

Patten Report on reform of Royal Ulster Constabulary provokes Unionist outcry

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Proposals for the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) have met with outcry from Unionist politicians. The Executive Committee of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) unanimously rejected key aspects of the findings drawn up by the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, under Christopher Patten, Britain's former Conservative governor of Hong Kong.

The UUP executive said his proposals would undermine the force's "province-wide effectiveness and cohesion", and, by allowing Sinn Fein places on a new police board, "create a channel for the involvement of terrorist organisations in policing". It denounced proposals to remove British symbols, such as the force's badge and the flying of the Union flag at police stations, for undermining the RUC's identification as part of the British police force. UUP leader David Trimble described it as "shoddy" and a "gratuitous insult".

Trimble's stance compounds the difficulties facing the British government. The UUP was the main unionist signatory supporting the Good Friday Agreement, while its chief rival, the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley, declared against. In the past 18 months, Trimble has become ever more isolated in the unionist camp, and within the UUP as well. Last Friday, his deputy leader John Taylor publicly withdrew from the current review of the Agreement being carried out by US Senator George Mitchell. Taylor said that it was not acceptable to involve Sinn Fein in the process whilst the IRA refused to immediately decommission its weapons. Recent polls also indicate that the slim majority in favour of the Agreement amongst Protestant voters has now been reversed.

Despite Unionist complaints, Patten argued in a series of interviews that none of those who had signed up to the Good Friday Agreement could object to his proposals. Indeed, the changes he proposes are largely cosmetic. They do nothing to undermine the essential function of the RUC as the defender of the interests of British imperialism and the Unionist bourgeoisie in Northern Ireland. Their aim is to lend credibility to a discredited force that is seen by most

Catholics as partisan and representative of an occupying power.

Patten's report admits that hitherto the RUC has been "identified by one section of the population not primarily as upholders of the law but as defenders of the state", and that "the nature of the state itself has remained the central issue of political argument. This identification of police and state... has left the police in an unenviable position, lamented by many police officers. In one political language they are the custodians of nationhood. In its rhetorical opposite they are the symbols of oppression."

This is why Patten calls for the removal of the most obvious symbols identifying the RUC with the British state. Numerous measures built around a "human rights" agenda, community policing, changing the religious composition of the force, etc., will change the present state of affairs, he maintains, to one where the police force does "not serve the state, or any interest group".

Patten argues for targets to be set for recruiting Catholics into the force, who are presently massively under-represented. Alongside this are various measures supposedly aimed at making the police force "accountable" to the people of Northern Ireland by setting up a 19-strong Police Board that includes 10 members of the new Northern Ireland Assembly. Alongside the Unionists, this would include the Social Democratic Labour Party and Sinn Fein.

Even this formal involvement in police monitoring by parties that endorse the Agreement and British rule over the north is subject to veto. The document explicitly states that questions of "public interest" and "national security" override the issue of democratic control. It stipulates that "responsibility for policing be devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive as soon as possible, *except for matters of national security*" [Emphasis added].

The overriding control of Britain over the policing of Northern Ireland will continue. The Police Board appointee will be made by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in consultation with the First Minister and deputy First Minister of the Assembly.

The present machinery of repression is not only maintained, but also strengthened. The report provides for continuing the role of the British Army in policing the north. Though “army support for the civil power in Northern Ireland should in principle be no more than it is in any other part of the United Kingdom... There is one exception and that is in the area of public order policing”.

It continues that “for as long as the prospect remains of substantial public order policing demands on the scale seen at Drumcree in recent years, the army should retain the capacity to provide support for the police in meeting those demands”.

There will be no genuine reduction of the police presence in Northern Ireland, which presently stands at 13,000 officers for a population of less than 2 million. In line with the supposed “normalisation” of the political situation, Patten proposes to cut the force to 7,500. But this will be phased in over 10 years. Any short-term reductions are to be found from “civilianisation”—the contracting out of clerical and managerial tasks.

The report states that “the Northern Ireland police should have the capacity within its own establishment to deal with public order emergencies without help from other police services and without more than the present level of support from the army.” To this end the part-time reserve is to be increased to 2,500 officers, which could be substituted for regular officers involved in public order policing.

The RUC have been notorious for the most brutal suppression of public demonstrations and protests. Throughout the last three decades human rights groups have condemned their frequent and extreme use of Plastic Baton Rounds (PBRs). The Patten report notes that since 1981 alone, 41,657 PBRs have been discharged. In the same period, 11 people were killed and 615 injured with the weapons. Five people were killed before 1981.

Far from calling for an end to such practices, the report states: “We recommend that an immediate and substantial investment be made in a research programme to find an acceptable, effective and less potentially lethal alternative to the PBR. We also recommend that the police be equipped with a broader range of public order equipment than the RUC currently possess, so that a commander has a number of options at his or her disposal which might reduce reliance on, or defer resort to, the PBR.”

A table presented on page 55 gives a list of possible alternatives, which include:

- * Ring Airfoil Projectile with enhanced effect through delivery of Pepper Spray charge

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- * CS/CN Gas, a noxious chemical which causes the eyes

to water, streaming nose and a burning sensation

- * Sticky Shocker which imparts incapacitating high voltage shock

- * Malodorous Substance fired from an air/gas gun which can induce vomiting by target and people in immediate vicinity

- * Water Cannon

In light of this, Patten’s call for RUC reform to take account of the implications of the European Convention on Human Rights is meaningless. He even calls explicitly for such considerations to be conditional. “Even where, in exceptional and defined circumstances, some derogation from these standards [i.e., the upholding of human rights] is *permissible, these must be prescribed by law and proportional to the circumstances*” [Emphasis added].

Amongst various examples of “best practice” cited by Patten regarding respect for human rights is the “Human dignity training, along the lines of that offered by John Jay College in New York to the New York Police Department,” a force reviled internationally for its brutality.

The report highlights the discrepancy between the over 80 percent support amongst Protestants for the RUC, compared with under 50 percent amongst Catholics. However, it notes that distrust and hostility towards the police are highest amongst poor urban Catholics—at 81 percent. Though no equivalent statistic is presented, the report notes that “in the lower income groups, Protestants could be as strongly alienated from the police as were the Catholic counterparts.”

The report assumes that the Good Friday Agreement will succeed, with a suspension, or at least a severe curtailing, of sectarian hostilities through the incorporation of Sinn Fein into the machinery of government and policing. But the policing of social and political dissent envisaged by Patten will only deepen hostilities between the working class and the RUC. In such circumstances, police actions against civil unrest will be directed more overtly against working class communities, irrespective of their religious composition.



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