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## Array of barriers help keep 'rotten apples' well hidden

(Susan McKay, [Irish News](#))

Collusion was the elephant in the room at the Policing Board's big expensive conference in Belfast last week. There was an unfortunate air of self-congratulation about the event. This was about 'Policing the Future' and there was a determination not to let it get dragged down by the past.

So when Des Rea, chairman of the board, called in the first session for a commission to look into how we should "deal with the past", he did so in such a way that the secretary of state, Peter Hain, was able to follow him without even acknowledging what he had said.

Rea spoke of our "difficult and turbulent past". We must not forget those who died, he said, but this wasn't something that could be solved by the police alone. What was needed was a "broadly based commission" to recommend how we as a society can deal with the past, he said.

Hain then swanned forth and spoke of "exciting and beautiful" Northern Ireland. The recommendations made by the ombudsman would be implemented, he said, but it was important to pay tribute to intelligence officers. Policing was "intelligence led" and their work had saved lives: "Let us not let the excellent work of the many be tarnished by the few."

Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde went on to say he agreed with Rea and that the past had a serious ability to undermine the present. Former policing board deputy chairman Denis Bradley also said that the British and Irish governments should set up a commission.

But Hain had got away with a blatant reassertion of the myth that if there was wrongdoing within the police in the past, it was simply a matter of a few bad apples. He also ostentatiously failed to commend the ombudsman for her sterling work – even though her office is, as Rea had mentioned, one of the cornerstones of the new policing regime and Nuala O'Loan's shocking report into collusion between police and loyalist paramilitaries made headlines around the world just a few weeks ago.

It was left to British and Irish Rights Watch, the Committee

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for the Administration of Justice, Justice for the Forgotten, Relatives for Justice and the Pat Finucane Centre, to show that there can be no moving forward for this society until collusion is exposed and faced by the authorities.

They did so by organising 'the Elephant in the Room'. They invited Geraldine Finucane, Raymond McCord and Alan Brecknell to speak about how they have each struggled to find out the truth about the murder by loyalists of a loved one and how they have each discovered that agents of the state were involved.

Alan Brecknell's father was murdered in 1975, Geraldine Finucane's husband in 1989 and Raymond McCord's son in 1997. They span the Troubles. Each of the speakers has had to dedicate a great part of their lives to this struggle and so have many more people who have been helped by the groups which ran this seminar.

There is one simple reason. The British have obstructed them at every turn. The formidable array of barriers erected to keep the truth hidden has been well rehearsed in this column and elsewhere.

Raymond McCord revealed that his most recent death threat had been received that morning. Geraldine Finucane spoke with palpable weariness about how she had won the right to an inquiry, only to see it snatched away again by the current British government. All this effort is not being put into protecting a few bad apples. Rotten policy is being covered up.

Although the Policing Board declined to mention the independent seminar, it was well attended. O'Loan came and spoke impressively from the floor, as did the head of the human rights commission, Monica McWilliams. The oversight commissioner, Al Hutchinson was there along with Kit Chivers, the chief inspector of criminal justice. Senior police officers from the PSNI also came, listened, and entered into constructive discussion about the issues raised.

The time for writing off those who speak about collusion as republican propagandists is past, though unionist politicians will, inevitably, hold out, cold shouldering Protestant victims and calling them traitors when they turn to human rights groups.

There are dirty secrets all round. Des Rea is right – the police can't resolve the past alone. But if he had called for the British government to stop obstructing those seeking the truth, his call for a commission would have meant more. However, it would also have embarrassed the secretary of state, and Policing the Future wasn't that kind of conference.



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