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Opinion

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Tuesday, January 29, 2008

By Barry White

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Oh dear, just when it looked as if we might be able to make a clean break with the past, the old problems of our divided society have returned to haunt us.

Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness laboured for nine months and delivered their answer to the Victims' Commissioner quandary - not just a dual appointment, representing the two sides, but four. Good, I thought, they'll work a day and a quarter a week, at a fourth of the £65,000 salary, as a part-time job.

But no, they're each getting the full whack, presumably with their own office and staff, which better reflect the two sides of the community. Then their first job will be to look at the list of victims and designate them as victims of Protestant, Catholic or state violence.

Do you think they'll copy Amnesty, and refuse to let a Protestant commissioner review a Protestant case, and the same for Catholics? No, I didn't think so, either. It will never be admitted, but we have opted for separate Protestant and Catholic commissioners, because that is the only way the First and Deputy Ministers could agree.

Now the DUP is claiming that appointing four people is a good idea, because there are whole commissions for equality and human rights. I know what their job is, but I'm not clear what victims' commissioners will do, apart from complain to Stormont or Westminster when victims feel decisions ignored them.

In most cases the four will agree, because otherwise their jobs wouldn't last. But there will be occasions when killings involve paramilitaries or the SAS when it will be hard to calculate the degree of victimhood. If a bomber blows himself up, or a paramilitary is killed in a gunfight, can his family claim he is a victim on a par with total innocents?

With four people involved, there must be divisions of opinion. And what can the commissioners do to measure the victims' pain and how, beyond providing aid for the disabled, can they help them?

At a stroke, the money for victims has been reduced by around £250,000 a year, so already their job has been made harder. It's the first identifiable case of a carve-up between the DUP, whose Peter Robinson has challenged "taxpayers' money being wasted on over-staffing", and Sinn Fein, whose nominee's family connections are comprehensively covered in Wikipedia. It won't be the last.

Am I the only one who has been missing Peter Hain's unquenchable optimism about converting Northern Ireland into a "world-class" centre for everything?

At the same time as he was talking up the magical possibilities of devolution he was scaring the DUP with talk of London and Dublin combining on a Plan B. No one in Dublin showed any interest in joint authority, but he calculated on Ian Paisley's prime ministerial ambitions and Sinn Fein's hopes of electoral success in the Republic producing agreement. He may have left us with a sectarian carve-up, but he'll be remembered for forcing us to make our own mistakes together.

One of those errors was made, last week, by Wallace Thompson, the chief adviser to Nigel Dodds, who

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hopes to woo American industrialists to invest here, despite his personal opinion that if they are Catholic, they're taking orders from the Anti-Christ.

He was only following the ex-Free Presbyterian Moderator's line, but he might have detected that Ian Paisley hasn't exactly been haranguing his partner, Martin McGuinness, about the errors of his religion.

By coincidence, I picked up a copy of the Paisley biography, by Ed Moloney and Andy Pollak, and Wallace Thompson is widely quoted. As a Ballymoney teenager, he joined Paisley's Ulster Protestant Volunteers, a shadowy outfit, before graduating from Queen's University and becoming a senior DUP official.

He admitted going through "a fleeting pro-O'Neill phase", believing that his attempts at reconciliation were reasonable. But as civil rights took off, his reaction was like a red rag to a bull. Giving in to all the forces of nationalism was a disaster.

There's more like this, plus deep insights into DUP thinking. He remembers Sammy Wilson, in Paisley's absence, warning at a meeting that Tory policies would lead to unemployment and deprivation. Then Paisley arrived, and prayed that the Conservatives would deliver Ulster from the curse of socialism. Both were wildly cheered.

The lesson, of course, is that while politicians can shift their ground and get away with it, a civil servant who lets us into his personal religious beliefs, when they are so expressed so fervently, cannot retreat.

The least he could do is say 'sorry', like Sir Ronnie Flanagan, forced to admit that the Omagh bomb investigation was a disaster. It should have been a model of north-south cooperation, with careful handling of evidence, but there remains the suspicion that it never got the attention it needed, because of fear of exposing intelligence failures. The sources who gave bomb warnings must be heard in court, and that's why the civil action taken by the relatives is the only way forward. Sinn Fein have a nerve, challenging the SDLP's claim to be 'the civil rights party'. NICRA was a rainbow coalition of nationalists, communists, socialists, at least one unionist and independents.

The leaders, who soon obtained important reforms by non-violence, founded the SDLP, while the radicals split between Provisionals and Officials.

The IRA's violence finally wrecked the movement, leading to a working-class war, and in 1983 the anti-electoralists insisted that Sinn Fein politicians 'give unambiguous support to the armed struggle'. They did.

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