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Thursday, February 5, 2009

Victims of Troubles lose out in payout row

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OPINION: The offence was to articulate what the state should do in accordance with existing policy, writes **Fionnuala O Connor**

SOME PEOPLE chewed up by the Troubles who shun the label of victim may have been best able to weather the storms about a possible payment to relatives of all the dead. A fortnight on, rage is still the story, much of it voiced by politicians who lost nobody to violence.

What magnetised attention was that relatives of killers, like relatives of those they killed, might get £12,000 in an official envelope. It would be a formal rejection, funded by public money, of the concept of a hierarchy of victims: a way of recognising every death, not just those most publicised, devised by a group tasked to consider how best to wind up costly inquiries into the past.

But outrage blotted out the other proposals from the panel headed by former Church of Ireland primate Lord Eames and former Catholic priest Denis Bradley, though for 18 months inside Northern Ireland, Britain and the Republic they met dozens of groups and individuals. In addition, the spume veiled what their proposals omitted.

Some months back sources close to the authors hinted at sensations ahead. It was reported that Lord Eames in particular had been shocked by what he learned of official British responsibility for dirty tricks. The congregations he had led for so long, it was said, would also be shaken. No revelations emerged.

Even if it had majored on official wrongdoing, of course, the hoo-ha about blanket acknowledgment of the bereaved, in monetary terms, would have displaced attention at least initially. Cue paranoia and conspiracy theory, perhaps mistaken.

Eames/Bradley, essentially, were asked to assess the needs of victims but also to end investigation of alleged wrongdoing by state agencies. On the day there was certainly less attention than deserved for the recommendation that existing investigations into unsolved murders and allegations of old security force wrongdoing should be bundled together, and halted in five years. The focus instead was on the offensiveness of equating soldiers and paramilitaries, murderers and those they killed.

And yet for more than two years the widest definition of victimhood has been official policy, inclusive not only of those bereaved by the "conflict" but also those injured

physically or psychologically and their carers.

The Eames/Bradley offence was to articulate in public what the state should do in accordance with existing policy, and put a figure on it. No doubt well-meant, but also crude and needlessly provocative. The outbursts that met the report's publication in the Europa Hotel grabbed attention in part because they included the harrowing sight of bereaved people trading harsh words. But the nucleus of objectors had followed the caravan from one public meeting to another.

The payment proposal brought serial protesters like Cedric Wilson, one-time fan of Peter Robinson who long ago detected a softening in the DUP line and ex-DUP MEP Jim Allister, the only major party figure to denounce the shift into powersharing.

There was the odd point of light relief. Some enjoyed the sight of chief constable Sir Hugh Orde and his former boss Lord Stevens, seated side by side but looking off in different directions, as objectors to the protests wondered aloud why the police were never around when you needed them. Not Sir Hugh's best week, all in all.

The rage in the Europa may go down in the annals of public relations as one of the worst conceived launches ever. There was shared bafflement among those who thought Eames/Bradley a dignified, effective pairing and others who heard only clerical windbagery.

The emotions on display, like the payment idea itself, have raised the temperature so high that it will be months, at least, before all involved can have a measured, thoughtful response.

The best justification for the payment proposal is that it offers minimal official recognition to the suffering of people who may never have had the sense that the state knows they exist and that it is offered across the board.

Some will continue to insist that the bereaved must be classified as they would classify the dead: innocent, guilty, deserving, undeserving. The bulk of killings in the Troubles happened in the earliest years, a long time ago, in a great rush of mayhem. Those bereaved then – including the families of soldiers and police – were for the most part treated by the state with little care.

The idea that there is a hierarchy of victims blocks any shared memorial. There might be slight, sad satisfaction in belated acknowledgment that lives were wrecked in an upheaval that a well-ordered state could have avoided. But Eames and Bradley were asked to draw a line in the sand and this has kicked up a sandstorm which will last for months. There may be little enough left of their proposals when the air clears.

The victims lose again.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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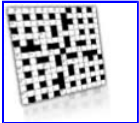
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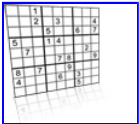
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