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Northern Ireland study sparks rage over payouts for all Troubles families

Protesters disrupt launch of report proposing £12,000 compensation for relatives of dead, including paramilitaries

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Protesters in Belfast at the launch of a report on the legacy of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Photograph: Peter Muhly/AFP/Getty Images

Protesters objecting to compensation payments for the families of everyone killed in the Troubles disrupted the launch today of a groundbreaking report on overcoming Northern Ireland's embittered past.

Waving placards declaring "The Wages of Murder is £12,000" above the head of the Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, relatives of unionist victims demonstrated that the wounds inflicted by 40 years of violence had yet to heal.

The enraged exchanges overshadowed the publication of a 190-page study by the Consultative Group on the Past calling for the creation of a legacy commission aimed at securing justice, promoting peace and aiding "information recovery".

The 18-month inquiry was chaired by Lord Eames, the former Church of Ireland primate, and Denis Bradley, a one-time priest who was recently vice-chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Its conclusions were unveiled in the conference room of Belfast's Europa Hotel, a building renowned as the most bombed hotel in Europe.

"Dealing with the legacy of our troubled and violent past ... is the final and most difficult challenge for a society moving out of conflict," Bradley said. "Our politicians have been lauded for what they have achieved, and rightly so, but if the accommodation stays only at the political level we end up with a society that is in relative peace but is still begrudging of each other."

The study's 31 recommendations did not, as originally expected, copy South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission or include promises of immediate amnesty for those confessing their past misdeeds. Instead, its two main proposals involve the

establishment of the legacy commission – with a five-year mandate – and payments of £12,000 to the nearest surviving relative of everyone killed in the course of the Troubles between 1966 and 2006.

Payments for "recognition of the loss or injury endured" generated the most furious response, with many victims' groups, as well as Unionist and Conservative politicians, resenting the fact of relatives of paramilitaries killed while carrying out terrorist attacks possibly benefiting. The compensation is modelled on a similar scheme operating in the Irish Republic.

The legacy commission, the study suggests, should be chaired by an international figure working alongside two other prominent people. Its main work would involve "helping society towards a shared future, investigating historic murder cases, recovering information on murder cases and examining themes emerging from the conflict".

A review and investigation unit, with police powers, would replace the existing PSNI's historical enquiries team and the police ombudsman's unit dealing with historical cases. It would build on work already undertaken on past murders.

A reconciliation forum is proposed to support the existing Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland and improve healthcare services linked to the conflict, such as trauma, suicide and addiction services. It will tackle persistent problems of sectarianism and promote reconciliation.

There will be a ban on fresh public inquiries into the era, avoiding the massive cost overruns of investigations such as the Bloody Sunday inquiry – which after 10 years of investigation has yet to report. Any future inquiry into collusion over the 1989 loyalist murder of the solicitor Pat Finucane would be taken over by the legacy commission.

Although no amnesties will be granted now, the report suggests the commission might consider how to draw a line at the end of its mandate: immunity from prosecution could be offered at the end of the five-year period.

The total cost of payments to relatives would be £40m, the study estimates. The cost of the commission over five years would be £170m. Additionally, the consultative group suggests, a "bursary of £100m should be made available" to address Troubles-related social issues.

Other recommendations include the signing of a declaration by political parties and the remnants of paramilitary groups saying they will never again resort to political violence. There is also an idea for establishing a "shared memorial to the conflict", and holding an annual day of reflection and reconciliation.

In the Commons, Gordon Brown promised to study the report "with great care". The DUP MP Nigel Dodds condemned the compensation scheme for creating "an equivalence between terrorists on the one hand and the innocent victims of terror on the other".

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