learned virtually nothing about the circumstances surrounding a relative's death.

And while it has had limited success in bringing forward cases for prosecution, the unit has performed an invaluable role in providing previously undisclosed information to many families who had received few facts and had scant contact from officers over the years.

It also became apparent that the process of examining every killing was going to take longer than anticipated and would undoubtedly cost more than the £34 million budget allocated for a six-year period.

Having reached the halfway mark in terms of time – but only 1974 in the chronological examination of cases – the HET's director, Dave Cox, believes the unit will need an extra three years to complete its work.

At this stage, and given the uncharted nature of this type of work in Northern Ireland, it is useful to assess any lessons which have been learned.

Of prime concern must be the views of relatives who have been involved in this process. This team was set up to address the concerns of victims' families and, ultimately, the success or otherwise of this initiative will be judged on how it has delivered for them.

There is also merit in considering ways of streamlining and coordinating the often overlapping work carried out by a range of bodies examining the past.

Former Police Ombudsman Dame Nuala O'Loan has put forward the eminently sensible proposal that the HET and ombudsman's office should merge in order to reduce duplication and costs.

With resources an issue for both organisations, there is no logic to the same cases being investigated in parallel. Dame Nuala also made the point that a merged body would be independent, which is a key reassurance for families.


The outcome of the Eames/Bradley consultation on the past must also be factored in to any considerations, to ensure a joined-up approach.

However, it is important the work of the HET continues and there is no loss of momentum.

And while there may be organisational improvements, the British government must also ensure families are not denied information due to a lack of funds.

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