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Local & National

Lawyers were often target of RUC threats, inquest is told

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Friday, May 16, 2008

By Chris Thornton

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A senior solicitor told the Rosemary Nelson inquiry yesterday about battles with the RUC over intimidation of lawyers — including the time a client said detectives warned he would end up like murdered solicitor Pat Finucane.

Barra McGrory — the first solicitor in Northern Ireland to be made a QC — told the inquiry into Mrs Nelson's murder that defence lawyers were subject to "deliberate and systematic intimidation" by RUC officers.

"We realised that the RUC's behaviour indicated a deep and maligned mindset of hostility towards defence lawyers," he said in his statement to the inquiry.

Mr McGrory, who also represents Rosemary Nelson's widower Paul in the inquiry, went to the witness box yesterday afternoon to describe how solicitors began reporting allegations of intimidation by police officers in the years just prior to Mrs Nelson's murder in 1999. Mrs Nelson had been particularly concerned about threats, he told the inquiry.

"In the conversations I had with her in the prison and on the phone, the subject came up every time. She was concerned that Pat Finucane's murder wasn't receiving enough attention," he added.

Mr Finucane had been murdered by the UDA in 1989. Mrs Nelson was killed ten years later by a bomb that went off in her car as she drove away from her home in Lurgan.

Yesterday the inquiry saw statements from clients she had submitted to the Law Society, describing intimidation through clients. One client said in his statement that arresting officers told him that Mrs Nelson wouldn't get him off this time because she would be dead soon. He made the statement a year before she was murdered.

Mr McGrory said several clients had told him of threats against him made by detectives interviewing them. On one occasion, he said he parked at a petrol station when he went to see a client in Castlereagh holding centre. He said that client was later told that if Mr McGrory parked there again, he could wind up like Pat Finucane.

Prior to mid-1990s, "we hadn't made such a big issue of it," he told the inquiry. "Perhaps in hindsight we should have done so".

He said that many defence solicitors previously hadn't given much thought to the situation because they were "case hardened and used to it".

The QC said that it was only when the UN and other non-governmental organisations began asking about the intimidation that "we realised how badly we were treated and how dangerous this was".

Mr McGrory said solicitors made few official complaints because "we had no faith in the complaints system". He said that because there was no independent evidence it was a case of one person's word against another's and "police would always believe another policeman when they said there had been no threat".

He said the intimidation stopped abruptly when sound recording of suspect interviews was introduced.

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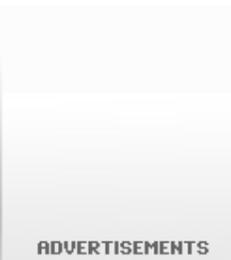
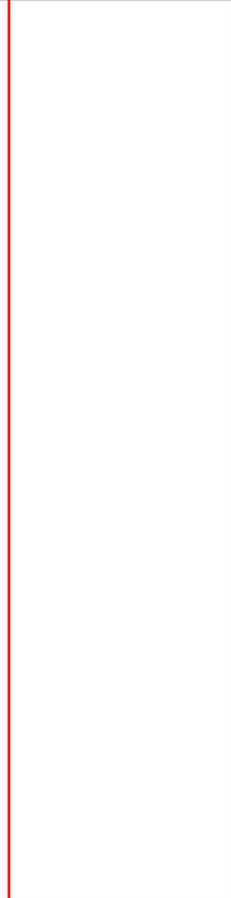


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