

Irish civil rights activist targeted for smear campaign

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Last month saw the publication of two major articles directed against civil rights activist Vincent McKenna, head of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Bureau, in the US-based *Irish Voice* and the British *Independent on Sunday*. An investigation by the *World Socialist Web Site* points to their origin in a smear campaign against McKenna instigated by supporters of Sinn Féin. Strong evidence has also emerged indicating collusion in this campaign by the Southern Irish police force, the Garda.

The articles provide an insight into the type of underhanded and undemocratic methods employed by some of the main participants in the so-called “peace process” against those they consider a threat to their strategic interests.

Moreover, the nature of the unsubstantiated allegations against McKenna raises the danger of his being set up for assault and possible assassination. In one revealing passage, the *Irish News* quotes an unnamed IRA man as saying: “I have an awful feeling he’ll come to a bad end by those who’ve used him and they’ll probably do it in such a way that it will be made out to be a Republican reprisal.”

McKenna has already been subject to violence. On July 18, 1998 he was beaten up by six people, one of whom was convicted on April 8 of this year in a Belfast Court of assault. On December 12, 1998 a crude letter bomb was posted to him, which failed to detonate.

McKenna is a former member of the IRA who broke with the organisation and has since campaigned against punishment beatings and other forms of sectarian violence. Like many others in Northern Ireland, his opposition to sectarianism is not grounded in a socialist political perspective that articulates the independent interests of the working class. This has left him open to manipulation by various political tendencies. Initially his condemnation of sectarian violence was broadly welcomed by everyone from the British and Irish governments to the Unionist parties and the nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party—as proof of the need to make the Good Friday “peace” agreement work. His statements were given widespread publicity in the media.

As the conflicts surrounding the Northern Ireland agreement have deepened, however, McKenna’s exposures of paramilitary violence have become an embarrassment to the British and Irish governments. On August 6 this year, he asked the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) if murdering working class people was not in breach of the cease-fire by the IRA and loyalist groups. He was told by an NIO spokesperson that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, “has to decide whether an incident is an internal housekeeping matter to the terrorist organisations or an attack on the entire community”. McKenna’s publicising of this statement provoked calls for Mowlam’s resignation.

In recent months, opponents of the Northern Ireland Agreement amongst the Unionists and the pro-Conservative British media such as the *Daily Telegraph* have been able to utilise McKenna’s exposures of paramilitary violence to reinforce their anti-Sinn Féin stance. Last month he even appeared on the platform of a right-wing pro-Royal Ulster Constabulary rally in Belfast, called to oppose reform of the RUC proposed by the

British Labour government’s Patten Commission.

To the extent, however, that McKenna’s criticism of the British and Irish government’s toleration of loyalist and IRA violence is considered damaging to their plans for Northern Ireland, he has become a target for the type of “black propaganda” exemplified by the *Irish Voice* and *Independent on Sunday* articles.

The *Irish Voice* is circulated in the Irish-American community and is pro-Republican. That its story was taken over uncritically by the pro-Labour *Independent on Sunday* suggests, at the very least, that the desire to undermine a critic of the Blair government has outweighed any regard for journalistic and editorial integrity.

The two articles assert that McKenna is a political impostor who was never a member of the IRA, and a child abuser to boot. They intimate that he is a political stooge, if not an agent, of Unionist forces or the British state.

“Secrets and Lies: the Strange Story of Vincent McKenna” was written by Darach MacDonald and published in the September 8 *Irish Voice*. It quotes the Garda as an authoritative source regarding allegations of sexual crimes: “The case involves charges that McKenna sexually abused a child while living in his former family home in Monaghan. A local doctor and the child’s mother have corroborated the abuse claim.”

“The senior police officer in charge of the investigation confirmed for the *Irish Voice* on Tuesday that a file on the case is ‘with the DPP’ [Director of Public Prosecutions]. Inspector Joseph Sullivan, a senior sub-divisional officer of the Cavan-Monaghan area, based at Bailieborough Garda Station in Co. Cavan, said, ‘I can confirm that the file on Mr. McKenna is with the DPP and it relates to very serious crimes.’

“‘All crimes are serious as far as I am concerned, of course, including those that are sexually related. These crimes are of a serious sexual nature.’ Inspector Sullivan added, ‘I can tell you that this is a huge file and it has been with the DPP for some time. That is not because it is being delayed and I don’t want that impression to go out. But a huge file of this nature requires a lot of processing eventually and I can assure you that processing is taking place even as we speak.’

“Asked if the Garda investigators expect formal charges to be directed by the DPP, Inspector Sullivan told the *Irish Voice*, ‘we are confident that there will be a prosecution and we are confident that we will secure convictions against this suspect’.”

The article concludes, “Meanwhile, a senior police officer, who has been working on the case [against McKenna] said that Garda officers are ‘astounded’ at the amount of publicity that Vincent McKenna has generated and garnered for his personal crusade against the IRA. ‘One could have their suspicions about where this publicity is being generated from and there are many directions you could look for that,’ the officer said. ‘In this case, I think we all know where this is being generated from and directed from.’”

The second article in the September 26 edition of the *Independent on Sunday* ran under the headline “Exposed: the Dark Side of an Irish Peace

Hero" and was attributed to Beatrix Campbell, Kim Segupta, Paul Lashmar and the selfsame Darach MacDonald.

Less explicit in its formulations than the *Irish Voice*, it still alludes to McKenna facing charges for sexual abuse and questions him having ever been an IRA member. Again the article cites Inspector Sullivan of the Garda: "These crimes are of a serious sexual nature.... We are confident that there will be a prosecution though it is a very large file and it will take the DPP a while to sift through it."

The political purpose of the *Independent* article is made explicit in the statement by its author Beatrix Campbell that "The news will come as an embarrassment to those politicians—particularly opponents of the Good Friday Agreement—who have come to rely on the integrity of Mr. McKenna's statistics on paramilitary violence."

The publishing of statements by a Garda officer regarding a supposedly ongoing investigation, even giving his opinion that a criminal prosecution is imminent, contravenes all legal norms against prejudicing the outcome of a case. The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Garda headquarters in Dublin to ask them whether they could confirm the statements attributed to Inspector Sullivan and, if not, whether the Garda intended to take action against either newspaper.

Inspector Simon O'Connor replied verbally, "The particular Inspector [Sullivan] did not name any individual. He didn't allude to any individual in the case.... At no stage did the Garda mention the suspect."

O'Connor continued: "He confirmed to Beatrix Campbell that the Garda was dealing with serious sexual offences and that a file was with the DPP and did allude that a file of this nature would take some time to be dealt with. He has no recollection of talking to the *Irish Voice*. He did not talk to the *Irish Voice* at all."

Following this conversation, one of the journalists attributed as authoring the *Independent on Sunday* article, Kim Segupta, said that he had been away and had "nothing to do with the story. My contribution has been nil." He made the same statement regarding Paul Lashmar, leaving just Beatrix Campbell and Darach MacDonald as the real authors of the piece.

Attempts to speak to the *Irish Voice* on the issue have been repeatedly stonewalled.

The efforts made to place McKenna's previous IRA membership into question focus largely on statements by forces close to Sinn Fein. But a number of unsubstantiated claims are made, such as an accusation that McKenna committed arson attacks on "the Catholic church in Aughnacloy". Investigations reveal that this church has never been attacked by anyone.

McKenna's biography effectively disproves the assertion that he was never an IRA member. He was born to a Republican family. His uncle, Sean McKenna, was an IRA member who was tortured during internment. His uncle was given a full IRA funeral in 1975 in County Monaghan in the Irish republic, which borders onto Northern Ireland. His cousin, Sean, was on hunger strike at Long Kesh.

In 1981 McKenna was arrested and charged with petrol bombing the homes of RUC personnel during the hunger strikes of that year. In December 1981 he was bailed, against RUC opposition, and went on the run.

He was again arrested in 1982 by the Garda on a warrant from the RUC and was extradited by the High Court in Dublin in 1984. He was held in the IRA wing of Crumlin Road jail before being freed in January 1985. McKenna says that he was, by this time, an IRA intelligence officer. He has never named any of his former IRA comrades still alive, as this would open them up to possible reprisals. But in response to the claim that he was never an IRA member, he identified Jim Lynagh as his commanding officer. The most senior IRA officer killed since 1969, Lynagh died along with seven others in an SAS ambush in May 1987. McKenna possesses personal correspondence between himself and Lynagh.

By his own account, McKenna subsequently became disillusioned with the IRA and finally left in 1992. In 1993, he started an undergraduate degree course at Queen's University, Belfast, and established a number of civil rights groups, committed to uniting Catholics and Protestants. His relations with Sinn Fein and the IRA were troubled, but he was still given supportive reporting in Sinn Fein's weekly newspaper *An Phoblacht/Republican News* as late as December 1995.

By 1998, McKenna had become politically hostile to Sinn Fein, epitomised by a March 29 interview in the *Sunday Times* in which he condemned the IRA as sectarian and attacked it for carrying out "ethnic cleansing". He dates this as the starting point for a campaign to discredit him.

Events unfolded, according to McKenna, as follows:

On April 21, 1998 he received a letter from the North Eastern Health Board (NEHB) in County Monaghan, asking to speak to him. Believing this to be related to his upcoming divorce on April 27, McKenna contacted his ex-wife, Fiona McCleary, who lives in the former family home in Monaghan. She refused to speak to him and McKenna could not meet with the NEHB.

It was not until August that he says he was told by social workers in Belfast that his wife had laid charges of sexual abuse against him. In the intervening period, the divorce was finalised, including provision for access to all his children that went uncontested by his wife. McKenna says that his ex-wife sent his children to stay with him immediately after the divorce hearing for almost a month while she was in hospital.

McKenna maintains that his ex-wife was encouraged in making allegations by Sinn Fein supporters in the Monaghan area, including Councillor Owen Smyth. Smyth's sister-in-law, Dr. Marian Smyth, recently took over medical charge of McKenna's children.

On January 12, 1999, McKenna attended a court hearing in Monaghan over his request for resumed access to his children. The Garda arrested him immediately after the hearing.

McKenna told this reporter that during his 20-hour detention, under the pretext of investigating child abuse claims, officers of the Garda Special Branch asked him to spy on his contacts within the Unionist parties, as well as amongst dissident republican groups. Evidence supporting McKenna's version of events has come to light in the form of an internal Garda memorandum.

It bears the signature of the same Inspector Sullivan quoted by the *Irish Voice* and the *Independent on Sunday*. It states: "Dear Sir, we anticipate the arrival of VMK on Tuesday 12.1.1999. O Smyth has been helpful in this matter as you expected. I have appointed Det R Caplice to make the approach to VMK. In relation to the Orange position and other related matters. We would expect to have VMK in custody for 20 hours this would be enough to explain our position to him."

"On release VMK would be given contact name. It may be useful to hold on to allegations rather than dismiss them, as a safe guard against bad publicity. O Smyth has agreed to ensure pressure is maintained."

"VMK" here refers to McKenna. "O Smyth" suggests collusion with Sinn Fein Councillor Owen Smyth. "Det R Caplice" is the officer indicated earlier by McKenna as having led the interrogation. The memo is dated January 8, 1999, the same day that an official complaint was transferred from the North Eastern Health Board to the Garda.

McKenna says that, after several hours of questioning by local officers, two detectives from Garda Special Branch, including Detective Richard Caplice, took over.

"The line of questioning was about former IRA comrades, dissident republicans and the unionist politicians I had recently come to know at the new Assembly in Northern Ireland," he says. "They wanted to know if I would be interested in working for them, either giving information about republicans or giving an insider view of the way Unionists were going to play within the peace process. The Special Branch officer said that the

Irish government had a big investment in the peace process and that I might be better on the right side of the state. I said I had fought the state all my life and I would continue to do so, and that included their friends in the IRA.”

The next day, there were over 51 murals painted across Belfast about McKenna being a child molester and pervert, including 16 on the street where he lives.



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