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Saturday, January 24, 2009

Most aspects of reconciliation plan to prove controversial



Thomas Begley, the IRA bomber who blew himself up in the Shankill bombing in 1993

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ANALYSIS: The Eames-Bradley proposals will face a barrage of criticism, but they are determined to stand their ground, writes **GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor**

THE FIRST thought that leapt to mind on learning of the proposals that Lord (Robin) Eames and Denis Bradley have framed for dealing with the past was that these two public figures are invested with considerable daring and courage.

It is not a view universally shared. Eames-Bradley have invited upon themselves lurid tabloid headlines and a political inquisition over the coming days that will require all their emotional and intellectual strength to withstand.

That is because of one proposal, in a comprehensive set of proposals, to pay £12,000 to the families of each of the 3,700 people killed in the Troubles. It means that the next of kin of Shankill bomber Thomas Begley will receive £12,000, just as each of the families of the nine Protestants he killed will receive the same figure.

It means that the family of Loyalist Volunteer Force leader Billy Wright will receive £12,000, just as the families of the many Catholics he killed will receive £12,000. It means the families of the two UVF/UDR members killed by the bomb they were attempting to plant on the bus of the Miami Showband in 1975 will receive £12,000 just as will the families of band members Fran O'Toole, Tony Geraghty and Brian McCoy, who were gunned down in that attack. The families of the 10 dead hunger strikers will be offered the same payment.

Numerous other examples will be cited in the coming days. It is explosive territory and Eames-Bradley will have some explaining to do after their report is published on Wednesday.

They know the political barrage of criticism they face, yet they are determined to hold their ground.

They appear resolute that this "ex gratia recognition payment" will be offered to all families because, as one observer put it, "one mother's tears is no different than another mother's tears".

Their thinking seems to be that whatever about a hierarchy of victims, there can be no hierarchy of the bereaved. But it also appears implicit that they want Northern Ireland to move away from a hierarchy of death, and for many of the bereaved that is not going to be easy. What Eames-Bradley propose will take time to digest. It will require careful reflection – because this is creative, compassionate work with the ambition of helping the North gradually free itself of the burden of the past.

Beyond the £12,000 payment, Eames-Bradley may be on somewhat surer ground, although controversy will feature with most aspects of this fraught enterprise.

They propose a Legacy Commission to run for five years and to be established next year headed by an international commissioner and two other commissioners appointed by the British and Irish governments in consultation with First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness.

The commission in turn will form a reconciliation forum run by the North's four victims' commissioners, the Legacy Commission itself and the North's Community Relations Council.

It is now for the British government mainly, but also the Irish Government, to accept or reject these proposals. The plan overarches the North's Executive because, truth is, this is too hot for local politicians to handle.

The forum will have four areas of responsibility. The first is to assist survivors and the bereaved, to help people with depression and addiction problems caused by the Troubles, to address sectarianism and other issues.

The second is to investigate killings of the past. Here the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) that is part of the PSNI and charged with investigating some 3,000 killings, will be subsumed into a new organisation that comes under the Legacy Commission. Also part of that body will be the element of the Police Ombudsman's office responsible for addressing past killings. It will have police powers, a full investigative role, and can recommend prosecutions.

The third and fourth elements deal with a form of truth and reconciliation. The third proposal is the creation of an information recovery unit where privately – a key word – groups like the IRA, loyalist paramilitaries, British army, MI5, RUC and PSNI can assist the bereaved in establishing how and why their loved ones were killed. This will not just pertain to killings in the North but to all killings of the Troubles.

Here, it is understood, they are anxious that the concerns of those seeking the truth behind the Dublin-Monaghan bombings are properly addressed.

The fourth proposal deals with the "examination of themes" — which, for example, means that an attempt will be made to establish how widespread and deep was official collusion, was there an attempt by the IRA to conduct "ethnic cleansing" of Protestant families in Border areas?

Furthermore, it is understood, there will be no more public inquiries. This would undermine attempts by the Omagh families to have a cross-Border inquiry established into the bombing.

There will be no proposal on the "on the runs" – the paramilitary fugitives from justice – but an expectation that in five years time when the Legacy Commission is wound up, they can return. Equally, there is an expectation in five years' time that the investigation of past killings will cease. The goal of Eames-Bradley is to draw a line on the past by 2015.

The overall cost will be £300 million with a significant contribution to come from Dublin. Some £160 million will go to the Legacy Commission, £40 million in "recognition payments" and £100 million in "bursaries" — these bursaries are for large strategic projects to, for example, tackle sectarianism or to devise means by which the North's 40 or so "peace walls" can be toppled.

Past investigations by the HET and Police Ombudsman is already costing about £100 million so the true cost is about £200 million.

Eames and Bradley will be tested in a white-hot political furnace in the coming days and weeks. Word is that they will hold firm because they genuinely believe their report will help Northern Ireland cast off the chains of the Troubles.

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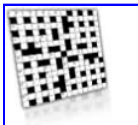
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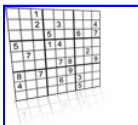
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