

Royal Ulster Constabulary awarded George Cross

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The decision to award the George Cross to the Royal Ulster Constabulary is a further attempt to placate Unionist opposition to the inclusion of Sinn Féin in the new devolved government for Northern Ireland. It follows a letter from the Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson promising that the concerns of Unionists would be taken into account when considering the Patten report on reforming the policing of the province.

The George Cross, an award for "gallantry" second only to the Victoria Cross, is usually given to individuals for outstanding acts of bravery or courage. Among the 151 individual recipients are to be found bomb disposal officers, French Resistance fighters, policemen and prisoners of war. The last time a collective award was made was to the people of Malta for their endurance of two years of Nazi occupation during World War Two.

The award to the RUC was presented by the Queen on the recommendation of Prime Minister Tony Blair and Northern Ireland Secretary Mandelson. The George Cross was supposedly awarded for "acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger," in honour of the 302 members who have lost their lives in the 30 year "Troubles" and the thousands more injured. As Mandelson visited the RUC headquarters in Belfast to congratulate Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan, Downing Street busily denied that the award was a political move. Blair's spokesman said the award was a "stand alone," unrelated to the Patten report or the review by former US Senator George Mitchell of the Good Friday Agreement—a claim that was rejected by politicians on all sides.

Whatever decision is finally taken as to the fate of the RUC, in honouring its past in such a conspicuous

manner the Labour government is giving an indication of what policing will consist of under the Good Friday Agreement. It is an attempt to portray the RUC as a force gallantly defending the people of Northern Ireland from the "terrorist threat".

The RUC was set up in 1922. From the beginning it took on more of a military than police character. It has been the subject of numerous reports and investigations into abuses of human rights. As early as 1936, a report by the National Council for Civil Liberties said that the RUC was guilty of partisanship and abused its powers of search and interrogation.

Following the suppression of a civil rights march in 1969, Lord Scarman said Catholics saw the force as "the strong arm of Protestant ascendancy". When the British government sent in the army as an occupation force that same year, the RUC relinquished military responsibility for the north. The force has become notorious for its brutal suppression of public demonstrations and protests. Since 1981, 41,657 Plastic Baton Rounds have been discharged, killing 11 people and injuring 615.

The mother of a 15-year old boy who was the last person shot dead by an RUC plastic bullet condemned the George Cross award as a "total insult". Kathleen Duffy became a prominent campaigner for the scrapping of the weapons following the death of her son, Seamus. She said the plastic bullet was fired from a passing RUC Land Rover. "They said they thought he had been rioting but the inquest showed that he wasn't doing anything," she said. "There are policemen who have been promoted after being pinpointed as the ones who killed people with plastic bullets. I have never received an apology," Mrs Duffy added.

In addition to their brutal suppression of civil liberties, the force has been implicated in the murder of

a number of Catholics. Widespread allegations of collusion between the RUC and loyalist paramilitaries have gained increasing credibility. At the beginning of this month, over 300 security files were found in an Orange Hall in Stoneyford, Co. Antrim.



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