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Local & National

Brian Rowan: Will the terrorists give us a record of killings?

Assistant Chief Constable Peter Sheridan tells Brian Rowan that any examination of Ulster's troubled past is bound to leave many secrets unlocked

Friday, January 25, 2008

The Assistant Chief Constable, Peter Sheridan, knows all the complications in the debate - all the complexities around language, all the hurt in the picking over of this thing we call "The Past".

He spent the vast bulk of his long career in uniform - far away from the covert side of policing and the business of the "dirty war".

But in our developing peace - in life after the RUC - he is now in charge of PSNI Special Branch.

Sir Hugh Orde had him by his side in those first face-to-face talks with Sinn Fein in Downing Street in 2004, and, two years later, he was across the table from Gerry Adams in that photographed meeting at Stormont.

It is an indication of Sheridan's standing within policing.

He is a Catholic who has climbed the ladder into one of the most senior and sensitive posts in the PSNI structure.

He does not like the word "war" in the context of what went on here - in that life and death before the ceasefires.

But he understands it being part of the debate in the work of the Eames-Bradley Consultative Group on the Past.

That said, he wonders what the IRA and loyalist contribution to that work will be - what kind of a truth process we can expect.

"Unlike policing where Eames-Bradley can look at the Stevens Report, and all of the investigations into that; they can look at the various reports - they can call for reports. Where are those reports in terms of paramilitaries?" he asked.

"Can any of us go and look at their documentation to see how they did that event? Where is their report of that shooting that they did, and why they targeted that individual? Who gave the orders? Is there a record of all of that?"

"Will Eames-Bradley get access to those records? Will people put them on the table?" he asked

"I would like to think it's different, but it's not there - records to that extent."

He talks about thousands of intelligence documents being passed to the various public inquiries, and then he asks another question.

"How many intelligence documents have been passed from paramilitary organisations into those inquiries?"

"So, if you take that in terms of Eames-Bradley, it's going to leave a big gaping hole.

"Is it all one-sided?" ACC Sheridan asks.

The senior police officer will tell you that he hopes the IRA and the loyalists will cooperate with that consultation process, but, he sounds far from convinced.

"Of course it is right and proper that the State has a much higher standard," he accepts.

"But when you're trying to get to a future position, and if people want to build on the peace making that

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we've done, then they need to take the next step.

"And peace development will mean coming to the table."

I asked him about the wrongs of the security forces - the "horrific" story, as I described it, of the agent role of the loyalist Mark Haddock, in the pay of the Special Branch, but described as a "serial killer" after an investigation by the Police Ombudsman.

"I don't disagree with you that there were horrific events," the assistant chief constable responds.

Then he widens the discussion.

"There was a huge amount of good work that the police did - a huge amount of lives that they saved. Can you say that about terrorist groupings? Did they do a lot of good work? Did they save lives?"

"I think that would be a very difficult question for them to answer," he adds.

But he makes something else clear - that in his mind using the description of "war" would "never excuse inappropriate actions by the police or Army".

"That wouldn't have changed anything in my view. If it shouldn't have happened because it wasn't a war it shouldn't have happened because of war.

"I don't think that's a reason or an excuse - particularly in human rights terms - that you can do those things even though you call it a war."

The war and amnesty debate will continue with the work of the Eames-Bradley group.

That group now plans in private consultation to try to engage with the IRA and loyalist leaderships.

But in the police world - at that high level of the security forces - there is a questioning of what the paramilitary contribution will be.

Will some have to tell more truth than others? And will there be those who walk into the future without any examination of their past?

There are so many questions, and there are those who have the answers, but who may never speak.

That is one of the hard truths - that there are secrets and information that will never be unlocked from our past - whatever we choose to call it.

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