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Columnists

The collusion that hides the truth

Wednesday, March 14, 2007

By Lindy McDowell

Be careful what you wish for... The republican campaign alleging collusion between the security forces and loyalist terrorists has taken a new, if inevitable, turn that may not impress the Provo propagandists.

Now, it's allegations of collusion between the security forces and republican terrorists.

Or, to put it another way, allegations of collusion between republican terrorists and the security forces.

Nuala O'Loan is currently investigating a number of cases centred on alleged British agents said to have been operating within the IRA.

This investigation has got off to a fairly typical start for the Ombudsman's team. First person they've arrested is the retired RUC officer who came to them seeking to assist their inquiries. The man's house has also been raided. Hardly the way, one would think, to encourage future whistleblowers.

But it's just one aspect of the entire issue that raises the big question.

Why exactly is the Ombudman's office investigating collusion?

Shouldn't there be a specialist agency to look at such allegations?

After all, you would think that the Ombudman's team already have enough on their plate serving as a watchdog for the PSNI.

The collusion inquiry has the potential to expand massively, placing more and more demands on the team.

Add to that the question of public perception. Rightly or wrongly, many people, not least many former and serving police officers, believe that the Ombudsman's Office is biased against the RUC.

Surely then there's an argument for a new and independent body to be set up specifically to review and investigate allegations of collusion?

The Government may balk at the thought at yet another inquiry team. But since the Ombudsman's Office would otherwise require the resources to do the job, it need not take that much additional funding.

Besides, money has been readily found for other much less valid schemes. Perhaps the Government could take a whack out of the pot it's said to have promised to the UDA?

The thing is, a new inquiry team wouldn't have to limit itself to merely investigating allegations of collusion. There's constant talk in Northern Ireland about the need for some sort of truth and reconciliation body to aid what is usually referred to these days as "truth recovery".

Instead of truth recovery, it might be more practical if we were to concentrate on truth uncovering.

Truth recovery suggests people coming forward voluntarily to tell what they know about who did what during the Troubles. The likelihood of terrorist warlords coming clean is a bit remote.

Truth uncovering would not have to rely on their co-operation.

And truth uncovering could be the remit of an investigative body which would consider not just allegations of security force collusion - but also allegations about the role played by some of the leading figures in public life here.

At the moment, an impression is being created in Northern Ireland that unless collusion of one sort or another can be alleged the Government believes the investigation of past atrocities to be of little importance.

Of course, relatives in cases where collusion has been alleged do deserve answers and full disclosure.

But so do the relatives of all victims.

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There are men out there - men in some cases, now playing high profile roles in public life - who could help answer the questions of many bereaved relatives.

It's a supreme irony that some of these public figures are actually to the forefront of the campaign demanding answers about allegations of security force collusion.

Why is no attempt being made to recover truth from them?

Why is so very little attention drawn to this particular form of collusion process?

The one where the Government currently appears to be helping shield from inquiry the men who played a key role in a 30-year campaign of slaughter.

Do these people think we're green?

David Cameron really is green if he believes that his latest wheeze, to price the ordinary punter out of an annual holiday, is going to be a vote-winner.

Who the proposal is likely to hit hardest are working people who slog their guts out all year in order to be able to afford a couple of weeks of sangria and sun. And small businesses which can ill afford another price hike on essential travel costs.

Who won't feel the pinch? Big businesses, public authorities, rich folk and out of touch politicians like Mr Cameron himself, who will be able to weather the extra cost without too much difficulty.

In fact, if Mr Cameron could be persuaded to stay out of Antarctica, Gordon Brown out of Africa and Tony Blair out of the Caribbean, the combined emissions this would save might offset an annual holiday for the rest of us.

Wealthy Dave Cameron wants to save the planet. Save it, it seems, for those rich types like himself who can afford the higher price it will soon cost to travel around it.

This week it's been reported that Camilla, wife of that other well-known green campaigner Prince Charles, having left behind a pair of shoes which matched her outfit, had them specially flown out to her during a recent visit to the Gulf. Worse, it's reported that she didn't even wear them when they arrived. And these people preach to the rest of us!

If politicians want to seriously tackle air travel emissions, perhaps they could start at the upper end of the market, targeting the big offenders. Not the economy traveller who gets to fly less in a year that a duchess's shoes do in just one royal tour.

Lo, and behold!

The Alliance party did an odd thing in the course of the recent election. It didn't just fare quite well at the polls. It suddenly became fresh and relevant.

Anna Lo - the first Chinese person to be elected to any assembly in Europe - has brought attention, all of it positive, from all over the world.

But it's not just the good publicity that Anna will bring. She's an extremely able and articulate worker with an impressive track record who will be a vital asset to the new Alliance team.

She's not some token ethnic face, in other words. She's a key player.

Ditto the impressive Naomi Long, who justifiably did so very well in East Belfast. In recent years Ms Long's profile has been growing. She's seen as a voice of common sense, a public representative with a close understanding of the concerns of her local community.

Their party leader David Ford may not be generally regarded as Northern Ireland's most charismatic political leader, but it says something about the man and the party he leads that these two women were to the fore in the election battle.

Recognising and promoting female talent hasn't always been a hallmark of political parties in Northern Ireland. In this election it has paid enormous dividends for Alliance.

Once the party may have been seen as twee, middle class and frumpy.

One good election, however, and, Lo and behold, it's a very different picture.

And another one for the fairies...

Alarm is being expressed in some circles that children in primary schools may be taught to read books about gay relationships. Fairy stories the tabloids call them. While we're on the subject of fairy stories, how come there hasn't been an outcry on this point - the fact that they unanimously portray step-mothers as wicked? Surely, in these days of extended family set-ups, that could be provocative ... not to mention needlessly unsettling for the little ones?

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