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Northern Ireland

## Ulster's rotten branch

**Leader****Tuesday January 23, 2007****[The Guardian](#)**

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It is hard to think of a more serious allegation against the police than that they colluded in the murder of citizens of the society that they are sworn to protect. Nevertheless, that is the deadly charge at the heart of the report by the Northern Ireland police ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, into the protection of informants. The investigation started as an attempt to explain why Raymond McCord Jr was beaten to death in November 1997, a few months after his arrest in a drugs-running bust. It soon broadened into a wider probe of the relationship between the Royal Ulster Constabulary special branch and local paramilitary UVF police informers, some of whom were alleged to be involved in the McCord killing. These informers have been linked to an array of shocking crimes. Yet, throughout, special branch preferred to protect them rather than hunt them down, and with the full approval of senior supervisors, even going to the length of destroying much of the evidence.

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Mrs O'Loan's investigation focused on the RUC's relations with a single group of informers in north Belfast over a period of 12 years. But much of what her team unearthed was systemic. The implications could hardly be more disturbing - and need spelling out. They mean individuals and groups of loyalist paramilitaries were allowed to continue committing crimes, including murder, as a matter of routine and even policy. The informers were given such priority that in some cases their crimes were committed with the RUC's advance knowledge. Records were destroyed according to what was judged necessary to maintain the network. The RUC as a whole became subservient to the special branch and accountability was therefore consistently subverted. The shielding of informers by special branch - and their superiors - was institutionalised to such a degree that attempts to reform the practice over the years were not just unsuccessful but officially deflected. The result was a double whammy: the paramilitaries were able to strengthen their grip in local communities, while police effectiveness was reduced. Northern Ireland terrorism was in some respects aided, not prevented, by the police force itself.

The context needs to be fully understood, of course. For 30 years Northern Ireland was the victim of a dirty war on all sides. Republican paramilitaries were at least as lawless as

their loyalist counterparts, and their victims have never had the accountability that those of the UVF and its protectors are now belatedly receiving. Nor should it be forgotten that, in the midst of all this abuse, many individual RUC officers continued to do an exemplary job. In recent years, moreover, things have moved on. The RUC has been seriously reformed. Sinn Féin may be on the threshold of a historic compromise with the new policing system. We all need to look forward rather than back.

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that both the Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Hain, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland chief constable, Sir Hugh Orde, found the report hard reading. Yet it is not enough to say that that was then and this is now - even though the changes are historic. Any serving officers involved in creating the lawless system detailed by Mrs O'Loan should be required to leave. Commanding officers who sanctioned the abuses should step down from police posts too - specifically the former RUC chief Sir Ronnie Flanagan, who remains head of the police inspectorate in England and Wales. Former Northern Ireland secretaries from the period covered by the report - from Peter Brooke to Paul Murphy - should also give an account to parliament of their failure to control special branch. It is indeed time to move on in Northern Ireland. There is a strong case against an endless system of expensive enquiries. But as nations from Poland to South Africa continue to show, the unjust past cannot be brushed under the carpet so easily.

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