

Stevens report on Northern Ireland

A glimpse into Britain's dirty war on the IRA

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6 May 2003

Inquiries led by London Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir John Stevens into collusion between Protestant loyalist terror groups and British military intelligence in Northern Ireland have collected 10,391 documents and 16,194 exhibits, interviewed 15,000 people and taken 9,256 written statements over the last 14 years. Taken together the collection weighs 4.1 tonnes.

Stevens final report apparently runs to some 3,000 pages and has taken four years to compile. But the four-part version published April 2003, during the Westminster parliamentary Easter break—at the height of the TV celebrations of victory in Iraq and in the midst of frantic efforts to restart the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont—ran to a mere 19 pages and 3,500 words. Clearly not everything is being said.

Media commentary has talked of the “tip of the iceberg” being revealed, but the purpose of the Stevens report was always to ensure that the iceberg remains mostly invisible.

Nevertheless the information available does provide a glimpse into Britain's dirty war against the IRA and other republican groups and at least raises the possibility of criminal prosecutions resulting from its exposures. In particular, it confirms that the British state colluded in assassinations carried out by loyalists. It also makes a series of recommendations as to how the reformed Royal Ulster Constabulary, the police service of Northern Ireland, should operate in the future.

The Stevens Inquiry was established in 1999 under the Good Friday Agreement of one year earlier that had established power-sharing structures in Northern Ireland, including the pro-British and Protestant-based Ulster Unionist Party and republican Sinn Fein.

As part of the new “rapprochement,” Stevens was asked to reinvestigate the murders of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane and student Brian Adam Lambert, along with “certain issues surrounding the handling of agents”.

The loyalist Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) targeted Pat Finucane, who had represented several leading Irish republicans in court cases, for assassination. On February 12, 1989 he was shot 14 times in front of his wife and family. His killing followed a statement in parliament by then Conservative Home Office Minister, Douglas Hogg, complaining of solicitors “unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA”.

According to Stevens, in 1990 Neil Mulholland, a journalist, gave information to the RUC that William Stobie, an RUC Special Branch agent in the loyalist paramilitaries, had information on the Finucane killing.

Special Branch had recruited Stobie in 1987 following the murder of Brian Lambert, for which he had been arrested and released. Lambert was a Protestant student killed mistakenly in retaliation for a murderous IRA bomb attack at the village of Enniskillen.

Prior to the Finucane killing, Stobie had informed his handlers that a UFF attack was being planned. This information was kept hidden from the subsequent murder investigation. Stobie was arrested by Stevens' team in 2001 and charged with the murder of both Finucane and Lambert. The case collapsed when Neil Mulholland was unable to give evidence. Two weeks later Stobie was shot dead by another loyalist gang—the Red Hand Defenders.

Stevens has subsequently arrested another 12 men, all of whom he believes had a role in the Finucane murder. Five more have been arrested on suspicion of killing Lambert.

Stevens also examines the role of two so-called “Covert Human Intelligence Sources” around the Finucane and Lambert murders—the same William Stobie and the late Brian Nelson.

Nelson, who was jailed for 10 years for his role in a series of assassinations, was an agent for the British Army's Force Research Unit (FRU).

The FRU was one of several covert units operating in Northern Ireland. From the early 1970s, British military policy against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (the IRA) increasingly relied on spies, dirty operations, informers, army and loyalist death squads, in addition to 25,000 or so regular troops. The Special Air Service and the 14th Intelligence Company both became notorious for organising massacres of republican fighters as part of this permanent undercover war.

The FRU, formed in 1979, was less visible and only came to light following the arrest of Brian Nelson in 1992.

Nelson was a former soldier, one of hundreds of individuals recruited by the FRU to provide information and influence targeting and policy in both loyalist and republican groups. Recruited as a British agent in 1983, he became the head of the UFF's intelligence wing. His role came to light when British Army intelligence documents were discovered in his possession, proof that the British were directing the loyalist murder gangs.

Nelson was jailed in 1992, having pled guilty to conspiracy to murder. During his trial a “Colonel J”, recently identified as a Brigadier Gordon Kerr—currently the British military attaché in Beijing—appeared to give evidence on his behalf.

Nelson served half of a 10-year sentence, was released, then vanished to a new life and identity. He was reported to be living either in Florida or England until last month when he died of what has been variously described as cancer or a brain haemorrhage. What relationship his death has to the timing of Stevens' report remains to be seen.

In any event, Stevens states, “Nelson was aware and contributed materially to the intended attack on Finucane.”

Legal inquiries are still ongoing into the activities of 20 formers

members of the FRU. Following forensic examination of the intelligence documents found in Nelson's possession, 81 people have been identified as having access to classified documents. Twenty-seven of these individuals have been arrested; six have been charged and convicted. In all, Stevens' efforts have led to 144 arrests and 94 convictions.

Stevens investigated Douglas Hogg's statement in parliament, and found that "To the extent that they were based on information passed by the RU,c they were not justifiable and the Inquiry concludes that the Minister was compromised."

Part Three of Stevens' report deals with the efforts to obstruct his inquiry and notes that "obstruction was cultural in nature and widespread within parts of the Army and the RUC."

Stevens, whose first inquiry into collusion began in 1989, complained that Nelson's FRU handlers hid evidence of his possession of intelligence documents from Stevens' team. The FRU also warned Nelson of his imminent arrest and leaked news of this to loyalist paramilitaries and the press.

When Stevens prepared a new arrest, his team's incident room was torched, which he believes was a "deliberate act of arson". Documents requested by Stevens from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) were concealed and he continues to investigate "whether the concealment of documents and information was sanctioned and if so at what levels of the organisations holding them."

Finally, Stevens admits that there was collusion by the security services in both the Finucane and Lambert murders, ranging from failure to keep records, withholding of intelligence, to "the extreme of agents being involved in murder.... The unlawful involvement of agents in murder implies that the security forces sanction killings."

Paragraph 4.9 states, "My three enquiries have found all these elements of collusion to be present. The co-ordination, dissemination and sharing of intelligence were poor. Informants and agents were allowed to operate without effective control and to participate in terrorist crimes. [Irish republican] Nationalists were known to be targeted but were not properly warned or protected. Crucial information was withheld from Senior Investigating Officers. Important evidence was neither exploited nor preserved."

Stevens tries to draw a line under the activities of the FRU and isolate them from British government policy by presenting the two investigated murders, and literally hundreds of other murders that may be directly or indirectly attributable to British agents, to a lack of "effective control".

This is also the line of the British media. In an editorial *It Happened Here*, the *Guardian* opined in quietly shocked tones, "It is now clear that, for a period in the 1980s and early 1990s, a small group of policemen and army officers decided the normal rules did not apply to them."

But the FRU was loyally carrying out British policy of stoking sectarian tensions in order to divide the working population and in pursuance of its dirty war against the IRA.

The lie to the "rogue unit" scenario is also given by the remarkable fact that Brian Nelson appears to have intervened in 1987 to *save* the life of Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams from UFF killers.

Adams, already the target of one assassination attempt, went on to become the architect of the transformation of Sinn Fein into a central player in the Good Friday Agreement with the British and Irish governments. The British government had long identified him as someone with whom they could work and the last thing they wanted was for him to be eliminated and replaced by someone less politically

reliable.

Stevens concludes with a series of organisational recommendations on the operation of the security forces in Northern Ireland, which should be seen alongside an internal army report, the Blleloch report into procedures for running agents—hundreds of whom are presumably still active, the Patten report into policing in Northern Ireland, and the police ombudsman's report into the Omagh bombing in 1998.

Together, these are geared to recasting British police and security policy in Northern Ireland in line with the possibility that the IRA will officially disband and hand over its arms so as to enable Sinn Fein to take a permanent position in the Northern Irish state apparatus.

The Stevens report indicates the desire of the British government to normalise its rule of Northern Ireland, reduce public spending and free up its military for more far-flung operations. Techniques developed and refined in Belfast, Derry and South Armagh are already being deployed in Basra. But even so, a somewhat reduced secretive apparatus will remain in place in Northern Ireland and a return to dirty operations is always possible, should the efforts to arrive at a working arrangement between the unionists and the IRA break down or if Sinn Fein fails to keep political dissent amongst Irish Catholics in check.

Michael Finucane, son of the murdered lawyer and himself a lawyer, was highly critical of Stevens, commenting, "This report is widely believed to be some sort of 'systems analysis'; an examination of what went wrong in Northern Ireland and how that can be prevented in the future. On this level also, Stevens' work is flawed. Nothing went wrong. The 'system' worked exactly as intended and, in the British government's eyes, it worked perfectly. The policy in Northern Ireland was—and may yet be—to harness the killing potential of loyalist paramilitaries, to increase that potential through additional resources in the shape of weapons and information and to direct those resources against selected targets so that the government could be rid of its enemies."

The Finucane family continues to call for a full judicial inquiry into all aspects of collusion including the full publication of a simultaneous report by Canadian Judge Peter Cory.



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