

# Ireland: Barron report confirms British collusion in 1974 Dublin bombings

Steve James

23 December 2003

The Irish government has approved the publication of a report into the origins of bomb attacks in Dublin and Monaghan in 1974. Thirty-three people were killed in the atrocity, the single most bloody event in the entire period of the “Troubles” in Ireland, and the lives of hundreds more were marred by injuries to themselves, friends and family members.

The report, prepared by former Irish Supreme Court judge Henry Barron, runs to some 448 pages and gives considerable insight into the attacks and the failed investigation by the Irish police. No one has ever been convicted of the attacks.

The report’s central focus is to examine what role was played by various British security and intelligence services in the bombings and the extent to which subsequent Irish governments have covered this over. In the end the report makes many extremely damning points but does not draw the conclusions which the factual and circumstantial evidence supports.

On May 17, 1974, two car bombs exploded in Parnell Street, South Leinster Street, and Talbot Street in the centre of Dublin. They detonated simultaneously, at 5.28 p.m., and were timed and placed to cause the maximum level of casualties and disruption, while leaving escape roads free for the attackers. Some hours later a fourth bomb, apparently intended to divert police and security forces from individuals trying to cross back from the Irish Republic into Northern Ireland, exploded in the border town of Monaghan. Twenty-seven people were killed in Dublin and six in Monaghan. It was assumed that both attacks had been carried out by pro-British loyalists paramilitaries, operating out of Northern Ireland.

The attack took place at a time of unprecedented tension in the North, during a loyalist revolt against a power sharing agreement being implemented by the British government with support from Ulster Unionist Party leader Brian Faulkner and the Irish government. The Sunningdale Agreement was similar to the Good Friday Agreement that was eventually reached in 1998, but it did not have the support of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or a majority of unionists. An executive jointly run by the Ulster Unionist Party, the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party, and the Alliance Party took office in January 1974 and elicited threats from hard-line unionists to consider “alternatives to democracy.”

Sunningdale was rejected by the Ulster Unionist Council just four days after it met and Faulkner was forced to resign as UUP leader and set up a new party, the Unionist Party.

Stormont was also opposed by an organisation called the Ulster Workers Council (UWC), which drew together the main unionist parties including the UUP and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley, the loyalist paramilitary groups and sections of Protestant workers. Following the election of a minority Labour government in February, the UWC drew up plans for civil disobedience and a general strike to bring down the new executive and the Sunningdale Agreement. Within a fortnight of the strike commencing, on May 15, 1974, with power supplies and essential services collapsing, Faulkner and the executive resigned.

Barron’s report points out the alarm in loyalist circles following the new

minority Labour government’s decision to remove Sinn Fein from the list of banned organisations. It notes the allegation that elements within the British security forces in Northern Ireland were intent on destabilising the executive in preference for their favoured option of a purely military solution against the IRA.

Given the degree to which loyalist paramilitary groups were closely affiliated with the Protestant-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Ulster Defence Regiment, and the fact that they were riddled with British agents, the central question hanging over the Dublin and Monaghan atrocities is this:

Did the British government or sections of its intelligence services carry out, plan, or provide other support for bombings in the capital city of another nation intended to destabilise its government and wreck the already beleaguered Sunningdale Agreement?

Barron makes clear that the investigation by the Garda Siochana, the Irish police force, compromised from its inception, was made impossible for political reasons.

On a practical level, key forensic evidence was simply washed away by the Dublin fire department. In any event, the Garda was in a poor position to investigate forensically. While Northern Ireland’s Department of Industrial and Forensic Science was probably in advance of comparable facilities anywhere else in the world, the Garda did not even have a dedicated forensic science department until 1975. Beyond eyewitness accounts, and a cog wheel thought to come from a timer, little information was collected from the scene. The Barron Inquiry stumbled across some of the forensic material in an unmarked cupboard.

More seriously, some of the most pertinent debris was sent to Belfast for analysis and simply disappeared. Barron comments that “it is now impossible to reconstruct an unbroken chain for custody for the debris which was sent to Belfast for forensic examination.” However, he disagrees with the suggestion, made by journalist Frank Doherty, that the debris may unwittingly have been handed over to the very British officers later suspected of planning the bombings.

From the eyewitness reports a list of potential suspects was gathered, photographs of some of whom were handed over by the RUC. One man in particular, David Alexander Mulholland, was identified. The RUC apparently informed the Garda that Mulholland was unlikely to say anything, but the Garda never even made a request to interview him. Other important leads were given even less attention.

On September 11, 1974, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson informed Irish Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave that internment orders had been signed and “the perpetrators of the Dublin bomb outrages had been picked up and were now detained, but it was impossible to get evidence to try them in ordinary courts.”

No information on these individuals was ever passed to Dublin, nor, Barron suggests, did the Dublin government, or the Garda or Irish Intelligence ever request it.

Barron suggests this may have been due to fears held by the Irish

government of reciprocal demands being made by the RUC to question suspected IRA supporters in the Republic. Allowing these would have further exposed an Irish government already under internal criticism for its prostration before the British military occupation and its inability to alleviate the sufferings of the minority Catholic population in the North. None of the members of the Irish cabinet of the day mentioned any efforts to assist the Garda to Barron's Inquiry, nor are there any references to the bombings in contemporary cabinet minutes.

Denied government backing the Garda investigation soon died a death, and efforts appear to have been made to lose all trace of it. Despite meticulous record keeping in other areas, astonishingly the Department of Justice files on the Dublin bombings are "missing in their entirety" and no records were provided to Barron by the department. Barron's assessment—"there was no single reason why the investigation ended"—is an evasion. The investigation failed primarily because it was politically suppressed by leading figures in the Irish government of Liam Cosgrave.

There matters rested until 1993 when a Yorkshire TV documentary, "Hidden Hand," was broadcast. Its principal researcher was journalist Joe Tiernan, whose team spent most of a year investigating the bombings. "Hidden Hand" named four additional suspects—Billy Hanna, Harris Boyle, "the Jackal" later named as Robin Jackson of the Ulster Volunteer Force and Robert McConnell, a part-time Ulster Defence Regiment man suspected of being in the UVF. All were from the Portadown area. Others suspected of involvement were from Belfast.

The programme asserted that the complexity of the attack and the characteristics of the explosions indicated training and planning beyond the capacity of loyalist forces acting unaided and strongly implied that the security forces in the North had likely helped the attackers. Pointing to a covert unit of the British Army in Castledillon, the programme makers suggested that the attack had been allowed to happen in order to protect British Army agents in the UVF. The allegations revolved around Army Captain Robert Nairac. "Hidden Hand" stated that McConnell, Boyle and "the Jackal" were controlled by Nairac. Hanna, meanwhile, was allegedly run separately by the British Army from Lisburn and 3 Brigade HQ in Lurgan.

The programme rekindled interest in resolving the unanswered questions around the attacks, particularly amongst relatives and friends of the victims. A group was formed, Justice for the Forgotten, whose campaign for an independent and full public inquiry was central to Justice Liam Hamilton's 1999 appointment by the Irish government, with minimal funding, to conduct further investigations. Hamilton was succeeded by Barron, whose own report is described as an "interim" work.

Barron scrutinises "Hidden Hand" and although he finds some discrepancies he largely accepts the evidence of two of the main interviewees—convicted killer John Weir, a former RUC officer in Armagh's Special Patrol Group (SPG), and Colin Wallace, a former information and covert psychological operations officer in the army's Information Policy Unit. Barron is less convinced, but does not fully dismiss, evidence from Fred Holroyd—a former army captain and military intelligence officer.

Weir was convicted in 1980 for the murder of a William Streathern following the arrest of another Armagh SPG member for abduction. In "Hidden Hand" and subsequent interviews, Weir explained that he had become part of a group of police who had decided to launch attacks on Catholics. He noted that senior RUC officers were aware of their activities and made no efforts to stop them.

Weir alleges that members of the all Protestant SPG group and local UVF members had together carried out numerous bombings and assassinations, including—in addition to William Streathern's killing—the Dublin and Monaghan bombs, the murders of IRA member John Francis Green, John Farmer, Colm McCartney, three members of the Reavey family and RUC Sergeant Joseph Campbell.

Barron rejects attacks made on Weir by the RUC and concludes that his allegations into the Dublin and Monaghan bombings "must be treated with the utmost seriousness."

Colin Wallace was framed for manslaughter in 1981 by the British judicial system in reprisal for his exposure of black propaganda used against non-military and political opponents of army policy and a plot from within the MI5 intelligence services to bring down the Wilson Labour government. He also exposed child abuse at the Kincora Boys' Home, demanded it be stopped, and protested when he realised that the intelligence services were blackmailing a leading loyalist involved in the abuse to ensure his assistance in their efforts at manipulating the loyalist gangs.

Wallace's conviction was not quashed until 1996. Barron considers Wallace a "highly knowledgeable witness" whose analyses and opinions "should also be treated with seriousness and respect."

Regarding the Dublin attacks, Wallace noted that in his operational role he sought to manipulate press coverage of individual paramilitary leaders. During 1973/74 all the individuals mentioned above as likely having been involved were on an "excluded" list and could not be touched. He told Justice for the Forgotten that, in his opinion, there is no doubt that several of the mid-Ulster UVF members were working for RUC Special Branch and the army. Information from these contacts would have been immediately circulated around the top brass in the Northern Ireland security forces following something as serious as the Dublin attacks. Wallace considered Billy Hanna, Robin Jackson and David Alexander Mulholland as likely to have been involved and that the cavalier attitude of the attackers, who appear to have made little effort to disguise their identities or that of their vehicles, indicated confidence that they would never be called to account.

Fred Holroyd has made numerous damaging allegations and written a book critical of the British and Irish security services following his dismissal from his post as a military intelligence officer in 1975, ostensibly on medical grounds. He believes he was removed from work in Northern Ireland because of the feud between different branches of British intelligence over their conduct of the undercover war. Barron points to considerable discrepancies in his evidence surrounding the level of intelligence penetration of the loyalist groups, and his alleged involvement in intelligence contact between the British and Irish intelligence. Nevertheless, Barron believes Holroyd's claim that the RUC Special Branch knew more about the Dublin attacks than was passed on to the Garda.

Referring to the recently released findings of the inquiry by metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir John Stevens into collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and the British state, Barron notes that his inquiry has confronted similar obstruction from the British security forces. In contrast to the Stevens Inquiry report, however, which ran to a mere 3,500 words, Barron has included considerable detail in his assessment of the collusion allegations.

Numerous intelligence agencies were at work in Northern Ireland by 1974—the RUC Special Branch, Army Intelligence, the Special Air Service (SAS) in the guise of the 14th Intelligence Unit, along with both MI6 and MI5. These often competing agencies attempted to share some of their intelligence through a Director and Co-ordinator of Intelligence, while all the agencies reported to their own British based headquarters—all of whom ultimately reported to various British government ministers. All were running agents.

At the same time, the boundaries between the loyalist paramilitary groups and state forces such as the RUC and the UDR were very porous, with numerous individuals holding dual membership. Much of the military and police hierarchy considered the loyalist paramilitaries as valuable allies.

Barron considers the evidence supporting the view that security forces

directly assisted the Dublin and Monaghan attacks. He claims that the only source of allegations that an SAS Brigadier and Captain participated in the attacks came, in 1983, from French journalist Roger Faligot. Barron insists that his inquiry has found no evidence to support this claim.

More substantial information of collusion by the armed forces centres around leading loyalist Billy Hanna. He was regularly visited by soldiers, who even took him fishing. Other reports, from journalist Joe Tiernan, suggested that he was regularly visited by plainclothes officers. According to Tiernan, faced with difficult questions in the preparation of an operation, Hanna was wont to clear his unit's action with his army contacts. By implication, an operation as huge as the Dublin one could only have been carried out with approval from above.

Barron rejects the assertion that the complexity of the attacks and the type of explosive necessarily imply direct practical assistance from the military. His conclusions are generally weak and conditional, which must reflect ongoing sensitivities in the Irish political establishment. But he does find the following:

\* That finding that members of the security forces had been involved in the bombings is "neither fanciful or absurd."

\* Although the loyalist groups were capable of the bombing on their own, "this does not rule out the involvement of individual RUC, UDR or British Army members.

\* A high level cover-up cannot be ruled out, but "it is unlikely that any such decision would ever have been committed to writing."

\* Neither would any written records have been made of advance warnings.

\* The security forces in the North knew quickly who carried out the attack on the basis of good intelligence.

\* Some of those suspected had relationships with British intelligence and/or RUC Special Branch, and therefore information supplied to the Garda was compromised.

Having made these points, however, he insists that the inference that the bombings were state sanctioned "is not sufficiently strong. It does not even follow as a matter of probability. Unless further information comes to hand, such involvement must remain a suspicion. It is not proven."

Commenting on the report, Margaret Unwin of the Justice for the Forgotten group said that its publication would strengthen demands for the full public inquiry as long demanded by the bombs' victims.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:  
**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**