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From [The Times](#) January 9, 2008

Unionist anger at calls to rewrite history and call the Troubles a war

David Sharrock, Ireland Correspondent

A government statement that it was engaged in a war in Northern Ireland is one of several ideas being considered by the body established to find a solution to dealing with the legacy of the Province's murderous past.

Giving amnesties to people who committed murder is another option, but both suggestions were condemned yesterday by Unionist politicians and some victims of the Troubles.

The ideas emerged when the Consultative Group on the Past, an independent government-funded group set up last year and co-chaired by Lord Eames, the former Primate of Ireland, and Denis Bradley, a former Catholic priest, held its first public meeting.

The group is due to deliver its report in the summer, but it is unlikely that the Government would accept a recommendation to recognise the Northern Ireland conflict formally as a war – a definition for which Sinn Fein and its military wing the Provisional IRA have always argued. Such a step would overturn nearly 40 years of argument that the security forces were maintaining law and order.

Problems remain in dealing with the past, as was illustrated yesterday when Sir Hugh Orde, the Chief Constable of the Police Service of

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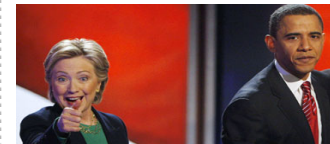
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Northern Ireland (PSNI), said that a tipping point may soon be reached over the resources that can be allocated to looking into unsolved murders. Sir Hugh told members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Review Committee: "Our views generally on dealing with the past are well known. I would not want to express a specific view in relation to was it a war or wasn't it. Will an amnesty necessarily help?"

"I think that is the key role for Eames/Bradley. Is there any consensus around any of this which allows us to move forward? I suspect probably there isn't. I don't think the piecemeal approach to the past will deliver sufficient closure to allow Northern Ireland to move on." He added: "The latest ruling from Strasbourg around coroner inquests suggests we are going to have 44 to 46 additional inquests. It is relevant because I am taking more and more people from dealing with day-to-day problems to service public inquiries and coroners' inquests. So my real experts in criminal investigation and intelligence are now spending 99 per cent of their time servicing inquiries into matters that went back 5, 10, 15, 20 years. At some stage we will reach the tipping point, I fear, where I will have to make a very hard decision about how much more I can put into looking backwards."

Willie Frazer, who campaigns on behalf of victims' families, angrily rejected suggestions that the Government should acknowledge that it was engaged in a war with paramilitary groups.

"If there was a war it justifies the murder of our loved ones," he said. "It was not a war, it was a terrorist campaign."

Ian Paisley Jr, a junior minister with the Democratic Unionists, said: "If there was a war fought under the ordinary rules of engagement, they would have a case. Law and order would be turned on its head – it would be sickening and that's why it should be rejected."

Stephen Farry, of the Alliance Party, said: "Other mechanisms can be created to encourage paramilitaries to come forward without granting their wish for a rewrite of history."

However, Mitchel McLaughlin, of Sinn Fein, said: "There is no hierarchy of victims – everyone is suffering."

The consultative group is also considering making the PSNI's Historic Inquiries Team, which is reexamining more than 3,000 murders committed between 1968 and 1998, an independent body with a widened remit to cover the Republic of Ireland.

It is also considering if murderers could be encouraged to own up to their crimes in return for an amnesty as part of a truth recovery process.

It is understood that the consultative body has not found much support for a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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Sources said that feedback indicated that many victims were tired of public inquiries and tribunals into a number of controversial killings.

Combat law

— A military conflict between two states or, in the case of civil war, between different groups within a state. International war is subject to international law

— Wars can be either unlawful or lawful. There have been a series of treaties since the 18th century that cover the conduct of war; they are largely designed to prevent “unnecessary suffering” or action that has no military advantage

— Today the main source of international law on war or the use of force is the United Nations Charter, notably Article 2 (4)

Source: Cambridge Encyclopaedia

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