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Opinion

Viewpoint: PSNI must show lessons have been learnt

Tuesday, January 23, 2007

Shocking is a mild word to use about the Ombudsman's report into the serial killings carried out by a UVF gang in north Belfast with the knowledge of police handlers.

It applies to one of the most disgraceful episodes in the history of policing in Northern Ireland, when police officers at all levels allowed informers within the UVF the freedom to terrorise.

The public has had enough experience of terrorism, and the difficulty of obtaining evidence, to know that informers are vital to the intelligence war. But the police who handle them, and the informers themselves, must operate within the strictest of guidelines, to ensure that for any crime that goes unpunished, many more are prevented. In the case of the RUC - and PSNI - against the Mount Vernon UVF, the police's "helpers" were obviously out of control.

The first rule is that murder can never be excused, in any circumstances, and yet the Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, found that "Informer 1" - known to be Mark Haddock - and his associates were linked to at least 10 murders. How could this have happened, as Special Branch detectives kept watch, and why did no one, up to the highest level, intervene?

Many alibis will be presented, arguing that the police had to preserve their intelligence sources. Yet what was so valuable, in what the police were being told, to justify protecting criminals from facing the rigours of the law? The handlers were interrogating their own informers, the Ombudsman reports, and releasing them without charge.

Senior members of the Special Branch must have suspected that there was something strange going on, even though they were coping with terror from both sides of the community. Yet it took an angry father, Raymond McCord, to campaign on behalf of his murdered son, before the Ombudsman was able to uncover the hidden truth. How many other informers, republican as well as loyalist, got away with murder?

The government now faces the inevitable calls for a public inquiry, but what purpose would be served? Names, now withheld because of lack of evidence, might be named, and charges brought, but at what a cost? The procedures for handing informers have undergone drastic change, like the PSNI itself, and the Special Branch "force within a force", obstructing CID investigations, is no more.

The timing of the Ombudsman's findings won't make Sinn Fein's job of selling co-operation with the police any easier, though it does emphasise the need for democratic control to be exercised, through the Policing Board. Sir Hugh Orde must prove that hard lessons have been learned and that in future a tight rein will be kept on both informers and those who deal with them.

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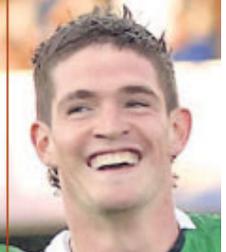
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