

RUC reform increases tensions in Irish peace agreement

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As the British and Irish governments embark on their review of the Good Friday Agreement, the *Belfast Telegraph* leaked the main contents of a report being prepared by Chris Patten into the future of policing in Northern Ireland.

The leak sent the process into deeper crisis. Stopping short of Sinn Fein's demands for the complete disbanding of the force, Patten *has* proposed sweeping changes that have provoked condemnation from Unionist politicians.

Under the proposals, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) would be renamed the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The traditional bottle green uniform would be replaced, as would its badge bearing the crown, harp and shamrock. The oath sworn by officers would be changed to remove any reference to the Queen. Union flags would no longer fly at police stations and portraits of the Queen would be removed from station reception areas. It is also proposed that officers register their membership of organisations such as the Orange Order and the freemasons.

The force is to be cut from over 13,000 to 7,500 within 10 years. The 3,000-strong full-time reservists will be axed and there will be a push to boost Catholic representation in the force.

Perhaps the most significant proposals are those to change control of the force. The present Police Authority is to be abolished and replaced by a central Policing Board, the majority of whom will be members of the new Northern Ireland Assembly. Patten is reported to state that seats on the board must be distributed in such a way as to ensure at least two for Sinn Fein.

Alongside the central board, there will be a sub-layer of district boards set up in each local council area. These boards will be allowed to pay for their own extra policing. Unionists have complained bitterly that this opens the way for former IRA paramilitaries to police Catholic areas. The same holds true for members of Loyalist terror gangs organised in private security firms being able to police Protestant areas. This proposal is clearly an attempt by Patten to incorporate the paramilitaries, without granting Republican demands that they be integrated into the official

police service.

Patten has largely been congratulated by the media for drafting policing proposals in line with the requirements of the Good Friday Agreement, i.e., for an acceptable police force, representative, unarmed and civilian, which conforms to human rights standards. Typically the *Irish Independent* of August 26 commented:

"Broadly speaking, nationalists can be satisfied with the proposals that go a long way to answering their complaints about a politically-biased, sectarian and unaccountable RUC."

This was essential if the Agreement were to stand any hope of success. The day after the Patten report was leaked, Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam ruled that the IRA cease-fire had not broken down and no sanctions would be taken against Sinn Fein for the alleged IRA murder of Charles Bennett. This was despite RUC Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan publicly stating that the IRA was responsible for his murder. The 22-year-old was found bound, gagged and shot in the head on waste ground behind a Gaelic football club last month.

Speaking during a recording of a BBC Northern Ireland television youth programme, Flanagan said: "I have no doubt that the IRA was involved in the murder of Charles Bennett. The Secretary of State [Mowlam] has no doubt and I have no doubt what organisation was involved.

"I have made it clear time and time again that these organisations which purport to be on cease-fire have been engaged in some of the most heinous acts of violence."

Flanagan's statement came as Mowlam deliberated on whether the escalation in IRA violence amounts to a breach of the cease-fire under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Unionists have repeatedly called for Mowlam to take sanctions against Sinn Fein/IRA, though the main Ulster Unionist Party have stopped short of calls for Sinn Fein to be excluded from the review process.

Sinn Fein's chief negotiator, Martin McGuinness, had threatened to boycott next month's review of the talks if Mowlam accepted Unionist demands to halt the early release

of prisoners.

Mowlem could not have taken sanctions against Sinn Fein because the entire Good Friday Agreement is based on their involvement in the process. If either party to the Agreement is excluded, then it is void.

In stating that the actions of the IRA do not constitute a breach of the cease-fire, Mowlem is legitimising the continued punishment beatings and killings carried out by both Republic and Loyalist paramilitaries. The Patten report, in its proposals for local police authorities to contract out policing, has taken this a step further. Not only are the paramilitaries to be incorporated into the political mechanisms, but into the policing of communities as well.

However, as the *Irish Independent* went on to warn, "the two governments can brace themselves for a storm of criticism from unionists that could make the Patten report, like the Agreement, undeliverable."

What threatens to make both the Agreement and RUC reform "undeliverable" is that the Good Friday Agreement was never anything other than an attempt to refashion Ireland economically in the interests of big business. The British, Irish and American governments jointly agree that armed conflict and the highly militarised border between North and South are an obstacle to taking advantage of Ireland's cheap and well-educated labour, and its potential as a platform for exporting goods into the European market.

But they also know that a precondition for success is the ability to secure high levels of exploitation of Ireland's workers and to eliminate the extensive social provisions that still exist. Hence they have sought to constitutionally regulate the old political divisions between Catholics and Protestants, rather than eliminate them, by reinforcing the domination of the Unionist and Republican parties.

The problem they confront now is that the RUC and all the symbolic paraphernalia that goes with it was never anything other than a Protestant force designed to subjugate the working class in the interests of the Unionist and British bourgeoisie.

The RUC was formed in 1922, with a stated dual role: providing a law enforcement similar to that of other police forces in the rest of the United Kingdom and at the same time protecting the state from armed subversion from within as well as outside its borders. From the very beginning the RUC had more of a military than a police character. The title "Royal" was first given to its predecessor, the Irish Constabulary, in 1867 as a reward for the suppression of an uprising by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In 1922, King George V gave permission for the title to be used by the new force created by the Northern Ireland Parliament.

An official committee of inquiry on the reorganisation of

policing in 1921 called for the new force to be one-third Catholic. The proportion has never exceeded 20 percent. In recent years it was less than 10 percent and closer to the present figure of 8 percent. Catholics make up 46 percent of the North's population.

As early as 1936, Liberal MPs, academics and lawyers produced a report for the National Council for Civil Liberties, stating that the RUC was guilty of partisanship and abuse of powers of search and interrogation.

Prior to the occupation of the British army in 1969, the RUC assumed military responsibility in the North. It maintained its own auxiliary armed police force, the Ulster Special Constabulary (known as the B Specials).

A tribunal chaired by Lord Scarman following the suppression of a civil rights march in 1969 found total distrust among Catholics at what they saw as "the strong arm of Protestant ascendancy". Scarman held the RUC seriously at fault in specific instances but ruled that they had not co-operated with sectarian mobs. The B Specials were abolished following a review in 1969 under the chairmanship of Lord Hunt. The RUC Reserve was established in its place, whose members assisted the RUC on a part-time or full-time basis as required. At the same time the Ulster Defence Regiment (subsequently the Royal Irish Regiment) was created as a full-time military force.

Hunt recommended that the RUC should be relieved of all duties of a military nature and should therefore not carry firearms, but this was never implemented.

In the 1970s an Amnesty International report alleged mistreatment of terrorist suspects at the Castlereagh interrogation centre and in the 1980s the RUC was accused of operating a "shoot to kill" policy. Four officers involved in the deaths of Republican suspects eventually stood trial, but all were acquitted. The last decade has seen evidence of RUC collusion with Loyalist gunmen in the assassination of civil rights lawyer Pat Finucane and others.

It is clear that without a reform of the RUC there can be no peace agreement. But such reform challenges the political and social privileges enjoyed by the Unionists. Patten's report will further intensify the conflict between the sectarian parties as they fight to establish their competing interests in the new arrangements.



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