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Columnists

Why probing all claims of collusion is simply right

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Saturday, April 19, 2008

By Laurence White

There is often a suspicion that complainants against the police are people motivated by a hatred of the force. That certainly was the view held by many unionist politicians when complaints of incompetence or collusion were levelled at the old RUC. The politicians were inclined to dismiss the claims as the inventions of republicans or their sympathisers.

But that often was not the reality of the situation. Many people who had lost relatives in the Troubles felt let down that those killings were not properly or fully investigated.

In some cases they felt RUC officers or soldiers had colluded with loyalists in the deaths.

They just wanted to know if that was the case or if more could have been done to catch the killers.

Gavin Larmour, whose father John, a serving police officer murdered by the IRA, is one of those seeking the truth about a relative's death.

According to a damning report from the Police Ombudsman, Al Hutchinson, the RUC failed to carry out a thorough investigation.

Basic things like follow-up enquiries regarding witnesses, suspects, telephone calls and vehicles thought to have been used in the killing were either not started or not completed.

Information about the killing was relayed to police but not passed on to the investigating detectives.

John Larmour was killed in 1988, a year which saw 98 deaths related to the Troubles. Of course, that was a heavy workload for detectives and mistakes inevitably occurred.

But if the police could not carry out a competent enquiry into the murder of one of their own, other people are bound to question what sort of investigation was conducted into the deaths of their loved ones.

The Police Ombudsman's office is one way of investigating grievances about police behaviour. Currently it is snowed under by so-called historical complaints, some of them dating back to 1968.

There are currently more than 100 such complaints on the books, but only around 30 of them are being actively investigated because the office has also to investigate fresh cases.

While admitting that his office is under severe strain, Mr Hutchinson accepts that people who feel they have been wronged by the police deserve an answer. "Even if you could draw a line under the past, I'm not sure you should because the victims deserve the truth," he says.

He was speaking as an inquiry got under way into the loyalist killing of solicitor Rosemary Nelson. The inquiry has already spent more than £15m on the case. That may seem an excessive sum, with no doubt many millions more still to go on lawyers fees and other expenses.

While there is an argument for making enquiries most cost effective, we must never reach the stage where cost is the definitive argument against continuing to probe past events.

Rosemary Nelson feared for her life and claimed she had been threatened by police as well as loyalist paramilitaries. She represented high profile republicans and also the Garvaghy Road Residents Group which opposed the Orange Order parades at Drumcree. Did her work lead to her death? Was there security forces' collusion in the killing?

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Those are basic questions to which her family deserve an answer. They, like Gavin Larmour, must wonder if everything possible was done to catch the killers. Let us hope that the inquiry answers those questions.

The Troubles were a very murky period in Northern Ireland's history. It is now firmly established that the police and the security forces were as fallible as any other sector of society in their behaviour.

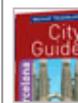
Sometimes that behaviour led directly to the deaths of people through collusion with loyalist paramilitaries or through letting agents run amok unchallenged.

There are mechanisms in place to challenge the past record and actions of the police and it is right that they are fully utilised.

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