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Columnists

Dealing with the past must not be at the expense of innocents

North Belfast News

Political Platform by Nigel Dodds, DUP

If Northern Ireland is to be able to come to terms with the violence and murder of the past 40 years, it must not be at the expense of the innocent victims of terrorism.

In this respect the Consultative Group on the Past has got it sadly and fundamentally wrong.

There are clear principles which must not be abandoned for the sake of expediency, and I fear the Eames-Bradley group has added insult to the injury of past atrocities.

One headline proposal is that a compensation package of £12,000 should be paid for every person killed in 'the troubles'. This will apply equally and unconditionally whether the person was an innocent victim, a member of the security forces or a paramilitary killed while perpetrating an act of terrorism.

In another arena, this would be equivalent to saying that a burglar is entitled to the same compensation as his victim, as the burglar is a 'victim' of his economic circumstances.

The real injustice in this proposal is to make no distinction between victims and perpetrators. There can be no equation. This would delight Sinn Fein which in recent years has promoted the false doctrine that there can be 'no hierarchy of victims' among those who died.

In reality there are massive differences in the circumstances. The families of innocent victims, killed while going about their daily routine, or members of the security forces who were targeted because they put themselves in the front line to protect society from terrorism, will be outraged that their loved ones should be equated crudely with the perpetrators of terrorism.

Any attempt to 'draw a line' under the legacy of 'the troubles', for all its complexities, must not be at the expense of integrity and justice.

All families who lost a loved one will have suffered greatly from that loss, but that does not bring equivalence to the circumstances. To elevate terrorists to the same status as innocent victims would be an encouragement to those still promoting terrorism today, and is something that society would come to regret.

The Democratic Unionist Party recognises that dealing with the legacy of the past is a monumental task, that must be handled with sensitivity and due care, with the maintenance of justice at its core. We will not allow any whitewashing of the past in order to absolve those guilty of heinous acts carried out against innocent people.

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This was not a war. It was a squalid and deliberate terrorist campaign. The fact that the majority of people chose not to involve themselves in violence and the brave actions of our security forces prevented our country from descending into greater bloodshed.

Any suggestion of amnesty is out of the question, as would be any attempt to absolve criminal convictions. The opportunity for justice, should evidence arise in the future, must not be precluded. The Northern Ireland Assembly has set aside over £35million for victims of the troubles and we are determined that this should go to support genuine victims.

The DUP will stand against any attempt to re-write history or to insult the memory and dignity of innocent victims.

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