

Amid the quarrels, a shaft of hope for bitter victims of the Troubles

Launch of proposals for payments to Troubles victims divides and unites audience

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Thursday, 29 January 2009

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They stood head to head, eyeballing each other; trading insults, fighting back the tears.

On one side the brother of a teenage IRA member shot dead by the British Army in Londonderry; on the other a daughter who lost her parents in an IRA bomb attack on a fish shop in the loyalist Shankill Road, Belfast.

Daniel Bradley, a Catholic already incensed by unionist protests which delayed the start of proceedings, could barely contain himself as Michelle Williamson, a Protestant, let fly.

It was as if years of bitterness and pain for each other's traditions suddenly exploded. A sad and distressing exchange between two people who had never met before.

With very contrasting opinions on the contentious Troubles legacy report – the launch of which they attended yesterday – they traded angry words for almost five minutes, both making sure the other knew exactly how much pain they had suffered.



PA

From left, Willie Frazer, Michelle Williamson and Daniel Bradley, who all lost relatives in the Troubles, clashed before the launch of the report

Then suddenly Mr Bradley tentatively reached out his right hand. She took it cautiously and in a remarkable act of conciliation the pair wished each other well. "We need to move on," he said as he clasped her palm. "We have to put this behind us."

It was a rare shaft of light on a day when many of Northern Ireland's dark shadows ominously reappeared in the Europa Hotel's Grand Ballroom.

Ms Williamson was there to protest – angry at the proposal to compensate relatives of dead paramilitaries like Mr Bradley. "He told me his brother died for the cause," she said. "Well, my mother and father died with shopping bags in their hands, innocent victims. But we shook hands. That does give me a glimmer of hope for the new Northern Ireland."

Few expected the launch of the consultative group's recommendations about payouts for victims of the Troubles to pass without incident. Demonstrators picketed the front entrance, then formed a protest line inside.

Euro MP and leader of the Traditional Unionist Voice, Jim Allister, was prominent, no doubt with an eye on the forthcoming European elections. Tormentor-in-chief of the Democratic Unionists, who resigned from the party over its decision to enter power sharing with Sinn Fein, he branded the report as amoral and another sop to republicanism. Victims' campaigner Willie Frazer, who lost five family members at the hands of the IRA, was also among the dissenting voices.

Much ire was aimed at Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, one of the guests. He sat impassively as he was subjected to a barrage of insults.

And as the voices of the Protestant demonstrators rose, so inevitably came retorts from republican victims' groups at the other side of the room. Among those who sat uncomfortably as the brickbats flew was Police Service of Northern Ireland Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde, who had just learnt that he had missed out on becoming Commissioner of the Met. He was joined by the former Met commissioner Lord (John) Stevens, who 10 years ago led an investigation into paramilitary collusion with the security forces.

Yet while the heated exchanges made for dramatic TV images, the warm applause for Lord Eames and Denis Bradley at the close suggested that the silent majority was perhaps not as outraged with their proposals as the few who vented their anger.

Admitting their report wasn't perfect, the co-authors urged their audience to at least give it a chance.

As the crowds drifted from the hall, most were content to do just that. "If we don't take action now," Mr Bradley told them of the lingering hurt, "it will move to the generation not yet born and the cycle will begin again". His words rang true for many, but so too had the opening remarks from Brian Currin, a South African mediator. He said: "The peace process, as we well know, has a long, long journey to go."

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