


[HOME](#)
[History](#)
[NewsoftheIrish](#)
[Book Reviews  
& Book Forum](#)
[Search / Archive](#)
[Back to 10/96](#)
[Papers](#)
[Reference](#)
[About](#)
[Contact](#)

## Window on our troubled past becomes a little clearer

(William Scholes, [Irish News](#))

*The sordidness of Special Branch's role in the 'dirty war' was again held up to the light yesterday (Monday), reports William Scholes*

The winter sun peeking over the crown of the hills on the horizon lit up the entrance to the east Belfast hotel with a blinding intensity; only the long shadows cast beneath the cloudless blue sky provided respite for wincing eyes.

Inside the contrast between light and dark was just as stark, as Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan announced what she had discovered when her office shone a floodlight into the darkest recesses of Special Branch collusion with loyalist paramilitaries.

It quickly became clear that her report provided only a snapshot of the extent of collusion.

Mrs O'Loan had lights and snapshots of her own to contend with, a battery of photographers' flashguns mercilessly popping in her face as she took her seat in the large conference room, normally used to host weddings but yesterday crowded with relatives of UVF murder victims and reporters. Eventually she put her hand up to indicate that enough was enough and the photographers reluctantly retreated.

Sam Pollock, chief executive of the ombudsman's office, took to the rostrum and said the report – bearing the unwieldy title 'Statement by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland on her investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Raymond McCord Junior and related matters' – was the "largest and most complicated undertaken by this office".

While he was on his feet Raymond McCord – whose complaint sparked the investigation – entered the room and took a seat at the front. The flashguns and cameramen jostled for position.

A short time later he was separately followed by members of Relatives for Justice.

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They arrived in time to hear Mr Pollock say the report highlighted "fundamental failings" which struck at how "the rule of law" had been administered by the police.

Justin Felice, the ombudsman's senior director of investigations, went on to describe how murders, attempted murders, bombings, punishment attacks, drug dealing, criminal damage, extortion and intimidation were among the activities in which loyalist Special Branch informers in north Belfast had been involved.

The investigation's main difficulty was "the reluctance of retired RUC/PSNI officers from cooperating", he said.

A majority of those asked to be witnesses "failed even to reply" – including two retired assistant chief constables, seven detective chief superintendents and two detective superintendents.

Others were "evasive", "contradictory" or even "farcical" in how they answered questions.

The PSNI also dragged its feet.

With an air of controlled exasperation, Mr Felice said: "I expect the public would expect more from those officers."

Heads around the room nodded in agreement.

Mrs O'Loan was last to speak. With every sentence she added a further grain of truth to the existing silo of evidence that there had been collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries.

Records had either not been kept or had been routinely destroyed. Evidence which could have proved useful in future prosecutions was lost. Special Branch did not tell CID what it knew of crimes its informers were involved in... and on it went.

Mrs O'Loan described Mark Haddock – who she did not name and is known as Informant One in the report – as a "serial killer".

The failure of police to act against him "can only be described as collusion", she said.

The cumulative effect of collusion had been an erosion in public confidence in policing, particularly in areas in the thrall of paramilitaries, she said.

But because collusion is not a crime – conspiracy and

misconduct in public office come close – and because so much evidence was systematically destroyed, prosecutions were unlikely, Mrs O'Loan said.

Afterwards, outside in the sunlight, politicians queued to comment on the ombudsman's findings and a group demonstrated against "state collusion". Mr McCord, joined by his family, held a news conference of his own.

When she arrived at the hotel yesterday morning Mrs O'Loan had walked past a window cleaner wiping away the dirt exposed by the bright January sun.

Leaving several hours later, she had joined John Stalker, Lord Stevens and others in highlighting another part of the stain left by the security forces' involvement in the so-called dirty war.

Even if it is not yet wiped completely clean, the window on Northern Ireland's troubled past yesterday became slightly clearer.

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[BACK TO TOP](#)

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[History](#)

[NewsoftheIrish](#)

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