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Lindy McDowell

Home truths about the collusion debate

Wednesday, January 24, 2007

By Lindy McDowell

A statistic which didn't get an airing amid the coverage of Nuala O'Loan's report this week, and one which is rarely, if ever, alluded to in the debate about so-called collusion

The number of lives which have been saved in Northern Ireland over the years as a result of the use of police informants, touts and agents.

What would you guess? Dozens? Hundreds? Possibly even thousands?

I'll declare an interest here - I have personal reason for wondering what that total might be.

For there's a fair chance that some of my family could be among them.

I live with a man who has had so many death threats that I have in the past made jokes about being able to wallpaper a room with them.

The 'threats' I'm referring to are not phone call warnings of the "we're going to do you" genre (although he's had those, too.)

Nor are they those anonymous notes you see in the movies with letters crudely cut from a newspaper spelling out lethal intentions.

No. These are warnings delivered on official forms by the police explaining that they have 'information' or 'intelligence' about potential attacks.

Where does this information or intelligence come from?

In the past, I have assumed that at least some of it has come from informants. How 'involved' have those informants been? I don't know. But I'm fairly certain they won't all have been just little old ladies twitching the net curtains.

What I do know is that we've taken these threats (and they've come from all sides of the paramilitary spectrum) seriously.

Sometimes, on reading between the lines, or following advice from other sources, we've taken them very seriously indeed.

Without going in to great detail, on at least a couple of occasions our family has had to take an unscheduled holiday abroad

Has this saved a life?

I really, truly, do not know. But I suspect it has.

And the telling point is this - what I am writing here will be all too familiar to all too many households all over Northern Ireland.

For ours is far from being the only household in Northern Ireland to have received warnings via the police down through the years.

Indeed, among those who have been told by police of threats to their lives from paramilitary sources, have been leading loyalists and republicans.

I recall, for example, not so very long ago, leading members of Sinn Fein announcing that they had received just such threats.

Interestingly, what I do not recall is the recipients of those threats either questioning their veracity - or the means by which the information was obtained in the first place.

If you are waging a campaign about so-called collusion, surely you would want to make it very, very clear you would not wish to benefit from it.

A double standard at work here?

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The whole collusion debate is riddled with double standards.

To take just one example - isn't it odd how some of those demanding full disclosure about UVF informer Mark Haddock, who was paid a reported £79,000, have in the past been much more reticent about demanding full disclosure in the case of the IRA's Mr Stakeknife - who was reportedly paid a similar sum and who was reportedly linked to around 40 murders?

And then there is Mr Peter Hain talking this week about how the O'Loan report made "uncomfortable reading".

That would be the same Mr Hain who, in a letter of reply to the retired police officers' association about this most serious and sensitive subject, was paying such attention to the "reading" that he didn't notice his own name was spelt Peter Main.

The same Mr Hain who during a past meeting with Raymond McCord was so "uncomfortable" that he fell asleep halfway through the interview.

Main-ingless words?

The fact is that the debate about collusion is much more complex and has more far ranging implications than much of this week's glib comment would suggest.

Nor is it primarily the PSNI for whom the O'Loan report will now have the most profound ramifications.

For the war against terrorism is almost over here.

But there may be a few security chiefs in England currently dealing with a different type of terrorism on their own patch who will be leafing through that report with considerable unease. How many lives were saved through the use of informants in Northern Ireland? How many terrorist operations were averted? We may never know for sure. But here's an equally big question - elsewhere in the UK, how many will be saved in future?

Let's put Jade in the shade

The media have, almost unanimously, dubbed Jade Goody a bully.

Take's one to know one, I suppose.

This is not meant to be a defence of Ms Goody. She did, indeed, bully Indian actress Shilpa.

And she does, indeed, deserve to be taken to task for doing so.

It's just that the media reaction to the international crisis that was Big Brothergate has disintegrated into such, well, bullying.

Even a spokesperson for a bullying charity seemed to be getting in on the act this week, calling on people to boycott her perfume, boycott magazines which feature her, boycott her television appearances.

What next? Spit at her in the streets?

And, no, I don't actually have any sympathy for Jade.

It's just that I feel a sense of perspective mightn't come amiss here.

Treating her with the contempt she deserves, as opposed to portraying her as the new Saddam, might send a more positive and realistic message to the victims of bullying about how pathetic bullies tend to be.

The party that has dealt best with mouthy Ms Goody to my mind has been the magnificent tourist board of India which placed full page tongue-in-cheek ad in newspapers inviting her to their country to experience its 'healing powers'.

It cut big gobby Goody right down to size.

Can the same be said, though, for the OTT reaction of some of the tabloids?

It's a shore thing

On a beach in Devon scavengers have been gathering up the displaced cargo of the stricken vessel, Napoli.

The pruck some people have made off with has included perfume, barrels of sherry, clothes, trainers, car parts and, most impressively, BMW motorbikes.

More power to them.

The goods being swept ashore are hardly likely to be of a standard to be sold in a shop. The ship's owners will have been insured. And in these green times the 'scavengers' could easily argue that actually they are environmentalists cleaning up the nasty pollutants being washed up on the beach. (It doesn't bear thinking about the harm an abandoned BMW bike could do to small sand creatures.)

For the ship's owners, the storm that crippled the Napoli may have been a disaster.

But it's an ill-wind and all that.

And whatever else we've been witnessing on the beach in Devon, it's not a crime wave.

- The shocking attack by Toulouse rugby player Trevor Brennan on an Ulster fan at the weekend game is said to have been provoked by a bit of innocuous banter along the lines of: "The Guinness in your bar is s****." It was shortly after this that the s*** really hit the fan...

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