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The blanket

A Journal of Protest and Dissent

Collusion revelations: disturbing but not shocking

Ten-year-late handwringing admissions that the NI security forces were in cahoots with loyalist gunmen are like therapy for the British state.

'Shocking...disturbing...extraordinary.'

Brendan O'Neill • [spiked](#), January 24, 2007

Those are some of the words that have been used to describe a report by the Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland, Nuala O'Loan, which shows that there was collusion between Special Branch officers of the then Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and members of the loyalist outfit the Ulster Volunteer Force.

O'Loan's report focuses on north Belfast in the 1980s and 90s, when a gang of UVF gunmen carried out 10 murders, 10 attempted murders, 10 punishment shootings, 13 punishment attacks, a bomb attack in Monaghan and 72 other criminal offences while simultaneously working as informers for Special Branch. Some were being paid £80,000 a year, and if ever arrested by the RUC they were 'babysat' through their interviews by their Special Branch handlers to help them avoid incriminating themselves.

The report might make for 'disturbing' reading, but it isn't 'shocking' to some of us. It is well known, at least among those of us who looked beyond the headlines during the conflict in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1994, that the security services colluded with loyalist paramilitaries. Some of the families of those murdered by loyalists have been demanding inquiries into collusion for ages. In the Eighties and

There is no such thing as a dirty word. Nor is there a word so powerful, that it's going to send the listener to the lake of fire upon hearing it.
- Frank Zappa



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Nineties, the two predecessor publications to *spiked* - the weekly newspaper *the next step* and the monthly magazine *Living Marxism* - frequently reported on acts of collusion in their Irish coverage. Yet back then, nobody wanted to talk about it, much less employ a police ombudsman to investigate the claims and write a shocking and disturbing and extraordinary report.

What has changed? Why has collusion become an explosive issue 10 to 20 years after the fact?

This is less about getting to the truth about the conflict in Northern Ireland, or 'bringing to justice' those who were involved in terrorising certain communities. The collusion revelations are better understood as therapy for the British state. They're a way for British elements to admit to some wrongdoing in Northern Ireland without incriminating themselves (with Nuala O'Loan playing the 'babysitting' role in this instance), where the ultimate aim is to placate Sinn Fein and others and get the peace process back on track. Collusion is being upfronted in an attempt to boost the British authorities' flagging moral authority in Northern Ireland, rather than to shoot it down.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Beatrix Campbell gushes that 'Nuala O'Loan is a heroine' and tells us not to 'underestimate the moral courage of this fastidious lawyer' (1). In fact, O'Loan's report is partial and narrow, and certainly nothing like a detailed exposé of collusion between the security forces and loyalists. By focusing on north Belfast alone, and the role of Special Branch in paying and protecting a UVF gang, O'Loan reinforces the idea that collusion was rare and generally the work of 'rogue elements' in an otherwise benign and peacekeeping security force in Northern Ireland. In truth, collusion was widespread. And far from being an aberration, the actions of loyalist paramilitaries – consisting mostly of sectarian attacks on Catholics and occasionally targeted assassinations of Sinn Fein and IRA members – were part and parcel of Britain's occupation of Northern Ireland.

Collusion in Northern Ireland took many forms, from the security services turning a blind eye to loyalist activities to actively encouraging and directing them. A military intelligence file from 1973 estimated that between five and 15 per cent of soldiers in the Ulster Defence Regiment – a local infantry regiment of the British Army – were linked to loyalist paramilitaries, and that the 'best single source of weapons, and only significant source of modern weapons for Protestant groups, has been the UDR' (2). In short, a section of the British Army was arming loyalist paramilitaries. Furthermore, the British government knew that more than 200 weapons had passed from the UDR to loyalist paramilitaries, and that these were being used to murder Catholic civilians (3).

The loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) received intelligence files on Irish republicans, and on Catholic civilians who assisted Irish republicans, from the RUC and the British Army. During the conflict, loyalist paramilitaries killed 864 civilians, the vast majority of them Catholics (this is more than the number of civilians killed by the IRA, who, unlike the loyalists, targeted security forces rather than members of the public). The UDA killed a total of 112

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people, again mostly Catholic civilians in random shootings (78 of its victims were civilians, 29 were other loyalist paramilitaries, three were members of the security services, and just two were republican activists). As Peter Taylor shows in his book *Loyalists*, a number of these attacks were carried out with 'the assistance or complicity' of the British Army and/or the RUC (4).

Indeed, one of the most notorious instances of collusion involved the UDA. In February 1989, gunmen from the UDA and its offshoot group the Ulster Freedom Fighters broke into the Belfast home of defence lawyer Pat Finucane and shot him 14 times in front of his wife and children. A UDA quartermaster who was also working for the RUC supplied the weapons, and it is widely believed that Special Branch officers directed the paramilitaries to kill Finucane, who had represented IRA men in court cases. Another UDA/army double agent, Brian Nelson, had compiled a dossier for the UDA on Finucane's movements. The Stevens Inquiry into collusion, which ran in stages in the 1990s through to 2003, showed that the 'UDA had access to a large number of security files on republicans', including Finucane's (5).

One of the most public expressions of collusion occurred in 1974 during the strike of the Ulster Workers Council (UWC). The strike was called by loyalist groups in protest at the Sunningdale Agreement, which proposed that nationalists should be given a role in a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. The British Army refused to break the strike, implicitly expressing its support for the strikers and their aim; this act of collusion caused the collapse of the power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive.

Beyond this arming and direction of loyalist paramilitaries, there was also a kind of day-to-day complicity between the security forces and loyalists. For example, many of the families of those who were killed by loyalists asked how gunmen in cars could drive into Catholic areas in Northern Ireland (areas often surrounded by heavily fortified security roadblocks and monitored 24/7 by army and police cameras), shoot up some civilians and then just drive off again. Even the Shankill Butchers, the most barbaric loyalist gang, seemed to benefit from a 'blind eye' policy on the part of the security forces. The Butchers murdered 19 people in the early and mid-Seventies. They kidnapped Catholic civilians in a black taxi and took them to lock-up garages, where they would suspend them from ropes and use a knife on their naked bodies 'much in the manner a sculptor would chip away at a piece of wood or stone' (6). One of their victims had 147 stab wounds. Another was heard to say, after hours of sadistic torture, 'Please kill me'. As Martin Dillon points out in his 1989 book *The Shankill Butchers: A Case Study in Mass Murder*, this all took place in areas of 'dense army/RUC activity' where the antics of the Butchers were widely known about and discussed; and the Butchers did not even make much effort to hide their activities, instead following the same routine almost every time they went out and 'boasting about their murders' (7). Yet it wasn't until 1979 that *some* of the Butchers were put on trial.

From arming loyalist paramilitaries to directly encouraging UDA gunmen to target republican sympathisers to turning a blind eye to the sadistic torture and random

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murder of Catholics, collusion between the security forces and loyalists in Northern Ireland ran deep. Loyalist paramilitaries were effectively allies of British Army intelligence and the RUC, who viewed them as useful attack dogs in the war on Irish republicans and in terrorising and morally deflating Catholic/republican areas. At the same time, there were tensions between the British security forces and loyalists. The British pretty much held loyalists in contempt, and would rather not have worked with them at all. And of course, the authorities would arrest and imprison loyalist paramilitaries for periods of time, which helped to bolster the idea that Britain was a neutral arbiter in a 'tit-for-tat' conflict between two sets of mad Irishmen – loyalists on one side, and republicans on the other. In fact, as the evidence of collusion shows, the conflict was between the forces of the British state and their loyalist allies on one side, and republicans on the other.

Much of the welcoming coverage of Nuala O'Loan's report on incidences of collusion in north Belfast has got loyalist paramilitarism completely the wrong way around. The assumption is that it was the security forces' unthinking hooking-up with loyalists that *drove* the conflict. In other words, the bloodlust of groups like the UVF and the UDA was the driving force behind the violence in Northern Ireland, and Britain should have known better than to rub shoulders with such murderous charlatans. As Beatrix Campbell says, 'the state sponsored death squads for years in Northern Ireland and this collusion prolonged the war' (8). In fact, these loyalist death squads were an offshoot of Britain's war against the IRA and its occupation of Northern Ireland, not the other way round. The loyalists were merely allies – sometimes useful, oftentimes not – in a far larger military occupation by the British Army and local army and police outfits.

That is one reason why claims of collusion were vigorously suppressed in the past. Ms O'Loan may today be a 'heroine' for reporting on certain instances of collusion, and *Guardian* journalists may now slate the British authorities for 'sponsoring death squads'. But where were these people 15 and 20 years ago, when collusion was taking place and Catholic and republican families were trying to make it a big issue? Back then, talking about collusion could land you in trouble. In 1991 Channel 4's *Dispatches* team made a programme revealing the extent of collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and RUC members; their researcher was arrested in a dawn raid and charged under anti-terrorist legislation with withholding information and Channel 4 received a hefty fine. In January 1990, as the Stevens team in Belfast made plans to arrest Brian Nelson and others working as army/loyalist double agents, their HQ was destroyed by a fire; all the fire alarms and heat-sensitive intruder alarms had been disconnected first. This gave Nelson time to flee Northern Ireland. It is widely thought that the fire was started by elements within the British Army (9).

How did we go from claims of collusion being met with censorship and fire to a situation where the police ombudsman can talk about it to the cheering of various journalists?

This is a product of the fallout from the conflict in Northern Ireland, and also part of an attempt by the British authorities to regain some moral highground there.

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Marcel M. Baumann

Debate or disagreements about issues such as collusion were suppressed during the 'Troubles', because, as in any conflict, differences of opinion that army majors, judges, soldiers, politicians or police ombudsmen might have had about military tactics would have been settled behind closed doors. The threat posed by the IRA to the stability of the United Kingdom forced the British establishment to close ranks against its common enemy, and to settle problems in private. That is why Northern Ireland was the one issue that enjoyed bipartisan agreement in parliament. From the authorities' point of view, it would have been unthinkable to have, or to allow, a political debate about underhand tactics such as collusion. And if that meant censoring annoying critics, and even threatening and attacking official inquiries, so be it.

It was the end of the conflict in 1994 – in the absence of the common enemy of the IRA, who at least reminded the British authorities what they were all against – that led to serious cracks in the establishment over Northern Ireland. With the winding down of the conflict, debates that once would have taken place in private emerged into the public arena. The Stevens team restarted its inquiry into collusion in 1993, just as the peace process was emerging – and the inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, when 14 unarmed protesters were shot by the British Army in Derry in 1972, commenced in 1997 (and is still ongoing, unbelievably). These very public spats over the army, police's and politicians' roles in some of the most controversial actions of the British state over the past 40 years are an indicator of how hard the authorities find holding the line these days.

Such issues have also become a kind of therapy for the British state. Government ministers use issues such as Bloody Sunday and collusion as a way of confessing that, yes, bad things were done in the past, but now we must all move on together. The timing of the collusion revelations, for example, are striking. They come just as the British government is trying to convince everybody, especially Sinn Fein, to accept the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI); Sinn Fein is holding a crucial special conference on policing this coming weekend, at which President Gerry Adams will try to convince the membership to back the new PSNI. What better way to prove that the police have changed than by hanging out to dry a handful of those 'rogue elements' from the past? In one fell swoop, the authorities manage to make the wrongdoings of yesterday's conflict look like the work of small groups of bent coppers, while coaxing today's various parties to sign up to the peace process and accept Britain's new 'consensual' agenda for Northern Ireland – an agenda which, as we have pointed out on *spiked* before, seeks to stifle genuine political debate and argument (see [Northern Ireland's war of words](#), by Brendan O'Neill).

The end result is a shallow debate about the past, where questions about who was really responsible for the conflict and violence are evaded, and an uncritical approach to the new issues thrown up today. Just as collusion in the past was a product of Britain's undemocratic rule in Northern Ireland, so the revelations of collusion today are being used to solidify Britain's new forms of government and policing without any difficult questions or critical thinking.

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Visit Brendan O'Neill's website [here](#).

Read on:

- (1) [This exposes Britain not as peacemaker, but perpetrator](#), *Guardian*, 23 January 2007
- (2) [What is collusion?](#), BBC News, 22 January 2007
- (3) [What is collusion?](#), BBC News, 22 January 2007
- (4) *Loyalists*, Peter Taylor, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000
- (5) [Ulster Defence Association](#), CAIN, University of Ulster
- (6) *The Shankill Butchers*, Martin Dillon, Routledge, 1989
- (7) *The Shankill Butchers*, Martin Dillon, Routledge, 1989
- (8) [This exposes Britain not as peacemaker, but perpetrator](#), *Guardian*, 23 January 2007
- (9) [Timeline of Finucane murder probe](#), BBC News, 23 September 2004

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