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Special report
Northern Ireland

Comment

This exposes Britain not as peacemaker, but perpetrator

Now it's official: the state sponsored death squads for years in Northern Ireland and this collusion prolonged the war

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Nuala O'Loan is a heroine. None of us should underestimate the moral courage this fastidious lawyer has mobilised merely do her job as Northern Ireland's police ombudsman: to tell the world that collusion describes the relationship between the British state and loyalist gunslingers.

Raymond McCord is a hero. When his own loyalist leaders and militias refused to acknowledge his quest for justice for his murdered son, he risked his life by turning to the purported enemies of his state - the human-rights organisations.

McCord joins the band of relatives who become heralds for their lost loved ones, whose journey confronts them with the state itself. McCord didn't retreat when he found himself in a web of special branch and loyalist assassins.

The human-rights advocates are heroes too, because they would not bow to the slur that they were mad, bad or Provo

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agents provocateurs for investigating the state's patronage of death squads. Lest we forget, the ombudsman's investigation was prefigured by an earlier report naming the guilty men, published by Jane Winter, the forensic director of British Irish Rights Watch.

None of these people are republicans. But the sectarian slur ricocheted across the ombudsman's bows again yesterday when Lord Maginnis - a liberal in the unionist firmament - dismissed her report not only as "rubbish" but as having "an alternative agenda" - code for Provo propaganda.

The devastating McCord report that was published yesterday tells us that allegations of collusion once dismissed as rubbish are true. But that epochal admission risks being swamped by an old paradigm: tribal paddies dragging the reluctant Brits into their dirty war. It is time for a paradigm shift. It is time for Britain to be brave and tell the truth about itself. It must narrate a new story about that 30-year conflict.

The ombudsman tells us that the collusion prevailed between the prelude to the ceasefires and the new millennium. Her investigation was constrained by the narrow focus imposed on her: she was only able to investigate the murder of Raymond McCord Jr, a 22-year-old RAF cadet. But Mount Vernon, his north Belfast neighbourhood, is both the local and the larger story of collusion.

Peter Hain, the Northern Ireland secretary, acknowledges that this is very embarrassing for the state. This is progress - when O'Loan published her heart-stopping chronicle of the RUC's disastrous role in the Omagh bombing of 1998 she was insulted by unionists, abused by the chief constable and abandoned by Downing Street. The ombudsman was being warned by No 10 that she was on her own.

At least this time Hain has accepted her critique. Even so, he consigns it to the past. But the past lives on - the ombudsman insisted yesterday that Ronnie Flanagan, the former chief constable, had responsibility for everything

that happened in the police force he commanded, whatever he did or did not know. He has not been called to account before a public tribunal, and no one expects him to be now. Indeed, after his retirement he has been reincarnated with her majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary.

Flanagan wasn't alone. He was part of an entire system. Who were the civil servants who staffed that security system in Northern Ireland during the Mount Vernon terror? Where are they now? What else were they doing to thwart justice while the state was investing in the Mount Vernon boys? What did these civil servants think they were doing? What did they tell the politicians sequestered in Hillsborough Castle? And the biggest question: what was the overarching agenda?

The Mount Vernon boys were state-sponsored assassins. Special branch ran their local leadership. We now know that British security services had penetrated all the paramilitary organisations. Was there ever an audit of all the murder, rape and pillage?

Collusion tells us about our institutions and their purpose. After 1987 - when the loyalist paramilitary organisations were beginning to contemplate peace - Britain re-armed, reinvigorated and refocused them, taking control through its proxies among the warlords, and prolonged the war. Their reputations as ruffians, religious maniacs and pumped-up thugs merely gilded the reputation reserved by the British as law-abiding peacemakers.

But by enlisting the Protestant militias as auxiliaries while presenting itself as a neutral arbitrator, Britain left itself vulnerable to exposure. It could not stop a father seeking justice for his son wherever he might find it - not from the UVF or Protestant politicians, but among the human-rights groups, in Dublin, in Washington and at the United Nations.

All these pressures are bearing down on Britain. It has been exposed not as peacemaker but as perpetrator, spreading terror and spilling blood; as the most powerful presence among the warlords. That is the national narrative we need to contemplate before we can consign collusion to the past.

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