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Tuesday, October 21, 2008

British-Irish parliamentary body members demand material for families' civil action

RENAGH HOLOHAN in Newcastle upon Tyne

BRITISH AND Irish parliamentarians are to call on the two governments to disclose immediately surveillance information, including transcripts and timelines of monitored phone calls, in relation to the Omagh bombing of 1998.

At the biannual meeting of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, backbenchers from both houses of the Oireachtas and Westminster as well as members of the assemblies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, adopted almost unanimously a motion calling for the UK government to disclose to the legal counsel of the families of the victims all information it has. They said this should be done before the conclusion next month of the civil action by the families against five men they claim are implicated in the bombing.

There were two dissenting voices to the motion, which follows a BBC Panorama report that the British security intelligence monitoring agency GCHQ intercepted mobile phone calls of the Real IRA Omagh bombers on the day of and prior to the attack. It was proposed by the Labour MP Andrew Mackinley and seconded by Fine Gael's Brian Hayes TD.

Lord Maginnis (former UUP MP Ken Maginnis) argued that at a time of war against international terrorism a precedent should not be set by disclosing secret intelligence information. The mistake, or huge error of judgement, that had occurred over Omagh, should be sorted out by those responsible.

Tory MP Michael Mates said the decision to disclose the information should be done judicially and not ministerially. If the same methods were still being used to gather information, it would be dangerous to release details. He said speakers calling for disclosure said the Omagh case overrode national security, but they did not know that this was so.

Delegates from all parties including Sinn Féin spoke in favour of disclosure. Mr Mackinley said he believed the intelligence services were resisting disclosure as their stewardship was at fault.

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Mr Hayes said he was willing to await the official report from Sir Peter Gibson, but any evidence that could be of help in the civil case needed to be released now.

When the motion was passed the co-chairs of the body, Peter Hain MP and Niall Blaney TD, undertook to write to their respective governments conveying the body's demand.

Members of the UUP and the DUP attended the body yesterday, following the ending of their 18-year boycott. Lord Maginnis said a lot of matters had been settled on the islands and unionists wanted to play their part. They did not want the mistakes of the last 30 years to be repeated.

Alasdair McDonnell MP (SDLP) said the Omagh families needed every support and assistance in their civil case. He found it very difficult to understand that if there was information, it was being withheld. Charlie O'Connor TD (FF) said he would raise the matter in the Dáil. Barry McElduff MLA (Sinn Féin) said there were victims on all sides and only an independent inquiry could inspire confidence. He supported the motion.

The Liberal Democrat Lord Smith said members should not be "palmed off" with notions of state security. Omagh was one of those occasions when disclosure was essential. "If we do not speak up on this issue forcibly and with a single voice, I wonder what our purpose is." Alistair Carmichael MP (Liberal Democrat) said that as a criminal lawyer he had been trained to believe that if evidence existed it, had to be brought before the courts.

Chris Ruane MP (Labour) said if there had been a huge error of judgment on the part of the intelligence services, it had to be looked into. The services could even improve as a result. He suggested a delegation from both houses of parliament could go to the British government to advance the issue.

Lord Glentoran (Conservative) said he supported the motion. It was clear there had been a "total cock-up" in the communications between GCHQ and the RUC. It wasn't necessary to know everything about the operation of intelligence but if a very, very serious mistake had been made they should come out and say what was known as fact.

Jim O'Keeffe TD (FG) said there should be no blanket protection of intelligence sources when there was a compelling case for information to be made available.

The body agreed yesterday to change its name to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, and as a consequence to shift its focus to East-West rather than North-South, with a corresponding change in subject matter. Members decided the assembly should look at ways to make the new institution more relevant in the new circumstances that existed in Ireland and to seek an enhanced mandate.

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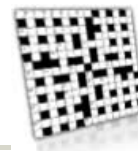
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