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Viewpoint: Civil action best hope for Omagh

Friday, January 25, 2008

While Sir Ronnie Flanagan's apology for the failures in the Omagh bomb investigation is welcome, it can do nothing to bring the bombers to justice. The best chance is through a forthcoming civil action against suspected Real IRA members but, nearly 10 years on, it is no surprise that the trail has gone cold.

Since his initial rejection of the Ombudsman's report in 2001, Sir Ronnie has felt inhibited by the trial of Sean Hoey, who was finally cleared of murder charges. The trial judge, Mr Justice Weir, was even more condemnatory of the police investigation, so it was only right that the former RUC Chief Constable should have faced his arch-critic, Victor Barker, father of a 12-year-old victim.

But it was a Channel 4 reporter who finally extracted the apology from Sir Ronnie to the Omagh relatives which, even at this late date, may help ease their pain. He had no reservations apologising for the failure to bring convictions although, in defence of the investigation, he added that mistakes in the handling of evidence came two years before tests could be made for low copy DNA.

Sir Ronnie will not be resigning as Britain's chief inspector of policing, since he has the full confidence of the Prime Minister, but he must know that the Omagh controversy - and its implications for him - will continue. The failure to bring the bombers to book was largely down to the judge's rejection of the police's case, based on flawed evidence, but there is much more to be heard from intelligence sources that has never been presented in court.

The victims' relatives hope to bring this out in their civil action against named individuals to be heard soon, and - as an insurance policy, perhaps - they are also calling for a public inquiry, taking evidence from the Republic. Since the Omagh bomb was prepared and delivered by a car stolen across the border, after a series of similar attacks, there must be far more leads to be investigated there.

When there has been little or no progress through the courts, it is tempting to think that a public inquiry, north and south, would get closer to the truth. But surely there is enough proof, in the protracted Bloody Sunday inquiry and the on-going inquiries into unsolved murders, to show they are both unsatisfactory and expensive.

Now that the relatives' civil action has received approval, attention should be focused on making it as thorough and wide-ranging as possible. The names of those who are alleged to have planned and planted the bomb have been known for some time, and the hope is that the lower standard of proof required in a civil case - and willing intelligence sources - will provide a breakthrough. Certainly the relatives deserve it.

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