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Opinion

Viewpoint: O'Loan will be hard act to follow

Tuesday, November 06, 2007

Although she had her detractors, there is no question that Nuala O'Loan made an outstanding contribution as Police Ombudsman to the reputation of the PSNI as an accountable force.

Thanks to her bravery, under fire from all sides, any fears that policing methods that had grown up over 35 years of violence would escape official criticism were quickly extinguished.

She spoke her mind, based on her professional judgment, and it often brought her into conflict with either the police or the victims of horrendous crimes.

But she won trust for her office, because of her evident integrity, and that is the most valuable legacy that she leaves her successor, Al Hutchinson, the former oversight commissioner.

Mrs O'Loan will be a very hard act to follow, since she pioneered the work of an independent office to investigate complaints against the RUC, with all the trauma that entailed.

Her report on the mishandling of the Omagh bomb investigation was a defining moment, when she showed her determination to stand up to the powers that be. From then on her judgments - accepting or rejecting complaints about police practice - were generally seen as models of impartiality.

Hers was an almost impossible job, attempting to reconcile the interests of police officers, tasked with gathering intelligence on paramilitary activity, and victims' relatives, alleging incompetence or collusion. Her verdicts had to disappoint one side or the other, but they were always presented with a professional detachment that impressed the watching public, whether its suspicions were upheld or rejected.

Not surprisingly, she made enemies in the police with her frank criticism of their investigative practices and, in some cases, their lack of co-operation with her office. After the Omagh report, the former RUC Chief Constable, Ronnie Flanagan, rashly threatened to commit suicide in public if her judgment was correct, but the fact that procedures were altered and that new lines of investigation yielded results is proof that her censures were valid.

In the case of the murder of Raymond McCord, jr, the persistence of his father and the Ombudsman uncovered an appalling dereliction of policing duties. Never again, one hopes, will a police agent be allowed a licence to kill, because he was regarded as such a valuable intelligence source.

Operation Ballast also revealed how little power even the Ombudsman had in forcing retired detectives to provide evidence of how agents were protected over a long period of time. Even allowing for the pressures the officers were under, to penetrate paramilitary organisations, there was no justification for the boycott that the Police Federation imposed on her. She leaves office with her head held high, survivor of many verbal attacks and founder of a tradition that has raised the standards and acceptance of policing to new heights.

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