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Saturday, January 31, 2009

No sign yet of truth, justice or reconciliation

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The Eames-Bradley proposal to pay victims' families in the North has left many shaken, writes **Susan McKay**

WHAT WERE they thinking of? It is hard to get beyond the crassness of the proposal to begin the process of dealing with the past by making once-off "recognition payments" to each of the families of those who died in the northern conflict. Many people who had resolved to set aside deep reservations about the Eames-Bradley consultative group so as to approach its report with open minds were badly shaken. Those whose minds were already closed had a field day.

If making such a proposal was ill judged, so was the manner of its release to the public. Having claimed that their report was embargoed until late Wednesday morning, Eames and Bradley summoned journalists to a briefing yesterday week, at which they leaked its contents. Inevitably, the stark proposal to pay £12,000 to each bereaved family grabbed the headlines.

Last weekend's papers plunged headlong into what the proposal meant. The front page of Saturday's Irish News was typical. Under the headline "Butchers, bombers, victims – they are all the same", the paper carried, side by side, photos of the Shankill Butcher, Lenny Murphy; the Shankill bomber, Thomas Begley; and 9-year-old Patrick Rooney.

Murphy, who sadistically killed Catholics for the UVF, leers. Begley, who wantonly blew up Protestant shoppers for the IRA, looks dim, and the little boy, shot by heavy RUC guns on the street while he lay in his bed sleeping, smiles the sparky, innocent and trusting smile of a child.

As it happens, I agree that the families of those who carried out murders during the Troubles and were themselves killed have a right to define themselves as victims. But surely if some sort of reparation is to be paid, it should come at the end of a process. The process would include a sensitive and honest exploration of this issue and would aim to help people to understand the pain experienced by the families of their enemies. It would also confront denial. It would show, for example, that the IRA carried out sectarian atrocities, and that members of the security forces colluded with loyalist paramilitaries to kill Catholics.

Families of conflict victims have been shabbily treated since the killing stopped. The Good Friday agreement had gracious words for them, but little in the way of constructive proposals. The Bloomfield report slighted victims of the security forces. One former British secretary of state said he was going to look into truth commissions, flew to South

Africa, turned on his heel and came back to say it wasn't for us. Another botched the appointment of a victims commissioner, and Messrs Paisley and McGuinness confounded the situation by appointing a matching set of four. The commissioners have made little impact and seem irrelevant.

The staggering cost of the Bloody Sunday tribunal has put many people off inquiries. Brave investigators of the past have had a tough time, often from the British authorities and unionism. Stalker was framed, Stephens was obstructed, O'Loan was savaged and Cory was thwarted. Some devastated families have conducted their own searches for the truth but not everyone wants reconciliation, you know. A few long for a return to violence.

Into this muddle, the British, without consultation, threw Eames and Bradley. Their team was oddly assorted and lacked visible expertise. But they have worked hard, and there is much about this report which is imaginative and courageous. They put up with belligerent behaviour from certain bullies who followed them around from public meeting to public meeting loudly declaring that their victims were the only innocent ones. They have studied a plethora of books and reports. They have listened to some of the more constructive of the far too many victims groups. They have dared to say that some victims groups are little political fiefdoms.

The suggestion of a legacy commission headed by an international figure is a good one, and while there will and must be much argument about the details of the legal processes proposed, it is clear there is potential there to set up structures that might work for many of the victims. The time frame is unrealistic and the warning that at a certain point a line will be drawn is foolish.

Eames and Bradley are way out of their depth – at best naïve, at worst disingenuous – when they suggest their commission will be capable of delivering an appropriate inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane. The way forward on this was already charted when Judge Peter Cory called for a public inquiry given the strong suggestions of collusion in the case. The British have already reneged on their commitment to it.

They point out correctly that the violence didn't come out of nowhere, and that there is still poison in the system. They insist that issues of sectarianism and social deprivation must be addressed. They even, in passing, rebuke the churches. They recognise that young people of this post-conflict generation need support. This is all important and wise and true.

It is to be hoped something constructive will finally now be done to help those who bore the brunt of the Troubles. However, when Peter Hain set this body up, he gave no guarantee its recommendations would be implemented. Truth, justice and reconciliation aren't on the horizon just yet.

Susan McKay is the author of *Bear in Mind These Dead* (Faber 2008), a study of the aftermath of the Northern conflict for the families of those who died. Breda O'Brien is on leave

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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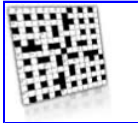
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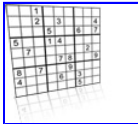
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