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Fury required in campaign to salvage justice in Britain

Susan McKay

By Susan McKay

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In 1976 Vincent and Patrick Maguire waited in the holding cell at the Old Bailey to be brought to prison to serve sentences for their part in making IRA bombs. Their father, who, along with their mother Anne, was also to go to jail, was brought in by prison officers.

He apologised to them.

"I've always told you British justice was the finest in the world and that you should trust and respect it," he said.

"I was wrong."

There was no evidence against the Maguires. They were innocent. They had nothing to do with the IRA, which planted the Guildford bombs, killing five people and sending out waves of anti-Irish feeling in England. In an atmosphere of paranoia about the terrorist threat, a jury was convinced by ludicrous statements, made under duress, by Gerry Conlon and Paul Hill and backed up only by trumped-up police evidence.

A largely compliant media provided headlines like 'Aunt Annie's bomb factory' for lurid stories which ensured that the Maguires were hated with a passionate nationalistic fervour.

Patrick Maguire was only

13 years old when the bombs went off, 15 when he was jailed, 18 when he was released, 30 when the convictions were quashed and 44 when the then British prime minister Tony Blair apologised.

Now, with help from Carlo Gebler, he has written a book which unsparingly details the destruction of his family and his own ruin.

Gordon Brown should read it.

This week he intends to push through a law which will make a further mockery of the notion of British justice.

Police are to be given the power to arrest those they suspect of being terrorists and jail them for up to six weeks without charge.

Those opposing the measure include the director of public prosecutions. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has warned that this measure could lead to arbitrary detentions.

It isn't the Irish who are now seen as a threat, of course. It is young men from Muslim communities who are now at risk. We already know that the sort of violence handed out to the Maguires while in detention is still being practised, along with modern variations.

There is still a deep racist tendency in much of the British media which will cultivate the fear and loathing required to persuade ordinary British people that such measures are necessary and that protests are merely terrorist propaganda.

It seems Brown has gone out of his way not to learn from the Irish experience. He has refused to understand that the abuse of power will increase, rather than diminish, the threat of anti-British violence, creating a tolerance for extremism. He is playing the Thatcher card, of believing that the assertion of his own authority is

more important than upholding democratic principles.

My Father's Watch is an excellent book which reminds us that the inevitable consequence of abandoning justice is that innocent human beings will be wrecked beyond repair. Patrick Maguire was hauled out of his childhood and brutalised in prison. He had to act tough but inside his cell he wept, night and day, tears of anger, incomprehension and loss.

This was his adolescence.

Dumped out of jail as a young man into a society he did not understand, he was left to sink or swim. The police continued to taunt and persecute him. Even when it became apparent that he had been the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice, the authorities showed him nothing but indifference.

He nearly sank. Craving love, he was unable to form stable relationships and needed to live alone, in a sparse flat which he furnished like a prison cell.

He had children but didn't know how to be a father. He is tormented by these failures. With no belief in society, he embarked on life as a criminal, making his living by robbing.

He tried to silence his demons with drink and drugs and nearly killed himself.

He is full of rage against the British system and against the IRA, which killed in the name of freedom and then let others take the rap. It was his mother Annie who told him that the hate he was carrying was going to cause him endless suffering.

"The fury had to go," he says. "It was killing me."

Writing the book has helped, he says. He hopes that maybe the fire that has almost consumed him will go out. It shouldn't go out in those campaigning to salvage justice in Britain. Fury is required.

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