

# Northern Ireland: The arrest of Kevin Fulton and the Omagh bombing

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The arrest of former British spy Kevin Fulton has implications that go beyond its impact on the current trial of Sean Hoey at Belfast Crown Court. Hoey, from South Armagh, has been in jail since 2003, and faces 58 charges relating to the Real IRA bombing of the town of Omagh, Northern Ireland, in 1998, which killed 29 people and was the worst atrocity of the Troubles.

The Real IRA split from the Provisional IRA in opposition to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement signed by Sinn Fein and the heads of state of the US, Britain and Ireland. The agreement established an executive and devolved government in the North, based on “power sharing” between the pro-British Unionist and the republican parties.

Fulton, a pseudonym, was subpoenaed by Hoey’s defence team. According to the *Guardian*, Fulton was to give information “about informants working for the Irish and British security forces inside the Real IRA.” Fulton had agreed to testify on condition that his own security could be guaranteed.

Fulton was arrested November 1 in London and flown to Northern Ireland. According to reports, over the next five days he was questioned on 30 occasions by the C2 serious crime unit of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)—most of which centred on details of murders that he had revealed in his recent book *Unsung Hero*, carried out during the period when he was working undercover within the Provisional IRA.

Although Fulton was subsequently released, it is expected that his arrest will effectively gag him and prevent any appearance at Belfast Crown Court. A former army intelligence handler, known as Martin Ingram, commented, “By arresting him during the trial, Fulton has had any chance of immunity from prosecution taken away.”

Ingram explained that Fulton is now at risk of incriminating himself if he gives details of his past at the Hoey trial.

Fulton’s arrest follows the British government’s decision to refuse him immunity for any statements he may make at the Smithwick Tribunal in Dublin into suggestions of Garda collusion in the fatal shootings of two senior officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 1989. The Smithwick Tribunal is due to begin hearings next year.

Fulton is one of a group of six former British agents that were inserted into paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The group came to public light in 2001 when they accused Britain of abandoning them and demanded pensions, compensation and trauma counselling. Since then, Fulton has made a number of serious allegations concerning alleged British agents and informants within both the Provisional IRA and the Real IRA.

A lower middle class Catholic youth from the border town of Newry, he had joined the British Army seeking excitement and a career. His undercover work followed a faked discharge from the army. He was first inserted into the Provisional IRA and then, when the organisation split, into the Real IRA.

In July 2001, the *People* newspaper published an article by journalist and writer Greg Harkin reporting that Fulton had appeared before the

Stevens Inquiry investigating allegations of state collusion in paramilitary killings, where he charged that the man responsible for creating the Omagh bomb was a British informant.

Fulton’s claim, along with his insistence that he had issued several warnings to his intelligence handlers that a bomb attack was imminent, led Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman Nuala O’Loan to launch an inquiry into the allegations.

O’Loan’s report, published December that year, stated that Fulton had contacted Northern Ireland’s Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC—now renamed as the PSNI) on five occasions between July and August 1998 regarding dissident republican activity. The report confirmed that there was a transcript of a tape confirming one of Fulton’s warnings.

O’Loan concluded that a man described as “A” should be considered a firm suspect for the Omagh bombing. His mobile phone was called from vehicles travelling towards Omagh, which have been identified as part of the attack. He also concluded that a further 10-minute warning had been made on August 4, 1998, giving notice of an armed attack in Omagh scheduled for August 15.

The report named three other individuals and another whose nickname was given. But the report was dismissed by Special Branch, despite one of those named being a known dissident republican. O’Loan noted that had this warning led to vehicle checkpoints being set up the Omagh bomb could have been prevented.

O’Loan also pointed to an internal RUC report which was highly critical of the Omagh investigation procedure, noting, for example, that the remains of the car used in the blast—vital to forensic evidence—were left in a car park with only a tarpaulin. He also stated that details of the August 4 warning call were not passed on by Special Branch to the bomb investigation team.

Then RUC chief constable, Ronnie Flanagan, denounced the report and threatened to commit suicide if the allegations were true. He resigned from the RUC shortly after and has recently been an advisor for the Iraqi police force in British occupied southern Iraq.

In the intervening years more detail has emerged. The man named as “A” in the O’Loan report has subsequently been identified as a Patrick Joseph Blair. Blair was named, using parliamentary privilege, in 2002 by Jeffrey Donaldson, MP for the Democratic Unionist Party, and subsequently by the *Sunday Herald* and *Guardian* newspapers. Donaldson claimed he had been told by security sources that Blair had been the source of the Semtex explosive used to trigger the massive Omagh explosion.

Fulton claims he met Blair shortly before the Omagh attack, covered in dust and smelling of bomb-making chemicals.

The *Sunday Herald* stated at the time that there was a widespread belief that no action was taken against the Omagh attackers so as to protect an informer within the bomb team and that suspicions had to be directed towards Blair as working either for the Irish or British security forces. Fulton has also described Blair as his “mentor” in the IRA.

In October 2003, the *Observer* newspaper published an article according to senior US intelligence sources, British officials did receive standing Ireland correspondent Henry MacDonald focussing on the role of Garda police detective John White. White recruited a former Dublin car thief, Paddy Dixon, as a police informer in the Real IRA. As of 2003, Dixon was in a witness protection programme. His role in the dissident republican group was to steal cars to order for them, while passing on details of the vehicles to the Garda.

Five planned attacks were thwarted in this way.

On July 2, 1998, Dixon warned that a vehicle had been requested for a new operation. He also told White that he was under pressure from the Real IRA. According to the *Observer*, White and a superior met Dixon in a Dublin pub. White's superior told him, "John, we are going to let this one go through." White's concerns over the possible consequences were dismissed, as were his repeated warnings to his superiors.

The *Observer* reported that both O'Loan and Superintendent Norman Baxter of the PSNI were convinced that White was telling the truth. But Dixon has never been questioned. White himself has been the subject of two court cases, both of which have collapsed.

In 2004, writing in the *Guardian*, Owen Boycott reported that a Special Branch officer was suspected of having made the August 4 warning call, which detailed an attack on Omagh police station, named five republicans, and gave details that were never passed on to local police.

The allegations surrounding the Omagh attack come on top of other high-profile instances of intelligence penetration of the IRA and the Real IRA.

In May 2003, Alfredo Scappaticci was named as the British agent "Stakeknife." It was alleged that Scappaticci had been deputy head of the IRA's internal security while at the same time feeding information to his handlers in the British Army's Force Research Unit.

At the trial of Real IRA leader Michael McEvitt, the main prosecution witness was US citizen and FBI spy David Rupert. Rupert, a former business man and adventurer, had befriended McEvitt and offered him access to computer equipment.

In December 2005, Denis Donaldson, one of Sinn Fein's leading figures in the Northern Ireland Assembly, admitted that he too had been a British agent for some 20 years. Donaldson had also been active amongst Sinn Fein's international supporters and had restructured its operations in the US. Donaldson was assassinated April 2006 in an isolated cottage in Donegal, where he had retreated following his exposure. His killers have never been found.

Taken together, there are strong grounds for believing that both Irish and British security services had, at the very least, some level of foreknowledge that a bomb attack was being planned by the Real IRA for August 15, 1998. There is also reason to suspect that one or a number of British agents or informants were actively involved in some way or other in preparations for the attack. Fulton's gagging can only be understood in this context.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time of the 1998 Omagh bombing, the terror attack was seized on by the British and Irish governments to build up political support for its proposed power-sharing arrangements in the North and to demand an end to paramilitary activities.

Still broader issues are raised by the events in Omagh, specifically in relation to the British government's ongoing "war on terror."

It is not possible to determine the level of intelligence awareness of the plans to bomb London's subway and bus system on July 7, 2005, which resulted in the deaths of 52 people. But there are disturbing parallels between the attack and that in Omagh.

There have been numerous reports that British and overseas intelligence agencies had been warned of an imminent attack on the capital in July 2005.

On February 26, 2006, the *Sunday Times* reported a leak from the Joint Intelligence Committee that, prior to July 7, Prime Minister Tony Blair had been warned of a "high priority" attack on the London Underground.

According to senior US intelligence sources, British officials did receive a credible warning months before the bombings from the Saudi Arabian intelligence agency. The February 5, 2006, *Observer* cited senior White House sources confirming that early in 2005 Saudis reported to Britain a bomb plot involving four Islamic militants, some of whom would be British citizens, that could target the London Underground within the next six months.

The Saudi claim was denied by British security forces when first reported by the *Observer* in August 2005, even when it was confirmed by Prince Turki al-Faisal, Saudi ambassador to the UK.

It has been firmly established that three of the London bombers were known to the security services. Mohammed Sidique Khan and Shahzad Tanweer had come to the attention of a number of intelligence services, including MI5, and their phones had reportedly been bugged for an extended period. American officials also reported that a third bomber, Germaine Lindsay, was on a terrorist watch list. French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy claimed he had been informed by Home Secretary Charles Clarke that some of the suspects were arrested and released in 2004.

In addition there has never been a credible explanation given for the decision to reduce Britain's terror threat assessment only weeks before the bombing. The bombings took place in the week when the heads of government of the world's leading industrialised nations were in the UK for a G8 meeting, an occasion where a maximum security alert would be normal.

As with Omagh, the July 7 atrocity was used for political ends, as the pretext for broadening the Labour government's attack on civil liberties. On July 22, innocent Brazilian worker Jean Charles de Menezes was gunned down on a London subway train in broad daylight by plainclothes officers. Army units trained in Northern Ireland were involved in the operation. His brutal murder was defended by the government and the police, who declared that the July 7 bombings had meant the "rules of the game have changed." Within months, the Blair government pushed through Terrorism Bill 2005 which abrogated fundamental rights, including free speech, habeas corpus—protection from unlawful detention—and the presumption of innocence.

More than eight years after the attack in Omagh and 15 months after the London bombings, neither mass murder has been subjected to any form of independent public inquiry.



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