

Finucane murder suspect shot dead in Northern Ireland

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15 December 2001

The chief suspect in the murder of Irish civil rights lawyer Pat Finucane was gunned down outside his house on Tuesday evening in north Belfast.

William Stobie, 51, had been accused of aiding and abetting the 1989 murder of Finucane, a lawyer who had defended several prominent Republicans. Ulster Defence Association (UDA) gunmen shot Finucane at his home in Belfast. It was alleged at the time that they had acted on information provided by a British army intelligence agent. An initial inquiry into the killing was held in 1989, but its findings were never made public, prompting further allegations of Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) collusion with loyalist paramilitaries.

In 1990, the Department of Public Prosecution (DPP) interviewed Stobie about the killing. At that time, the DPP said there was not enough evidence to proceed against him, although Stobie claimed the charges were dropped after he threatened to make public the fact that he had warned the RUC in advance.

In April 1998, with negotiations underway to secure the Good Friday Agreement, aimed at ending paramilitary violence and establishing a “cross-community” Northern Ireland Assembly, London Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner John Stevens was asked to reopen his 1989 inquiry into the Finucane case.

The Stevens Inquiry resulted in fresh charges against Stobie, based on evidence from a British official in the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). Neil Mulholland, a press officer at the NIO Information Department, gave the Stevens team a 28-page statement that named Stobie as the man who supplied the weapons used to kill Finucane. Mulholland had initially learned of Stobie’s role while working as a reporter for a Belfast newspaper in 1990. He had informed the RUC at the time, but they chose not to take any action.

Mulholland’s evidence was used to charge Stobie in 1999 with the Finucane killing. Stobie became a high

profile public figure after revealing in court that he had worked as a police informer at the time of the Finucane shooting. Stobie, a quartermaster for the UDA, said he gave his RUC handler prior notice that a “hit” was due to take place, but claimed he did not know who the target was.

Prior to his initial arrest in 1990, Stobie had also told his story to another journalist, Ed Moloney, northern editor of the *Sunday Tribune*. Moloney agreed he would only publish the notes of the interview with written permission from Stobie, or in the event of his death. When he was rearrested in 1999, Stobie asked Moloney to make his story known.

In July 1999, the *Sunday Tribune* published an article in which Moloney revealed Stobie’s full story. It detailed how he had given the information contained in the interviews to Mulholland, and lent credibility to Stobie’s claims to have been working as an informer at the time of the murder. Stobie’s account tended to confirm the allegations of the Finucane family and their supporters that the RUC were, at best, indifferent to Patrick Finucane’s murder.

But in a sudden twist, having earlier agreed to give evidence, in November this year, Mulholland was said to be suffering from manic depression and claimed he could become suicidal if forced to take the witness stand. When the DPP agreed not to call Mulholland, the case against Stobie collapsed and he was acquitted of all charges last month.

Following the disintegration of the case against Stobie, the Northern Ireland Office promised a further judicial investigation of the Finucane murder, amid increasing demands for a full public inquiry. Stobie had agreed to give evidence to such an inquiry, which could well have shed more light on RUC involvement with loyalist paramilitaries. The decision not to hear Mulholland’s evidence, and now Stobie’s convenient death will only

fuel suspicions of a cover-up or even state involvement.

The Red Hand Defenders, a cover name for the UDA and other loyalist paramilitaries, have claimed responsibility for the Stobie murder. It would certainly not be unusual for a self confessed RUC agent who has made public statements on the activities of loyalist organisations to be targeted for assassination. But questions remain as to the role of the security forces in his death. The police say they warned Stobie on December 2 about his personal security, after a threat from loyalists. Yet although he was the defendant in the upcoming Finucane murder trial he was given no protection.

Finucane's family have expressed their regret over the killing. In a statement they said, "The family did not want him murdered nor did they even want him prosecuted. All they wanted was the truth. If a public inquiry had been established into Pat's murder instead of the Stevens police investigation, Billy Stobie could have been granted anonymity and his identity unknown and he would probably still be alive today."

At a press conference, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams reiterated the demand for an international public judicial inquiry into the murder of Finucane, and alleged links between the British security forces and the loyalist death squads.

"In light of the recent collapse of the Stobie case and further revelations about the role of Brian Nelson, Sinn Fein reiterates our support for the demand for an International Public Judicial Inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane.

"William Stobie was an RUC Special Branch Agent, Brian Nelson was a British Army agent. Both were active members of the UDA and have admitted to involvement in a series of murders," Adams said.

Nelson had been an agent of the British Army's Force Research Unit (FRU), a branch of Military Intelligence responsible for running agents in Northern Ireland. The FRU was complicit in a series of murders carried out by the UDA between 1987 and 1990. His role as a British agent who became a UDA intelligence officer was revealed when he was arrested in 1990 and brought to trial for murder in 1992. In a deal struck with the Attorney General at the time, Patrick Mayhew, Nelson agreed to plead guilty to lesser charges and the murder trial was dropped. Nelson served six years in jail and, according to the *Sunday Telegraph*, was still on the army payroll in 1998.

It was revealed in 1992 that Nelson was passing on names, photographs and addresses of suspected IRA

members from Army Intelligence records to UDA gunmen. In 1989, UDA men had released official Army Intelligence documents to the media. Altogether 250 names, photographs and addresses of alleged IRA suspects were handed over, including a document claiming that one man they had killed, Loughlin Maginn, was on army files as an IRA Intelligence Officer.

It was in response to these revelations that the first Stevens inquiry was set up in 1989. Though seriously obstructed by Army Intelligence, this investigation did lead to the exposure of Nelson: his fingerprint was found on one of the documents that had come from the UDA.

At this week's press conference, Adams rejected the proposal for another judicial inquiry as a delaying tactic, saying, "I am sure he [Prime Minister Tony Blair] has also read the various reports produced by Stalker, Sampson and Stevens. So he and his colleagues are aware of these matters. They are also no doubt aware that this is not the case of a few bad apples... Pat Finucane was killed as a matter of British policy."

As part of the Good Friday Agreement, the RUC has been re-badged as the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in an effort to project the pro-Protestant loyalist body as a cross-community force. Under these conditions, the Blair government is desperate to get the Finucane murder off the agenda and maintain the silence over Britain's involvement in it. In some circles, Stobie's murder is no doubt regarded as fortuitous, in that it keeps his role as a British police agent hidden from public scrutiny for a little longer, but the questions it raises could, in the end, prove just as damaging.



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