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Leading Articles

From The Times January 29, 2009

A Troublesome Proposal

It is wrong to pay grieving families of Northern Irish paramilitaries

In striving to bring harmony where it detects discord, a reconciliation blueprint for Northern Ireland that aims to heal lingering wounds of the Troubles may succeed only in reopening them.

The showpiece of the Consultative Group on the Past is a proposal for families of all victims to receive a payment of £12,000 in recognition of their losses. Controversially, this payment will be paid to the families of dead paramilitaries as well to the relatives of their victims.

This will mean, for instance, that relatives of Thomas Begley, an IRA bomber who died when a bomb he was planting in Shankill Road, Belfast, went off prematurely, will be entitled to £12,000 along with the families of the nine Protestants who were killed in the botched bombing.

The report's authors - Lord Eames, a former Church of Ireland Primate, and Denis Bradley, former vice-chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board - believe that there should be no hierarchy of victims. But you do not have to echo the anguish of the father of one casualty of the Troubles - that "this is the equivalent of the American Government setting up a fund for the victims of the 9/11 atrocities and making sure that the families of the suicide hijackers get compensation as well" - to find the plan absurd.

The perpetrators of violence and their innocent targets do not inhabit the same place on the moral spectrum. In the pursuit of peace, the British Government, rightly, made morally uncomfortable compromises once it felt the IRA was ready to make the switch from bombs to the ballot box.

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But that has not left us blind to the moral gulf between villains and victims. Mercy should not be constrained. Compensation should.

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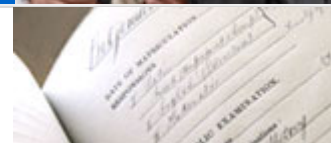
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