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Columnists

Ombudsman shone light in murky places

Friday, November 09, 2007

By Laurence White

Northern Ireland's new Police Ombudsman Al Hutchinson is no fan of raking over the past, unlike his predecessor, Nuala O'Loan.

He has voiced concerns about "a continuing debilitating drip-feed of speculation, inquiries and investigations into past police practice".

Whatever his concerns, he will have no choice but to investigate allegations of past misdeeds by the RUC as he has inherited a number of such complaints.

But is he right in his contention that investigations into historic events do not help this community to move forward?

I would argue that he is not. Nuala O'Loan's two most high profile - and controversial - inquiries uncovered uncomfortable truths, but also provided lessons to be learned.

The Omagh bomb probe by the Ombudsman proved that the original police investigation was flawed and a renewed effort resulted in one person being brought before the courts.

The investigation into the death of Newtownabbey man, Raymond McCord, revealed that police protected a UVF killer because he was an informer and allowed him to kill and kill again.

These investigations brought a storm of protest on Mrs O'Loan's head and a breakdown in relationships between her office and the Police Federation, the body of rank and file police officers.

But they did something far more important and far reaching. They demonstrated that the Ombudsman's office was fearless in its task of investigating the police, regardless of what was uncovered.

It also produced incontestable evidence of police fallibility, even wrong-doing.

For too long sections of the Northern Ireland community - mainly led by unionist politicians - were in denial of any police misdeeds. In their blinkered outlook the police could do no wrong.

It has to be admitted that the RUC faced horrendous challenges during the Troubles. Police officers were in the front-line of an unremitting terrorist campaign and hundreds of officers lost their lives upholding the law. Nothing should ever detract from that sacrifice.

But it also has to be admitted that RUC members - mainly in Special Branch - bent the law to their own purposes in order to tackle terrorism. They ran informers and allowed them to engage in serious crime, including murder, and that practice continued even after the ceasefires in the mid-1990s. And they tried to cover up their actions by routinely destroying evidence of their misdeeds.

The Ombudsman shone a light on those dark secrets and Northern Ireland is a better place, not a worse place, for that.

There is greater confidence in the PSNI principally because the Ombudsman is there to supervise and examine the force's actions.

By exposing wrongdoing the Ombudsman broke what had previously been a taboo subject. The current Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde has helped the process by introducing changes in the way the police operate.

In other words, the PSNI has learned from the mistakes of the past. How can that be a bad thing?

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Time to hit our drug culture

By all accounts Northern Ireland's drug problems are less acute than those of the Republic, England or Scotland.

But it is still frightening enough for me, especially after the deaths of two young boys this week, who committed suicide after taking drugs.

And highly respected north Belfast GP, Dr Sean Donnelly, added to my unease with the revelation that he is treating kids as young as 12 for drug problems.

Many people argue that the province's drug problems are relatively minor because there are fewer users of hard drugs like heroin or cocaine. However, Dr Donnelly showed that all drug abuse is harmful. The youngsters he has treated are suffering from mental problems because of their drug taking. They are affected in several ways. Some become paranoid, others depressed and feeling that they want to end their lives.

That is the harsh reality of drug taking. The young people may think that popping their pills is helping them to escape from the drudgery of everyday life. Instead it may be a one-way ticket out of life altogether.

The events of this week should be a warning to our politicians to ensure that proper resources are devoted to the fight against drugs. There is still a chance to make some real impact, but time is running out fast.

We only have to look at the situation in the Republic, where gangland killings over drugs rackets occur almost weekly and where the incidence of drug abuse continues to rise. Is that the kind of society we want here?

Egg all over their faces

The Independent Monitoring Commission this week issued its latest report on the behaviour of Northern Ireland's paramilitary gangs.

It was a report which brought to mind Humpty Dumpty's famous quote to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Humpty said: "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

Humpty might well have written this latest IMC verdict on the UDA. The IMC said that while the leaders of the UDA move the organisation in a new direction the pace of change remains far too slow. That would suggest to me that the UDA is reluctantly trying to leave its bloody past behind it. That it is ditching its drug dealing and rackets running. That it is moving towards a new peaceful future.

But sadly that is not the case as the IMC rather bafflingly concedes. Members are still involved in a wide range of serious crimes including drug dealing, counterfeit goods and loan sharking.

Even more worrying, some units appear to be still recruiting members and trying to get their hands on guns. And there is limited intelligence gathering still going on.

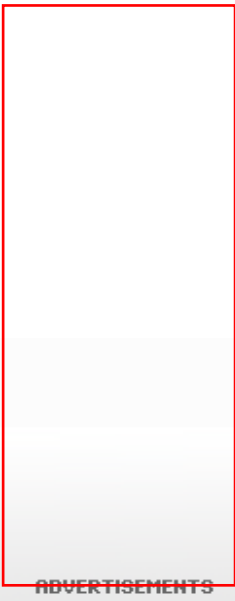
These are hardly the actions of an organisation poised for change. I would suggest to the IMC that the pace of change is not too slow, but actually in the wrong direction.

This is not an organisation seeking to mend its ways in spite of what its godfathers say. It is an organisation steeped in illegal activity with little indication that it wants to loosen the stranglehold which is killing the Protestant communities where it operates.

The IMC is too kind in believing the godfathers and their promise of a new direction for the UDA.

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