

February 8, 2009

VOL 26 NO 6



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Suzanne Breen - Justice and reconciliation take another step back

If they split the money, Jean McConville's children would receive £1,200 each for the murder of their mother. And what would it buy them – a week's holiday for two in a Spanish costa, a plasma TV, two premierships season tickets?

They're surely grateful. Ten children whose lives were scarred forever when their mother was taken from them in Divis Flats in 1972, the younger ones hanging onto her legs screaming as the IRA dragged her away.

The two oldest children raised themselves. The eight youngest were moved from orphanage to orphanage. The Eames-Bradley report says a £12,000 sum for victims' relatives wouldn't be compensation, just a "recognition payment". Some recognition.

'Blood money', many Protestants declare. There's little in the report for nationalists either. Eames-Bradley doesn't demand the British government hold a public inquiry into Pat Finucane's murder. It contains little to suggest that those who hunger for truth and justice will ever get it. There's nothing to worry MI5 or Special Branch that their dirty dealings will ever be exposed by the 'Legacy Commission', yet another suggested quango.

Gerry Adams was the IRA's Belfast leader when Jean McConville was disappeared. Chief Constable Hugh Orde presides over an organisation which still struggles with transparency and truth. The fact both men could comfortably attend the report's launch, was proof it never threatened to be challenging.

Eames-Bradley is a quango set up by the British government. This pair were never going to rock the establishment. Robin Eames sits in the House of Lords. He's long been someone whom the state regards as helpful. Remember that leaked Northern Ireland Office memo before the Belfast Agreement referendum?

While "overt manipulation" would be counter-productive, a "carefully co-ordinated timetable of statements from these people will be helpful in giving our message credibility," it stated. And who was among "these people"? Good old Archbishop Eames.

Denis Bradley is a former vice-chairman of the policing board who needed something to do when that stint ended. There seems to be universal media acknowledgement – even among those questioning the 'wisdom' of the victims' payment – that they were two decent men charged with an impossible task.

A former Church of Ireland primate and an ex-priest. We're meant to genuflect at their altar. Sermonising is their strong point, as anyone at the launch would have noted. In that fine clerical tradition there was no room for questions and answers.

In terms of reconciliation, it was backfire. The scenes from the Europa Hotel showed Eames-Bradley actually re-opened wounds and reversed the healing process. Their report will cost the DUP thousands of votes in June's EU election. While the party criticised the report, being in government involves an end to aggressive protesting. So it was Jim Allister's TUV (Traditional Unionist Voice) which captured that ground.

To unionists, only civilian and security-force victims count. Dead paramilitaries are dirt. No one could argue that Thomas Begley, the Shankill bomber, should be regarded in the same way as those he blew to bits. But the unionist hierarchy of victims is questionable. There were security force members who engaged in collusion and shoot-to-kill, who framed innocent men, tortured prisoners and harassed nationalists.

The IRA had its share of bullies and sadists, but there were also young men and women who joined because of Bloody Sunday, the hunger strikes or the injustices they saw around them, or who were – rightly or wrongly – motivated by sincere traditional republican beliefs.

The combatants in this conflict – paramilitary and state – had a choice. IRA members knew their involvement would lead to jail or the grave. Those who joined the security forces realised the risk putting on that uniform involved and – in the case of police – were well paid for it.

It's the civilians who were killed – those of all religions and none – who got the truly raw deal. The poor unfortunates in the wrong street or bar at the wrong time. Kathryn Eakin (9), killed in the Claudy bomb, cleaning the window of her parents' shop. Majella O'Hare (12) shot by the British Army in south Armagh on her way to confession. Children who could have barely spelt 'conflict'.

The shame is that those loyalist and nationalist bereaved who were finger-jabbing and trading insults in the Europa Hotel have more in common than they think. Collusion didn't

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just affect republicans. Faceless figures in the security services decided that the farmer and part-time UDR man down the road was expendable, and his killing could go ahead in order to protect an agent in the IRA.

At the Rosemary Nelson, Robert Hamill and Billy Wright inquiries, the state continues its efforts to thwart justice. Sinn Féin and IRA leaders won't tell the truth about Freddie Scappaticci's role as a British agent. They lie to their own community about the brutal killing of Paul Quinn and the secret burial of Gerard Evans. Eames-Bradley is meaningless. Justice in the north arrives not slowly – it doesn't come at all.

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Shane Coleman is on leave

February 1, 2009

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