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Bishops snub Eames/Bradley

Legacy of the troubles

By William Scholes Religious Affairs Correspondent

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THE Catholic bishops in Northern Ireland have snubbed the NIO-appointed group charged with finding "the best way" of dealing with the legacy of the Troubles.

In a move which will come as a blow to its credibility it is understood that the bishops are unlikely to either meet or make a submission to the Consultative Group on the Past, set up last June by then-secretary of state Peter Hain.

Any engagement is likely to be limited to a possible meeting with lay people from the Northern Ireland Catholic Council on Social Affairs.

Among the Church's concerns with the group, which is co-chaired

by Denis Bradley and Lord Robin Eames, are how it was set up and its membership.

It is understood that the Church would have preferred it to have been established and its terms of reference set by the assembly, the British and Irish governments and the north's political parties instead of solely by the NIO.

The Church also believes the group's membership - which as well as Lord Eames includes Lesley Carroll, a Presbyterian minister,

and David Porter, director of the evangelical-leaning Centre of Contemporary Christianity - does not equally represent the north's Catholic population.

There is also concern that the 12 months given to the group to carry out its consultations and produce its report was, given the scale of the task, an unrealistically short length of time.

A spokesman for the Northern Ireland Catholic Council on Social Affairs has told the Church of Ireland Gazette that it has difficulties with the group.

"From the outset we realised this was a highly sensitive issue," the spokesperson said.

"We wanted to take our time to develop a considered theological, moral and pastoral position before setting out our position to others or the wider public."

The Catholic Council on Social Affairs has been doing its own work on the issue of dealing with the legacy of the Troubles and may publish a position paper.

It is understood it may seek a meeting with the consultative group.

The Church also has difficulties about how suggestions that the Troubles should be described as a 'war' and that amnesties could be offered to perpetrators were made public.

In an editorial, the Church of Ireland Gazette said it also had concerns.

"If the Consultative Group on the Past had wanted these matters discussed publicly they should have been raised in a public address by a representative of the group and certainly not given to the media behind closed doors," it said.

"The people of Northern Ireland, who are being asked by the Consultative Group on the Past to face a most traumatic past, deserve better than that."

However, a spokesperson for the Consultative Group on the Past last night said it had spoken to the Catholic

Church, "who have told us they are currently working on reflective paper on dealing with the past".

"We have been advised that this will be made available to us and that the work of the consultative group is viewed by them as a significant initiative with important consequences for the way in which we all deal with this sensitive and complex issue."

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