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Local & National

O'Loan: collusion is still a danger

Safeguards needed warns outgoing Police Ombudsman

Monday, November 05, 2007

By Chris Thornton

Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan - who left office today - has revealed that she could not believe what she was seeing when she compiled her major report on police collusion with UVF killers earlier this year.

And she warned that the kind of collusion she exposed between police and paramilitaries could happen again if proper safeguards aren't in place.

Her report revealed that the UVF gang that murdered Raymond McCord Jnr and nine other people had been protected by police.

In her final press interview as Ombudsman, Mrs O'Loan said Northern Ireland risks its future if there is no effort to grapple with the past.

And she indicated that she believes similar collusion could have happened elsewhere across Northern Ireland because of the way police intelligence papers were routinely destroyed.

In a wide-ranging interview, Mrs O'Loan reveals that she didn't want to give up her job ? the role is limited to seven years by law - and that she feared for her life when a unionist politician turned up the heat over her report that found failings in the Omagh bomb investigation.

She also outlines why she believes the Omagh report was a watershed, because it ended a taboo on official criticism of the RUC and made policing better, and explains why her successor will have to continue investigating the past.

Mrs O'Loan says she came under enormous pressure from Government while compiling the collusion report known as Operation Ballast.

But she felt the pressure was justified because of the need to get the facts right.

"Omagh was bad, but McCord was much worse," she said. "When we did that I was constantly saying to the investigators, 'go and show me again, show me this statement, show me this document' because I had difficulty believing what I was going to have to report and I had to go through every single bit of evidence to satisfy myself before I would use it and I would make the statement that had to be made.

"Some of the things that we discovered were unexpected to me as Police Ombudsman, and therefore I would expect they were equally unexpected to Ministers and to civil servants who had no responsibility or involvement in the earlier period."

Mrs O'Loan says "elements of what happened in Ballast may well have been replicated across the rest of the PSNI" ? because of the way records were routinely destroyed and the PSNI's decision to dump 12% of informers because they were involved in serious crime.

"They conducted an operation, they had papers relating to it, and they routinely destroyed them afterwards. That was province-wide. I would say that because of the deficiency in management and supervision which I

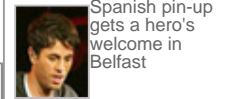
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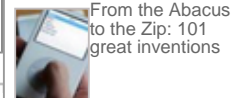
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know existed, and because of the deficiency in policy and practices, there was, I think, the opportunity for similar things to have happened elsewhere but that's as far as I will go."

She still has concerns about intelligence safeguards because she doesn't " want another situation like we had in Northern Ireland with Ballast, with McCord".

"Because that didn't happen 20 years ago. That stopped in 2003 because we did the McCord investigation. I think everyone has to be very clear about that because it could happen again."

But she indicated she is not concerned about how the PSNI leadership would react if individuals tried to cover up wrongdoing. "At chief officer level, there is a clear leadership which is saying 'we get policing right, but if we don't get it right we won't cover it up'," she adds.

Her successor, Al Hutchinson, will take up office tomorrow. Prior to his appointment, the former Canadian Mountie raised concerns about the " continual debilitating drip-feed of speculation, inquiries and investigations into past police practice".

"The law says that if a grave or exceptional allegation is made, the Police Ombudsman shall investigate," said Mrs O'Loan. "And I'm sure that he'll comply with the law. If he doesn't, he'll be judicially reviewed."

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