

Northern Ireland: Reports detail Britain's collusion with loyalist murder squads

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Four reports by Canadian judge Peter Cory into collusion between state authorities and the killers of two human rights lawyers, a Catholic worker, and a pro-British Protestant loyalist were finally published on April 1.

The British government's decision to release the reports followed legal action by the families of those killed and threats by Cory himself to release his reports if the Blair government continued months of prevarication. In all four cases—the murders of lawyers Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson, Catholic worker Robert Hamill, and Loyalist Volunteer Force leader Billy Wright—Cory called for public inquiries with full powers to call witnesses.

The outcome of Cory's investigations is a serious blow to the Blair government. At a time when it is trying to present its occupation of southern Iraq as more humane than that of the US in the rest of the country, further exposure of state involvement in the assassination of human rights lawyers and political opponents during Britain's decades-long occupation of Northern Ireland is highly embarrassing.

The reports are the latest in a damaging series of revelations concerning the activities of British intelligence, the army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) during "the Troubles."

In the last months, the Barron report, prepared by the Irish government, raised new suspicions about British involvement in a bomb attack on Dublin in 1974. The Stevens Inquiry into collusion also published a short report based on the mountain of evidence it has assembled on four killings, including that of lawyer Pat Finucane, concluding that the British state had been involved.

Allegations have also emerged that Freddie Scappaticci, the former second-in-command of the IRA's internal security, was a British agent.

The activities of the Force Research Unit (FRU)—a British Army intelligence unit responsible for running

agents in both nationalist and unionist paramilitary organisations—have been further exposed in a book, *Stakeknife*, by former FRU operative Martin Ingram and journalist Greg Harkin.

Stakeknife gives a remarkable insight into the FRU, detailing the techniques used by the unit to recruit agents including Scappaticci and loyalist agent Brian Nelson and to direct their murderous activities in line with the unit's political instructions. Ingram and Parkin have both been subject to numerous injunctions—indicating great official sensitivity—while the book has been subject to a near-total press blackout in Britain.

Cory's reports are damning, although they mainly bring together information that has already been in the public domain for some time. Cory has found that the murders of Finucane, Nelson, Hamill and Wright all show evidence of state collusion.

In doing so, Cory has infuriated the government that commissioned his services as part of the 2001 Weston Park deal to restart the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which enabled the power-sharing structures favoured by the British, American and Irish governments to be established. By allowing a definition of collusion that includes the systematic omission of elementary security measures, Cory has undermined the government's hopes of drawing a line under the "dirty war" in Northern Ireland.

Of most concern for the British government is the Finucane killing. Pat Finucane represented both republican and Protestant prisoners. He was shot 12 times in front of his family in 1989 by loyalist assassins. On the basis of FRU records, interviews with loyalists, Brian Nelson's own statements and a recently recovered draft autobiography, Cory states that "the inference could certainly be drawn that [the FRU] had advance knowledge of the targeting [of Finucane]."

Several paragraphs of the report—at a point when Cory is

discussing the activities of another British agent, the Ulster Defence Association's quartermaster William Stobie—are censored.

On the 1999 car bomb killing of Rosemary Nelson, Cory outlined an alarming picture of a dedicated and hardworking human rights lawyer whose efforts made her the target of increasingly frequent death threats. The RUC systematically ignored these threats over an extended period, despite their being highlighted by numerous groups including Amnesty International and the United Nations observer on legal issues. Additionally, RUC officers themselves made repeated threats to Nelson.

Cory commented, “[S]tarting with the Chief Constable and permeating throughout the force, it would appear that some members of the RUC associated lawyers with the causes of their clients particularly those acting for republicans charged with terrorist offences.”

Billy Wright was a hard-line loyalist thug, leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force. He was killed in the Maze prison by three members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) in the early days of the Good Friday Agreement, which the LVF opposed.

According to Cory, Wright's killing was the direct result of an extended series of security failings by the Maze authorities. Maze prison officers issued repeated warnings of the dangers of putting INLA and LVF prisoners in the same block in the Maze, particularly when the INLA were able to smuggle guns into the prison. These were systematically ignored by the prison governors, as were warnings of the ease with which INLA prisoners could access shared areas. Security cameras were found to be inoperable on the day of Wright's killing, while an observation post was left unattended. Details of a planned visit to Wright were circulated in the prison, offering the INLA an opportunity to assassinate him.

The killing of Robert Hamill is different in that the Catholic worker was not a political figure. His murder by a loyalist gang followed the pattern of numerous murders of Catholics. Cory accuses the RUC of ignoring warnings that a street ambush was in the making, and suggests that one RUC officer in particular, a member of the same martial arts club as one of those involved in the killing, hindered the subsequent botched investigation.

Cory commented, “[T]his case is unique in that it will turn on whether or not police officers by assisting or counselling the Protestant rioters or by turning a blind eye to their misconduct, acted in a collusive manner.”

Introducing the reports in Westminster, Northern

Ireland Secretary Paul Murphy conceded that there would be immediate preparations made for public inquiries into the Nelson, Wright and Hamill killings.

An inquiry into the Finucane murder, however, would be delayed, because a legal case is already running against a loyalist, Ken Barret, involved in the killing.

In conceding the Nelson, Wright and Hamill inquiries, the government is hoping to head off the Finucane inquiry. There is no doubt that the government has been fully briefed on the extent of British involvement in all four murders and probably considers it can attribute the Nelson, Wright and Hamill deaths to the RUC, now reformed into the Police Service of Northern Ireland, or to one or two individuals. But a full inquiry into the Finucane murder would demand testimony from former secretaries of state, directors of intelligence, chief constables and leading army brass, including the then-General Officer Commanding, Sir John Wilsey, as well as most of the membership of the FRU.

To avoid this, the Blair government is beginning discussions on a South African-style “Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” This, said Blair, would allow people to “express their grief, pain, and anger.” It would also be designed to avoid any charges against British and Ulster politicians and army officers, would seek to portray republican violence as directly comparable with, if not worse than, British and Ulster state terrorism, and would avoid the necessary full exposure of the crimes of the “dirty war” apparatus.

•*Stakeknife: Britain's Secret Agents in Ireland*, Martin Ingram and Greg Harkin (O'Brien Press, £8.99)



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