



Will Northern Ireland families quietly say yes to £12,000 after all?

In poor communities, money usually helps; even republican diehards recognised the British benefits system

How on earth can two clever, worldly churchmen like Robin Eames and Denis Bradley have heaped so much ill will on themselves by proposing that families of all 3,500 people killed during Northern Ireland's 30-year Troubles be paid £12,000 per victim? The formula offers a cash equivalence for all concerned: paramilitary terrorist, British soldier, RUC officer, innocent mother and innocent child alike.

It is not as if the pair can blame the media for focusing on the most sensational detail in yesterday's 190-page report from the Consultative Group on the Past, which they led and which contains many emollient proposals to help soothe bitter memories in the province's still-divided communities.

By all accounts they briefed the detail themselves last week, perhaps in the hope that advance publicity would lance the boil and allow readers to concentrate on other proposals when the report was officially published yesterday.

Fat chance. Lord Eames, the former Anglican Primate of All Ireland, holder of the Order of Merit (rumoured to have once been Margaret Thatcher's choice for Canterbury) and Bradley, a Catholic ex-priest and widely respected member of the province's Great and Good, insisted yesterday that they understood the hostile reaction their proposal had provoked.

It is not compensation, but "a small gesture by our society to acknowledge grief", they explained.

Too late for the hordes of angry Unionist politicians, including both Stormont's DUP first minister, Peter Robinson, and his ousted Ulster Unionist party predecessor, David Trimble.

They rushed to join condemnation of the payoff as "offensive" and misconceived.

As last night's TV news and this morning's papers all report, Sinn Féin's president, Gerry Adams, was harried by furious demonstrators at the launch in Belfast, many of them still grieving for their murdered loved ones.

The statistics are disputed, as always. But the tally is approximately this: republican murders 2,000, loyalist 1,000, army and police 360, unknown 80. As for the categories of dead: civilians approximately 1,800, security forces of all kinds 1,100, republican paramilitaries 400, loyalists 150.

Both sides can effortlessly recall brutal killings that took place years ago. Surely the families of the perpetrators (many of whom were later killed themselves) are not entitled to £12,000? What people want, say critics, is justice or, failing that, at least the truth about what happened to their loved ones.

That confronts republican and loyalist paramilitaries, as well as the British army, with a different set of problems in a divided community where one man's terrorist is still another's freedom fighter and Adams's status ("Is he a victim or a terrorist?" someone shouted yesterday) a symbol of residual ambiguities.

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Central to the Eames-Bradley report is actually not the payout, but the proposed Legacy Commission, to be set up under an international chairman (a narrow escape for George Mitchell that Barack Obama has dispatched him to the Middle East) which will work with a Reconciliation Forum (tasked to tackle sectarianism) to investigate all 3,500 murders.

Though a de facto amnesty for most such crimes has been in place since the Good Friday agreement of 1998, victims' families would be invited to choose between pursuing prosecution (unlikely on current showing) and forgoing that option in favour of available information on how their relatives died.

Stalin's victims took some comfort from such knowledge 50 years after the Great Terror. So did apartheid's during the truth and reconciliation process. But a short timeframe throws up problems, not least allegations of collusion between the British army, the old RUC and Loyalist paramilitaries in the so-called "dirty war".

It is the focus of republican energies as they battle to rewrite the history of the Troubles in their favour now that they have abandoned armed struggle for politics, the tacit admission that in military terms they lost.

It is hard to imagine sensitive security data being published without heavy editing to protect suspects in all categories – IRA, Loyalist, police and military, informers, exiles (those told to go to the mainland for their own safety) and others.

In any case one goal of the proposed Legacy Commission would be to prevent any more divisive inquests (was it "shoot to kill"?) or costly tribunals of doubtful value like the £185m Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday, still meandering on after nearly 10 years. Four others are costing the British taxpayer – not the province's – a further £20m.

The entire Eames-Bradley package will cost "only" £300m, which remains a great deal cheaper than a low-intensity insurgency.

But will, for instance, the family of murdered Catholic lawyer Pat Finucane, a cause celebre for both communities, settle for that formula? Is it even legal to curtail long-sought inquests, for instance into alleged army shoot-to-kill cases, some Belfast observers asked last night.

After five years the Legacy Commission might recommend a general amnesty. Will the bad guys on either side have any incentive to risk 'fessing up before then? And what about those informers, exiles or the on-the-run suspects?

Eames's team has offered a largely rational process to heal wounds at a time when the long-stalled devolved government at Stormont is now working again after the row over London's reluctance to hand back control over police and security, an issue now shelved after Whitehall refused to blink to nationalist pressure.

But sectarian passions still run deep – and irrational – on both sides beneath the peaceful surface. Little wonder that Gordon Brown condemned terrorism and sympathised with the outrage in the Commons yesterday – without committing himself either way on the Eames-Bradley recommendation.

In fact the "offensive" £12,000 payout is modelled on the €15,000 the Dublin government has decided to pay victims of the Troubles south of the border in a society much less divided on the issue – and thus easier to buy off.

No one has yet complained about the proposed exchange rate. But in these volatile times for the global economy the value of the offer for holders of sterling is rising all the time. Alas, money isn't primarily what it's been about these last 40 years, it's been about rights and respect, status and fairness – issues finally being addressed.

In poor communities, mind you, money usually helps, and even republican diehards recognised the British benefits system. It will be interesting to see, as initial anger subsides, whether families will quietly say yes to the £12,000 after all.

Perhaps the silver lining in the gloom is that all this has been inside page news and way down the bulletins, even in Dublin. The world has other worries and relative normalisation has made Northern Ireland part of that world again.

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