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Fr Des

Ombudsman's report: Start at the top

Andersonstown News

25/01/2007

Is there any chance that the recent report by the Police Ombudsman could do more harm than good? Yes, there is. Why?

Because the report makes it clear that police were responsible for allowing murders and even helping encourage them – but recommends that no prosecutions follow. This means police now know that even when there is proof, even when there clearly is corruption and murder, even when there is lying and disappearance of evidence, even when there is clear indication that police and death squads are working together, even then policemen and policewomen can be sure of escaping penalties. Now what does this mean for the future unless we can control these people and those who manage them?

It is a shocking and horrifying question. Before the O'Loan report was published the guilty police may have had some fear of facing trial, but now they have almost certainty of escaping it.

What does that say about the future of the police and what they are likely to do? Will it make them even worse?

It means they must be controlled so that they cannot ever become leaders of organised crime again. If ever there was an argument for the people and their representatives taking control of police and creating the ability to discipline them, this is it.

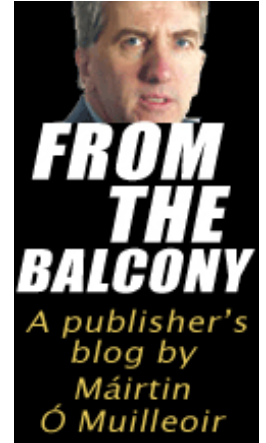
It could be argued that releasing the Ombudsman's police collusion report



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at this time is a cynical act, meant to influence the outcome of public debates on whether Sinn Féin should take part in any policing structure. The report could have waited until after the public discussions are over and a decision made by the Sinn Féin leadership. But then delicacy was never part of the British establishment's policy in Ireland. Whether it will make any difference to the attitude of republican voters to participation in the mechanics and policies of policing or not remains to be seen. It could turn people away completely from wanting to have anything to do with a body which harboured such corruption – on the other hand it may make people more determined than ever to take control and manage policing, no matter how that policing has been created or even forced on people at gunpoint. It is not the past origins but the present and future control that matter. It is logical and valid to say that whatever is there must be controlled by the people, no matter how it was put there. And if we say we must not try to control police because they were imposed on us by a corrupt government that will mean we allow them free rein for the next year, two years, three years, perhaps immune from scrutiny or prosecution. The police have to be controlled, whether they are Catholic or Protestant or Muslim or Hindu. There is no such thing as a police force which acts out of idealism and goodwill. They are trained to obey and if they have wrong-minded leaders they will obey them no matter how much they all pray on Sunday. We have plenty of experience of that. They will plead, I was only doing my job, and they will be officially excused. Police must be controlled and they must be controlled by representatives of the people. Otherwise they become at worst a tyranny and at best an unavoidable nuisance. No Police Ombudsman's report will ever get right to the heart of what was done by the police in Ireland's northeast. Because they were allowed and encouraged by senior politicians and the connivance of what is sometimes called the "most respectable elements in society". And they would not have been able to act the way they did if they had been treated with rigour by the judges.

When will there be a report by an Ombudsman examining the part the judges played in the past 80 years? They presided in courts in which standards were lowered, in which evidence of torture was ignored, in which standards of evidence fell dramatically and tragically. Courts in which "the demeanour" of a policeman proved how honest he was, in which "the demeanour" of defendants was said to show these people were probably telling lies.

There must be, simply must be, an inquiry public and searing into the people who sat on those benches and the people who acted as prosecutors in those courts. Could policemen and women have got away with as much as they did? Could those police who knew what was wrong have been intimidated into silence if the judges had been more strict in their assessments of evidence and witnesses including police? If government does not create such an inquiry then let the people do it on their own authority and with their own resources. Why condemn policemen and women and leave the others without even examination?

Nobody can envy the task facing the democratic leaders in trying to clear up what has been an appalling politically constructed mess. If the present strategy of Sinn Féin brings us even a step nearer to purifying governing bodies, courts, police, our public life, then it will be worthwhile.

But none of us will be in any doubt about the immensity of the cleaning up that has to be done.

Starting at the "top".

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