

UK Labour government and Supreme Court continue cover up of “dirty war” in Ireland

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Nearly 31 years after Paul “Topper” Thompson was shot dead by loyalist paramilitaries in Springfield Park, Belfast, the UK Supreme Court ruled, last month, against the release of a summary of intelligence documents relating to the killing.

The ruling, which overturned a previous coroner’s decision, relied on the so-called “balance of the public interest”, a euphemism for covering the tracks of informers or agents operating on behalf of the British state. It upholds the “neither confirm nor deny” (NCND) stance taken by the British government when one or more “covert human intelligence source(s)” (CHIS) or surveillance operations are in danger of being publicly exposed.

Paul “Topper” Thompson shot dead

Thompson, a 25-year-old Catholic man, was shot dead late in the evening of 27 April 1994. The shooting was claimed by the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), military wing of the loyalist Ulster Defence Association.

A community inquiry in September 1994, organised by the Springfield Park Residents Association and which attracted the support of a range of international human rights lawyers, is the only one to be completed to date. It found that Springfield Park residents had reported earlier the same day a breach in a nearby “peace” fence, constructed to separate Catholic Ballymurphy from the neighbouring Protestant Springmartin estate.

On numerous previous occasions, similar breaches had been the precursor of attacks on residents, carried out in full view of the then Henry Taggart barracks—a joint base of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the British Army. Fearful of another attack—one in nine households in the area had been previously targeted—Springfield residents printed leaflets to warn the community of the danger.

Despite reports to all relevant authorities, nothing was done to repair or monitor the fence.

On April 27 a bogus call was made to the Grab-a-Cab taxi company, which only employed Catholics, to lure driver Patrick Elley to Springfield Park. Thompson, riding as a passenger, was killed and Elley injured in an ambush. The inquiry reported that the RUC may have been aware for up to two weeks that calls to

and from the taxi firm were being monitored by loyalists. No warning was given.

To date, no one has been found accountable, let alone faced charges, for the sectarian murder. Questions posed by the community inquiry and the Thompson family remain unanswered. His mother died in 2004 and his brother earlier in 2025. Family and supporters have long suspected some level of collusion by the RUC, other agencies and their concealed agents.

No inquest completed

An official inquest was opened in August 1995. Over 30 years later, this has still not been completed. The Supreme Court verdict just released, following a hearing in June, was on an appeal brought by the British government’s Northern Ireland Secretary Hilary Benn against the decision of inquest coroner Louisa Fee, upheld in the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal, that the “gist” should be made publicly available.

The Supreme Court verdict noted, however, that that a “Draft Scope” written by the coroner identified a number of key issues to be explored.

These included:

- factual details of the attack
- whether the phone call was a decoy
 - was information passed to the killers by members of the security forces
 - who caused the gap in the fence and was it visible from the Henry Taggart barracks
 - why was nothing done about the gap
 - what information was known to the security forces about possible attacks on the taxi company

Brian Nelson

The verdict went on to note that “next of kin and others in the community suggest that both the RUC and the Army were aware that Grab-a-Cab was being monitored by loyalists”, and “that days

before the deceased's death, the RUC recovered a map of the Grab-a-Cab taxi depot in the locker of Derek Adgey, a Royal Marine, who was arrested for supplying information to the UFF."

It was also suggested that "the journal of the loyalist informant Brian Nelson records that in the years prior to the killing, he had provided information to his Force Research Unit Army handler that he had been asked by loyalist paramilitaries to obtain a map of the Grab-a-Cab taxi depot."

The verdict concedes that these were reasonable issues for a coroner to investigate, but at a certain point these come into conflict with NCND.

The judges made clear that it was not only a question of covering agents' tracks in Ireland decades ago, but of protecting current and future operations: "[I]t is also a question of how a CHIS for the British state in other contexts (say, in dangerous circumstances in a foreign country) might feel if they saw that the British state was liable to disclose such information in such a case".

They then note that the intelligence agencies themselves have intervened in the Thompson case to support the Secretary of State's position.

Intelligence "gists"

The judges also explore the "gists". These relate to a summary, with sensitive security data redacted, of seven folders of documents which the coroner wanted to be released to the family. The release was supported by the Chief Constable of the PSNI, Jon Boutcher. For the British government, however, even this highly filtered release aimed at giving some much-needed credibility to the entire "legacy" process supposedly drawing a line under its dirty war, was intolerable.

The Supreme Court found, unanimously, for the government. It offered a "statutory inquiry employing closed procedures" or a review by Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, both of which would further draw out the process in the hope of exhausting the Thompson family and its supporters.

Commenting on the verdict, Northern Ireland Amnesty International UK spokesman Gráinne Teggart noted "The Thompson case epitomises everything that is broken in the UK's legacy approach: secrecy, endless delay, and a state closing ranks against a family seeking answers."

Sean Brown killing case with UK Supreme Court

Although not cited, the Supreme Court verdict and the government's stance were undoubtedly influenced by the impact of another "gist" released in April 2024, related to the 1997 killing of Gaelic Athletic Association club chair, Sean Brown. Brown, a non-political and popular local figure, was kidnapped and executed

by members of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF).

As part of another long-delayed inquest, a "global gist" was made available to the coroner and read in open court last year: "The material indicates that in excess of 25 individuals were linked through intelligence to the murder of Sean Brown. The intelligence material indicates that those individuals are said to have been involved at the material time with loyalist paramilitaries... The intelligence material indicates that at the time of the death of Sean Brown, a number of individuals linked through intelligence to the murder were agents of the state."

So explosive was this material that the coroner closed does the inquest and requested that the Secretary of State establish a public inquiry, allowing for "sensitive" material to be examined in a closed court. The British government has refused and is appealing in the UK Supreme Court a Northern Ireland Appeal court ruling upholding the coroner's view that a public inquiry must be held.

Stakeknife report

The Supreme Court verdict came just days after the release of the final report from Operation Kenova into the activities of the mass murderer and notorious British agent at the head of the IRA's internal security, Freddie Scappaticci aka Stakenife.

Little additional information on Scappaticci's role was made available. Despite running to 164 pages, the report did not even formally acknowledge, citing NCND, that Scappaticci was indeed the individual in question, despite this being common knowledge.

Commenting on the report in the Irish News, journalist Greg Harkin and former British intelligence officer Ian Hurst, who originally broke the Stakeknife story, expressed their frustration at other vital omissions. Kenova stated that no evidence could be found of state collusion in the 1987 UFF murder of pensioner Francisco Notorantonio. Harkin and Hurst have contended for decades that the UFF was directed by the British Force Research Unit to kill Notorantonio instead of their man Scappaticci.

Despite the £40 million spent over 10 years, according to Harkin and Hurst, Operation Kenova did not have access to key Contact Forms, created by intelligence officers to record every transaction with their agents and informers. Nor did Kenova have access to the classified document registers maintained by the Ministry of Defence.

Not a single prosecution has come from Kenova while details of Scappaticci's will, including whatever fortune he amassed over his years working for British intelligence, have been hidden for 70 years by a court order.



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