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The blanket

A Journal of Protest and Dissent

HET: History of Whitewash Continues

Martin Galvin • 8 October 2006

Following the British announcement of a high profile inquiry into a Royal Ulster Constabulary shoot-to-kill policy, some years back, this writer issued a press statement predicting a "Widgery type whitewash". Almost immediately I was called by a BBC reporter, who coincidentally was an old friend of the English constable selected to head the inquiry. The reporter insisted that I had misjudged his friend, who would not be party to a whitewash. The BBC reporter would be proven right. His friend, John Stalker, did indeed attempt to conduct a fact-finding rather than fact-hiding mission, and for failing to fulfill his real mission, was removed on a pretext with his career in tatters. As documented in an ongoing series of revelations by the dedicated human rights group Relatives for Justice, (RFJ) there is little risk that the Historical Enquiries Team, set-up by the British to investigate thousands of killings, including many committed with British complicity, will repeat Stalker's mistake. However Britain's new version of the old strategy of whitewash by inquiry, alongside British and DUP maneuvering for Sinn Fein cover for the re-named RUC, raises important political questions about the crown's true motives under the Stormont Deal.

PATTERN

The British have a long history of setting-up what are variously named inquiries, commissions or tribunals as part of a blatant strategy of whitewash or cover-up. A few examples will suffice to put the HET in context. When word began to leak from the internment camps that suspects rounded-up without charge had been brutally subjected to what was euphemistically called interrogation-in-depth, a crescendo of protest arose. Stiff-lipped denials or claims of isolated errors by lower ranked troops, could not explain away hooding suspects, forcing them to stand for hours in

There is no such thing as a dirty word. Nor is there a word so powerful, that it's going to send the listener to the lake of fire upon hearing it.
- Frank Zappa



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search positions, blaring disorienting white noise, beatings, abuse and other refinements now known as experiments in sensory deprivation torture. A strategy had to be devised to blunt Irish outrage.

A British enquiry headed by Edmund Compton was contrived. Compton and the crown solemnly exonerated crown forces on the obscure and nonsensical grounds that these British forces had not "enjoyed" brutalizing their Irish captives. This distinction would make small difference to the "hooded men," torture victims, who had little opportunity between the hoods and white noise to discern the emotions of their torturers.

Britain not guilty was the verdict solemnly proclaimed with British impartiality by a British commission vindicating the British. So satisfactory was the result that a European Court finding years later that Britain was guilty of inhuman treatment, which is outlawed under the European Convention was reported by British headlines, saying "Britain not guilty of torture" outlawed under a different provision.

The word Compton entered the vernacular of the north denoting a ridiculous lie or blatant whitewash. For a time, one caught in an implausible tale might be told "who gave you that excuse Edmund Compton?" or "even Compton would not whitewash that".

WIDGERY

Compton however would be soon outdone by Widgery's inquiry on Bloody Sunday. Widgery was faced with the monumental difficulty that tens of thousands of people had witnessed innocent civil rights marchers shot down by the British Paratroopers who were likely deployed with premeditation to teach the Irish a lesson or draw the IRA into an ambush. Undeterred, Widgery courted nonsense about nail bombers, assistant nail bombers, crossfire, innocent mistakes, paraffin tests for gunshot residue, etc that all but blamed the Irish for forcing the reluctant British to shoot them.

DIPLOCK

Still other commissions operated with sleight of hand to announce the removal of some wrong by substituting something worse. The Hunt report trumpeted the abolition of the B- Specials and gave us the Ulster Defense Regiment so that loyalist paramilitaries might enjoy British Army arms and training. Diplock provided the infamous non-jury courts which bear his name in dubious honor, as well as set in motion the legal constructs which would lead irrevocably to criminalization, the H-blocks and ten hunger strike deaths.

PAT FINUCANE

Moving to contemporary permutations of this strategy, Blair last year railroaded the

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Inquiries Act 2005 through Westminster, under which the British could omit any negative evidence, facts or findings from any Inquiry report at its sole discretion. The British also gave themselves final say over what information could be made public and what facts would be censored. Amnesty International called upon judges not to preside over any inquiry set-up under these constraints, condemning such an inquiry as a sham, which the crown could muzzle, censor and control. The family of murdered civil right lawyer Pat Finucane has refused to participate in any British inquiry into his murder restricted by such terms.

The Saville Tribunal was proposed by Tony Blair as a confidence building measure in advance of the Stormont Deal. It was to signal a willingness to give the consolation of truth to the families of the Bloody Sunday victims murdered, and then defamed by the crown. It was welcomed by those courageous families and the people of Derry.

Now so many years, so many delays and so many British obstructions later, there is growing fear that the families have endured all this only to be given a watered-down Widgery, absolving crown officials and Stormont and assigning any blame to a combination of tragic circumstances, and understandable errors in judgment or mistakes by individual troopers. Britain's attitude is perhaps best illustrated by its refusal to cooperate with the Barron Tribunal's inquiry into bombings and murders carried out in the south with crown force collusion. If the crown cannot predetermine the outcome by rigging the judge or terms of reference it will stonewall, obstruct and boycott. Members of the crown forces will not testify or attend.

SQUARELY

The HET fits squarely within this British strategy of cover-up. Thousands of killings between 1969 and 1998, include many committed by British forces directly or in collusion with pro-British loyalists, or British agents like Denis Donaldson and Freddie Scapatticci. Nationalist and republican families suffered not only the murders, but the dismissive and callous treatment by the British crown forces who sanctioned these murders and ignored demands for justice. It was these murders that received perfunctory investigation because those tasked with investigating had blood on their hands.

A review was finally established. With British impartiality, the British placed the enquiry under the control of the PSNI Chief Constable. The team will serve as a unit of the re-named RUC, whose members would have most to gain by insuring that a fact-hiding rather than a fact-finding mission is carried out.

It has now already been revealed that RUC members were allowed to take home files. Perhaps some of these homes had shredders. Most had fireplaces.

Over half of the files for these murders cannot be located. How many RUC who engaged in shoot-to-kill or colluded with loyalists death squads, or worked through

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British agents would be unduly troubled by decommissioning any files possessing evidence which incriminates them?

A few egregious items have already been revealed, for example evidence from the Loughinisland sectarian attack in which innocents were murdered at a time when loyalists death squads were virtually run through the crown, has been destroyed. No fear of DNA evidence.

The amount of destroyed or missing files has proven one thing. This cannot be explained away as a few bad apples or rogue agents. The scope shows an unmistakable pattern of whitewash and cover-up. Many of those who carried out shoot-to-kill or collusion murders will have risen through the ranks of the RUC to the upper levels of PSNI command structure. The British cannot pretend that the PSNI is not the re-named RUC then reveal how many members in the command structure and the force were complicit in these murders. Can Republicans truly believe that HET will be anything other than another chapter in this strategy of concealment?

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Why do the British need to continue a strategy of whitewash by inquiry? Surely, if British rule has changed with the Stormont Deal, such tactics would be obsolete. Families could at long last be given the consolation of truth, and the British could acknowledge blame in murders such as Bloody Sunday or that of Pat Finucane. Instead the strategy of cover-up and whitewash continues. Indeed, the HET unit will be speaking to the victims of crown collusion asserting that their PSNI, is different from the bad old days of the RUC in a public relations exercise even while it continues the cover-up. The whitewash will unfold alongside British and DUP maneuvers to compel Sinn Fein backing and political cover for the re-named British crown constabulary. The British are seeking Sinn Fein representatives who will be touted as visible tokens of support for British forces enforcing British rule and British laws. Such ministers will no doubt be touted as a British answer to any charges of whitewash or cover-up. Widgery or Compton would not whitewash that.

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