

Northern Ireland: “Dirty war” probe provokes conflicts

Steve James
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Sharp divisions have emerged in Britain and Northern Ireland over ongoing revelations regarding the role of British armed forces in orchestrating the assassination of opponents during the “dirty war” against the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Sir John Stevens, a London Metropolitan Police Commissioner is the most senior police officer in Britain. He was charged with investigating allegations of collusion between Britain’s army and security services with pro-British protestant Loyalist terrorist groups in organising the assassination of Irish republicans.

In April 2003, Stevens published a 3,500-word document admitting “collusion, the wilful failure to keep records, the absence of accountability, the withholding of intelligence and evidence, and the extreme of agents being involved in murder.” Stevens reported that inquiries were ongoing into legal cases to be brought against at least nine members of the British Army’s shadowy Force Research Unit (FRU).

At the time, the *Guardian* described the report as “one of the most shocking commentaries on British institutions ever published,” despite its curtailed character (inquiries have been going on for 14 years and have amassed reams of evidence).

The newspaper went on: “It is now clear that, for a period in the 1980s and early 1990s, a small group of policemen and army officers decided that the normal rules did not apply to them... It is likely that dozens of victims—some innocent, some guilty—were killed through this unholy alliance between the state and terror groups.”

Although the crimes committed by British forces during their occupation of Northern Ireland are well known, the Stevens report is the first official admission by leading British officials of state collusion with loyalist killers and the first suggestion that senior army officers could face prosecution. Hitherto, only a tiny number of individual soldiers have faced legal censure. No army soldier or officer has, for example, faced trial for any role in the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre in which the British Army shot and killed 13 unarmed civil rights demonstrators.

On May 14, the Stevens report was debated in Britain’s parliament following a request from Labour MP Kevin McNamara. Given the explosive nature of the report, the fact it was left to a Labour backbencher to call for a debate is indicative of the government’s nervousness. The debate itself

was little reported.

McNamara called for full publication of Stevens’ findings, which together with his earlier investigations into collusion, are the largest investigations in British criminal history. He made clear that his primary concern was that British security services had unnecessarily extended the “dirty war” and delayed the type of power-sharing agreement finally reached with the IRA’s political wing Sinn Fein in 1998.

“For successive governments, the tactical assessment of the options for a military offensive against terrorism was flawed by compromised intelligence and undermined by its reliance on the unlawful activities of agencies,” he said. “I believe that intelligence agencies played a significant role in shaping the political geography of Northern Ireland and prevented the emergence of a political alternative for many years.”

McNamara pointed to previous failed efforts at prosecuting those responsible for assassinations in Northern Ireland and complained of the blurring of the line between state agents, informants and those merely assisting the security services. He called for prosecutions to be brought and those responsible to be removed from office. He questioned the circumstances surrounding the recent death of British agent, Brian Nelson—who functioned as the intelligence officer of the loyalist Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and acted as go-between for loyalist assassins and the FRU. Nelson died a fortnight before the publication of the Stevens report. Even Nelson’s own family have not been told how he died.

The MP concluded, “When the government themselves stand in the dock, what is the appropriate remedy? The charges made by Sir John Stevens are the most serious to be faced by any government in Britain. They go to the heart of our democracy. Our commitment to human rights, the rule of law and justice in Northern Ireland will count for nothing if we cannot address these matters openly and honestly.”

It is precisely because of the filthy character of the war carried out by British forces at the behest of successive Labour and Conservative governments and Ulster Unionism that no government can address matters “openly and honestly”.

Herein lies an essential weakness of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the basis for establishing a devolved executive in Northern Ireland in which Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionists

both participate.

The Agreement promised a limited investigation into the “dirty war” in return for the IRA ending its armed struggle and the creation of a Northern Ireland Assembly—considered vital to Northern Ireland’s efforts to attract overseas investment and slash Britain’s soaring security budget.

But the limited investigations conducted so far—primarily the Saville Tribunal into Bloody Sunday and the Stevens Inquiry—have enraged the Unionist hierarchy and sections of the British establishment.

Former Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, former Defence Secretary Lord Carrington, numerous spies, soldiers, and the leading army officers present at Bloody Sunday have been dragged in front of the tribunal. The pro-British Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), together with Conservative politicians have responded by denouncing the tribunal as a waste of money and called for it be closed down.

The Stevens Inquiry is the more explosive of the two as it threatens to reveal the internal mechanisms and human cost of the “dirty war” to the British and Northern Ireland populations of which Bloody Sunday was only one incident. While the Blair government has, so far, viewed the “dirty war” as an awkward past to be partially acknowledged in a restricted exposure, the British Army, Ulster Unionism and the intelligence services are all seeking to curtail even a limited airing of the more underhand and murderous methods that were employed.

Confirmation of this came from UUP leader David Trimble, the First Minister of the currently suspended Northern Ireland Assembly. The UUP is deeply divided over continued support for the Good Friday Agreement and Trimble is on the brink of facing a leadership challenge from hard-line loyalist MP Jeffrey Donaldson. As a whole, the UUP is under pressure from the anti-Agreement DUP.

Prime Minister Tony Blair had suspended the Northern Ireland Assembly in order to give Trimble time to win back control of his party by seeking further concessions from Sinn Féin—primarily the IRA’s final disbandment.

In Westminster Hall, Trimble rose to defend the policy of collusion and assassinations as a legitimate part of the “war against terrorism”, in which “obtaining intelligence” is vital.

“If the public are to be protected and terrorism is to be defeated, there must be intelligence agencies that recruit and run agents, and their operations must be secret,” he said.

Moral boundaries, Trimble insisted, “must be breached.....agents for intelligence organisations are necessarily involved in the commission of crime.”

Trimble went on to attack the Stevens report, complaining that some allegations were being thrown around with “no justification”. He insisted that failure to keep records (of planned assassinations) was “not evidence of collusion.”

Of Stevens’ warning of intelligence activity extending to “the extreme of agents being involved in murder”, Trimble claimed

that he did not know what material lay behind this. He insisted that the “dirty war” had “saved lives”. Elsewhere, Trimble has insisted, in opposition to the demands of the victims of state murders, that any further inquiry should be held under the auspices of the secretive Parliamentary Intelligence Committee.

Former British Airways director and MP for South Antrim David Burnside also attacked the Saville Tribunal and the Stevens Inquiry and called for any inquiries into the armed forces to be carried out in secret. Not so inquiries into the Unionists’ political opponents. Burnside called for public inquiries into the activity of the IRA and even the “foundation and activities of the Fianna Fail, which forms the present government in the Irish Republic.”

Stevens’ abridged report released last month also hinted at efforts to prosecute a series of officers in the FRU for their individual role in the assassinations of numerous Catholics, Sinn Féin leaders, human rights figures and ordinary Protestants. Chief on Stevens’ target list is likely to be a Brigadier Gordon Kerr—head of the FRU during the orgy of British directed loyalist assassinations in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Kerr is currently reported as on duty in either Beijing or Iraq.

Conservative MP and former soldier Patrick Mercer spoke after Trimble. He hailed the dirty war as a successful campaign of “killing people if necessary and deterring people because it has to be done.”

Conservative former Northern Ireland spokesman John Taylor complained that prosecutions of soldiers or officers would be “morally repugnant.” He warned they would “rightly be resisted by the armed forces and members of the police.”

Reply to the debate was made by a junior government minister, Jane Kennedy, who sought to tone down McNamara’s critical remarks.

On June 5, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, went much further in expressing his essential agreement with the Tories and Unionists. During the debate on the fabrication of evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Straw attacked judicial inquiries as a whole—complaining that “we sometimes make a mistake in vesting quite the faith that we do in appointing a judicial figure to chair an inquiry of this kind.”

Straw specifically cited the Bloody Sunday inquiry—which he established—complaining of its cost and length. He neglected to mention that much of the costs associated with the Saville Tribunal, some hundreds of millions of pounds, has been accrued combating the Ministry of Defence’s efforts to prevent its officers and agents being hauled in to testify.



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