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Relatives must have final verdict

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In an ideal world those responsible for the 3,000-plus killings during the Troubles which remain unsolved would be brought before the courts, tried for their crimes and punished accordingly.

However, that is never going to happen and the failure of justice to take its course provides the rationale for the latest blueprint to offer some sort of closure for those bereaved.

Archbishop Lord Eames and Denis Bradley, co-chairs of the Consultative Group on Northern Ireland's Past, are putting the finishing touches to the plan. They know it is not a perfect solution, but it is probably as good as it is possible to conceive at this remove from the historic crimes.

The two men have had to ask themselves what those people bereaved by the Troubles want. Some will still want those responsible for killing their loved ones brought before the courts and jailed. That possibility, even with modern detection methods, grows more and more remote with every passing day. The Historic Enquiries Team has had very little

success to date in bring prosecutions for old crimes. Other people will want to know who killed their relatives, why they were killed and, possibly, an apology for the death. Others may simply want to continue to grieve in private and not to have painful memories recalled.

The proposal from the Consultative Group would appear to take all those strands of opinion into account. There will be a five year commission, under an international, independent commissioner, and there will also be an investigations unit to continue re-opening and re-examining old killings and an

information recovery unit. This latter proposal is probably the most contentious. It would enable organisations — republican and loyalist paramilitary groups and the security forces — or individuals to give evidence about specific crimes in secret and immune from prosecution.

While the first emphasis of the new organisation would be to seek evidence to prosecute, in reality it is accepted that few, if any, prosecutions will take place. Only then would the truth recovery mechanism kick in.

What the proposed commission could do is shed new light on old killings. It could explain why some people,

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who patently were totally unconnected with either the security forces or terrorist groups, were killed. It would also afford the relatives of those killed and then had their reputation tarnished by their killers a chance to redeem their good name.

The proposals also suggest that families who don't want cases re-opened will be able to make that point to the commission. For some people re-opening past wounds could be too painful and their rights must be respected.

While it will be some months before the final proposals are known, the lines along which members are thinking are now becoming clear. It does appear to be an honest attempt by two men of integrity to help those people who were bereaved during the Troubles. The work of the Group is aimed at assisting them in coming to terms with their loss, not salving the conscience of everyone else. Therefore, the final verdict on the proposals, quite rightly, will come from the relatives.

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