

NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING BOARD

***MINUTES OF THE 2nd PUBLIC MEETING OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND
POLICING BOARD MEETING HELD ON 6 MARCH 2002 AT 12 NOON IN
WATERSIDE TOWER, CLARENDON DOCK, BELFAST***

PRESENT:

MEMBERS:

Professor Desmond Rea (Chairman)
Mr Denis Bradley (Vice-Chairman)
Mr Alex Attwood
Viscount Brookeborough
Mr Fred Cobain
Mr Brian Dougherty
Mr Sam Foster
Mr Barry Gilligan
Mrs Pauline McCabe
Mr Alan McFarland
Mr Eddie McGrady
Mrs Rosaleen Moore

**POLICE SERVICE OF
NORTHERN IRELAND:**

Sir Ronnie Flanagan (Chief Constable)

Mr Colin Cramphorn (Deputy Chief
Constable)
Superintendent, Command Secretariat

OFFICIALS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr Ivan Wilson (Interim Chief Executive)
6 Board Officials

IN ATTENDANCE:

Representatives from the Police Staff
Associations

Apologies:

Mr Byrne, Mr Hay, Mr Kelly, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Sharma and
Mr Wilson.

Chairman:

Welcome everybody, this is the public session of our meeting today, and I'm very happy to welcome the Chief Constable and his colleagues, and I'm going to ask the Chief Constable to begin this session by addressing us.

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Thanks very much indeed Chairman.

What I wanted to do was to look briefly at the crime and security situation. First of all for February, our most recent month and examine some trends and significant operations during the month and then perhaps look back over the past 6 months before taking members questions.

Members will know of-course that operationally we divide the Province in 3 regions, the greater Belfast urban region, and then the rural area divided in North and South region terms. So for the month of February in the urban region there were some 5,450 crimes reported and that's a position that's broadly unchanged so far as Belfast is concerned. In North region there were some 2,143 crimes reported during February and that's a 6 month low, its down 23% from the level of reported crime in that region last October, and down 13% from last month. If we look at crime generally in the urban region to which I referred initially, some 34% of that regional total is taken up by vehicle crime, that's thefts of vehicles or thefts from vehicles or damage to vehicles. So far as South region is concerned there were some 2,057 reported crimes during February. And again in South regions some 27% of that total of overall crime relates to vehicle crime. That figure is broadly unchanged so far as South region is concerned.

Looking at some specific aspects, so far as drugs are concerned, there were 111 drugs related arrests during the month. Seizures included 75 kilos of

cannabis and 31/2 gms of heroin. So far as a combination of the months investigative and intelligence work is concerned, we engaged during the month in an operation involving some 200 officers which led to 18 people being brought before the courts who had been involved in the heroin trade. Drug Trends Bulletins have been issued to some 350 personnel.

There has been an increase in the number of robberies of cash in transit and of high value robberies. On an upward trend, the urban region experienced 6 such incidents during February. All of these were substantive robberies and in total some £159,000 was taken. In contrast Post Office robberies were down as a result of some good police work, which I'll come to later.

So far as that high percentage of vehicle crime is concerned we have engaged in a number of initiatives. For example in Carrickfergus we are finger printing and having examined by scenes of crime officers every vehicle that's recovered.

We've noticed in the Belfast region a significant increase in burglaries directed at computer equipment, and we've seen an upsurge in burglaries at schools and indeed Queen's University, with specific computer equipment being targeted. Of concern to us is an increase in the number of bogus callers, usually targeted at old people, and we're taken a lot of action in terms of crime prevention in respect of that.

We've had a number of operational successes during the month, so far as vehicle crime is concerned, we had a coordinated anti-vehicle crime operation between our districts and South Belfast, and West Belfast and in Lisburn. And during a six week period a 120 vehicles were recovered and 43 people arrested.

There have been a whole range of other efforts in which we have engaged so far as crime prevention is concerned. And members will know that there was a highly publicised poster campaign in respect of 30 people whom we suspect

of serious disorder in North Belfast. So far we have managed to identify 17 of the 30 people whose photographs we distributed. In Castlereagh, our District Commander is engaged in an initiative because that district was experiencing a lot of people putting petrol in their vehicles and driving off and the simple placing of highly marked police vehicles in the forecourts has very significantly reduced incidents of that. We engaged in a joint operation with our colleagues in H M Customs and Excise in South Armagh resulting in 4 vehicles being seized by us and fines totaling £1,500 were imposed. We had a number of anti robbery operations and some very significant arrests of people who we would assess to have been involved in major robberies over the past month. And that can have a very significant affect, because the truth is in a lot of this serious crime and in relation to the volume crime, if you describe it as that, the position is often that a relatively small number of people are engaged in a disproportionately large amount of crime, so the arrests which I referred have been significant.

Chairman, you had written to me coming towards the end of January asking for an analysis of crime levels over the last 6 months and I've produced that analysis which I will distribute to members. In that correspondence you asked specifically for a report on pipe bombing attacks and similar attacks and asked to have outlined the number of deaths, injuries, arrests, prosecutions and what sort of police response we have engaged in, in terms of crimes of that nature. I will distribute for Members information the digest, but in terms of the follow-up investigation, of-course there's always an immediate follow-up, following any such incidents of pipe bombing attacks or any other type of crime.

In addition to the immediate response by our uniformed colleagues, of-course detectives would be tasked to the area concerned and an investigation immediately commenced, which would involve identification of witnesses, suspects, house-to-house enquiries, forensic examination and where necessary calling in military colleagues to make safe any devices or remains of any devices that have been found.

Of course, in a proactive sense and in response thereafter following the immediate response, we have engaged in a whole range of crime pattern analysis, we've looked at the collation and dissemination of intelligence and the maintenance of an up-to-date list of suspects. And I have to say that following that type of work, peaks that we experienced during July and August, where there were some 21 pipe-bombing incidents in each of those 2 months, thankfully have been brought down so that during September there were 6 such attacks, 6 in October, 5 in November, 5 in December and 4 in January. This is as a result of a whole range of both covert and overt activity involving patrolling not only by our officers but often by military colleagues on the ground.

Our District Commanders report very great value being derived from the fact that we now in most of our districts have deployed specialist civilian crime pattern analysts, and this is having a great affect in helping us identify trends, helping us identify hot-spots and indeed helping us identify particular suspects in respect of whom we can engage sometimes in covert activity. So I think Chairman, in handing you that digest, we have addressed the issues that you raised in that correspondence and those are the significant features in relation to the last month.

Chairman:

Does any member have a question that they wish to raise in respect of that report?

Mr Attwood:

Chief Constable, I think in the first instance it is important to acknowledge on this occasion your efforts and that of your senior officers, in leading the introduction of the new order of things in policing in Northern Ireland. And I think it is important that that is acknowledged because I think that is the agreed and common view of all members of the Board. But arising from what

you have said ultimately the new policing order will be judged against success, against those in particular against who are responsible for criminal and paramilitary activities. And the media and others would speculate openly about who for example would be the leadership of the UDA and would speculate openly about who the so called commanders of UDA platoons are and I think it is important that the police could indicate that in respect of those individuals or any such individuals who are responsible for or directing paramilitary or criminal activities, that there are dedicated strategies in place in respect of those people and those organisations, and could you comment on that, without obviously comprising operational detail or operational strategy?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Clearly Chairman, as Alex has said I wouldn't comment in any way that would compromise any prospect of bringing criminals to justice and the people who direct these organisations are nothing other than criminals. You can be assured that we have a dedicated strategy that we are examining these people. Our intelligence is good but intelligence is rather different from evidence that a court would accept, so we will be continuously examining such people, who think that they are in positions of authority, who think that they can direct the activities of others. They do maintain a distance and as they are often called the "Godfathers" of these organisations are hard to gather hard evidence in respect of because they work in ways and surround themselves by people who protect them. They don't leave evidence lying about loosely. But members can be assured that there is a dedicated strategy, we have dedicated resources and these people will never be free from very sustained focus on our part.

Chairman:

Mr Gilligan.

Mr Gilligan:

Thank you Chairman, just to follow up Chief Constable on your report on vehicle car crime. We've had the tragic death of Debbie McComb this weekend in West Belfast as a result of a growing car crime problem there, and your officers and civilians are put in nightly danger there. I note the number of vehicles you recovered and the number of people arrested. Unfortunately it doesn't seem to deter these culprits and I was wondering not withstanding the pressures on resources that exist, have you any further specific proposals to deal with this crime?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Chairman, we intend to keep engaging in specific operations directed against this sort of crime because it is an absolute blight on the lives of ordinary decent people, who want nothing more than to be able to go to bed safely and peacefully at night and to be able to walk the streets safely which sadly we saw an example of that not happening very recently. So we will continue to engage in operations directed specifically against such people, we will support those operations with their support and we will engage in a whole range of measures, overt and covert to do our very best.

We do need the assistance of the public and it does require a co-ordinated effort between those engaged in policing and those involved in sentencing. We will ensure that proper information is also passed to colleagues in other elements of the criminal justice system so that they can properly make evaluations as to proper sentencing, they are of-course absolutely independent and none of us would want it otherwise. But so far as we are concerned we will ensure that the proper information is presented to other elements in the criminal justice system as well.

Chairman:

Mr Foster has a question about the preservation of police stations that he would like to put to you.

Mr Foster:

There seems to be a reduction in resources these days, which concerns me considerably. That is both in manpower personnel and in-fact the suggestion that there is a reduction of police stations as it were, in the rural areas especially, which is concerning lots and lots of people. It has surprised me that this be so because the amount of crime which is going on, drugs, ordinary crime, road safety issues, and in-fact terrorism lurking in the community, lurking in the undergrowth if you like, this seems a contradiction in terms as it were. I would like to get some assurance from you that there will be an increase in manpower and that the preservation of stations will remain so in the rural areas?

Chairman:

Before you answer that would you mind taking a question in the same area Chief Constable, Mr McGrady.

Mr McGrady:

Thank you very much Chairman. Chief Constable two months or whatever it was ago, it seems like a long, long, time away, I asked you a similar question about the perception in the public mind and indeed the reality of the apparent huge increase in crime in rural areas. I say rural areas, I mean towns and villages included, of the violent nature, the use of guns, brutal assault, brutal robberies. The rural community has a very distinct perception that policing is being concentrated in the higher urban areas and in some circumstances we

can understand that, but generally we feel that in the rural community that we do not have an adequate and proportional service from the police service.

I wonder is there anything being done in a coordinated way to address that issue, and secondly, do you feel that, and how soon can you implement a strategy based on the district police partnership boards which I think would go a fair way towards bringing police to the rural communities and at the same time assisting in the detection and management of the policing service. We feel this is becoming a neglected area quite frankly.

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Chairman, if I may look at the general picture, first of all we expect by the time we reach the end of April that there will be something in the order of a 14% increase in the level of reported crime. Now some of that undoubtedly is a real increase but a lot of it we reported more than a year ago is, what we would have expected, because with effect from the 1st April 2001 we introduced our computerised crime recording system NICRS as we call it. The experience of all other police services who introduced computerised crime recording was always that you would expect from something like a 15% to 20% increase, so the 14% increase that we expect to experience at the end of this financial year is not unexpected, and that's not to take away from the fact that some of that is indeed a real increase. But when people look at the statistics a lot of it is about perception.

Now in terms of numbers in our organisation, we always knew that there would be a numbers deficit for a period that officers would avail of severance arrangements in greater numbers than we could recruit and train and get out onto the streets in respect of our new trainees. It wasn't just a question of correlating the numbers - the experience that would be losing through severance couldn't be matched for some time. But we have turned the corner, early in April we will have our first graduation ceremony of those new trainees. And that will be a position of continuous improvement there.

So far as our overall strength is concerned of-course there is another change in that our overall strength used to include all recruits in training because they were attested in day one. The position now is that recruits aren't attested until they complete their training. So the numbers that we have in training, some 240 colleagues, don't appear in our establishment figures and won't appear until they're attested.

On the wider front, about police stations. We do have to rationalise our estate of that there is no doubt, and it doesn't mean simply closing stations because in some instances, the fact that stations are there actually ties up manpower that could more effectively be used in delivering a service, than effectively used guarding stations that shouldn't in all places exist. But we won't do anything without the consultation programme in which we have been engaged, which I expect will be reported to the Board within the next month or so, very shortly thereafter.

Chairman, nothing will be done of course without the full consultation of the Board and the Board's very strong involvement before we even contemplate closing a station. And part of this consultation is not just about potentially closing a station. It's about if we contemplate closing a station, how else can we be easily accessible to the public. How can we go about our business differently? Can we take a shop in a shopping centre? Can we provide a mobile police station to an area at given times at peak areas of demand? How can we properly monitor our calls for assistance and prioritise them, there are a whole range of things being developed. And in relation to Mr McGrady's question specifically about rural areas sometimes feeling that the preponderance of effort goes to the more urbanised areas, it's something we are very conscious of and something we are working at, so that we distribute our men and women where they are most needed. And we'll continuously do that in a very scientific way through manpower allocation formula, rather than just operating on any sort of gut feeling. We always knew that we would be in

a numbers deficit for perhaps 18 months, but we are in a position now where we're turning the corner in that regard.

Chairman:

Mr Cobain.

Mr Cobain

Thank-you Chairman. Chief Constable could I ask you about the resources, and we are talking about limited resources as far as policing is concerned. Could I ask you about your attitude towards civilianisation of some police work. It seems to me a lot of this work is being carried out by front line officers. Could it be done in a more productive way from a financial and from a policing resource point of view?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

I have no doubt Chairman that there are more ways of optimising the resources available to us and because of the security situation we have faced for many years, we have duties being performed by fully trained police officers that could quite adequately and perhaps in some instances more efficiently be performed by civilians.

There were difficulties in the past in terms of freeing up the necessary budgetary resources to recruit, but, as an example, we have plans to recruit some 300 civilians who would perform front desk duties. It is not necessary that those on the front desks of our stations be fully trained police constables and the whole idea of that is to free those constables to get them out onto the streets where the people want to see them, and where the people need them. So we are certainly working with Government and will work with the Board to see that we accelerate that programme and that only those duties which require fully trained police officers will be duties carried out by fully trained

police officers. So we would very much want to optimise that whole programme.

Chairman:

Mr Dougherty.

Mr Dougherty:

Chief Constable we are all aware of the varying perceptions of police morale on the ground at the moment. I am quite interested in your opinions on police morale and I noticed in recent correspondence to the Board you felt that the whole correlation between sickness levels and morale was overstated. I'd quite like your comments on that and to expand on that. Could you also indicate what type of research you are deciding to commission?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

I think that what is important, Chairman, is that we do conduct research, because all the evidence is anecdotal and when people see increases in the level of sickness rates they tend automatically to relate, somehow, to lower feelings of morale within the organisation. Now I do have a genuine concern in respect of colleagues in the Full Time Reserve and that concern is brought about by the vagueness in terms of their future.

We as an organisation would want to work very closely with the Board and with the Government to try and bring some sense of a definite future, in that regard, because officers in the full time Reserve are exhibiting very concerning levels of sickness. As a body of men and women in the past they always traditionally exhibited very, very low levels of sickness.

I think there may be some evidence of correlation between morale and levels of sickness, but what is important is that we research it properly. We have

therefore directed our Senior Director of Human Resources to embark on research to determine in a very holistic way what the whole range of affects are, that causes this suffering from an inordinate level of sickness; that the level of sickness is totally unacceptable to us and we want to bring that down. There is a wide range for example, of our officers who have sustained serious injuries in large numbers that require some of them to be off for very long periods and the whole position is skewed heavily when officers are off for very long periods, and some of them very sadly, are faced with no alternative but ultimate medical discharge. Again we would want to work with the Board in determining how we could speed up that process so that officers who quite properly should be medically discharged are medically discharged as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Chairman:

Still in the human resources area, Mrs McCabe.

Mrs McCabe:

Thank you. In view of the opportunities locally, if we are really making progress on some of these things having an impact on manpower such as civilisation, or sickness absence management, could you tell us when the personnel officers, who are actually in the budget to be appointed at district command level to work with the district commanders on these issues, will be in position?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Chairman, we see this as a very important development to get experts available in our district commands, who can guide and advise in all sorts of personnel issues. It is not quite the case that it is there in the budget. We have certainly made a bid and Government will quite properly require a well-argued business case which we can prepare very quickly. We have engaged

in the research and we think it would take some 21 weeks as a process. So we certainly hope to have a competition underway within the next 6 months. And we would hope to have those experts in place within the next 12 months.

Chairman:

Still in the human resources area, - Mrs Moore.

Mrs Moore:

Chief Constable, the Board's Finance and Resources Committee has been concerned at the rising levels of overtime being worked by officers and would ask you for a couple of comments, one on your view of the difficulties that arise because of the need for such working, and if this is going to be a continuing trend for the foreseeable future?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

The numbers deficit to which I referred earlier, Chairman, was such that we always anticipated that for a period we would have to have officers working more overtime than either they would want to work or we would want to ask them to work. Of course members will have seen all the sorts of situations that we have had to deal with in recent times, in places like North Belfast and members will understand why those situations required officers to work longer than they should, longer than we would want to ask them. I have to pay tribute to all my colleagues for being willing to do so. But I am glad to report that it is beginning to drop down and the peaks that we reached, for example in September, where we had some 13,300 averaged daily hours, have dropped to some 10,400 averaged daily hours in January of this year.

We do anticipate probably for the next financial year still having to require officers to work longer hours than we would want them to work, and we will be carefully watching what the effects in terms of their health and safety are in

that regard. But thankfully the abnormal peaks that we had to endure are beginning to come down to more manageable figures.

Chairman:

Mr McFarland.

Mr McFarland:

Chairman, thank you. I understand that the level of civilian support staff is about 400 under your establishment strength at the moment and could I ask the Chief Constable to explain the difficulties with recruitment and retention of civilian support staff at a time when we are talking of getting policemen out of stations on to the beat and recruiting civilians to take their place?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Chairman, the Deputy has been dealing with that specific issue so Colin will address this.

Deputy Chief Constable, Colin Cramphorn:

Thank you Chairman. This is a complex issue and we have been running under our, we don't call it an establishment anymore, our budgeted strength issue for some time and there are a number of factors that contribute to this. You will recall perhaps that prior to the 1998 Police Act, all police civil staff were civil servants and therefore civil service pay and conditions applied throughout. That process of change began when the 1998 Act came in and an increasing proportion of our staff are now direct employees, but so long as we have a significant number of civil servants we clearly are not masters of setting our own terms and conditions, because we would be vulnerable to

equal opportunities claims for equal pay for work of equal value. That will perhaps be something we can address in the future in the longer term but right now we are largely pegged to civil service terms and conditions because of that fact.

It is true to say, particularly in the greater Belfast area, that levels of unemployment have been at record lows in recent times, and we have found that whilst we have been recruiting very successfully, we have not been retaining. So for every two recruits that we get into the organisation one person has been leaving, and indeed we have been aware of people often using us as a “holding job” whilst they pursue the job they really are interested in. That level of turnover contributes to what on flat figures looks like this constant under-filling of budgeted posts.

The third element I would highlight is that we have a limited capability to run recruitment competitions. We are, in fact, running the absolute maximum number of recruitment competitions we can. In specialist areas where we can make use of outside agencies or other bodies of that nature in the more general HR market we have been doing that as well. Frankly, all the stops have been pulled out on this, but there are a combination of factors there to do with the market, the market rates, and the skills and attributes of the staff that we are looking for that have given us this under-filling of budgeted post over the period of this current financial year and indeed it was the same last financial year.

Mr Attwood:

On a slightly different subject, Chief Constable, there is a question that I have wanted to ask you for some time: if it was now or soon decided by Governments that there should be an independent public judiciary enquiry into Pat Finucane’s murder and other murders, or into the murders of your colleagues a number of years ago as they returned from a Garda Station in the South, what would your view be?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

My view has always been, in relation to those matters, that if Government decided that was an appropriate way forward they would get absolute cooperation from us and we would have no difficulty whatsoever. In terms of the timing, my fear would be that it might compromise on-going investigations, so that is the only consideration I would very firmly want taken into account. Whether there were any current live investigations, the prospects of success in respect of which might be compromised by an ongoing parallel judicial examination such as described. But within the terms of that caveat that is the only difficulty I would have.

Chairman:

Any other questions from Board members?

Lord Brookeborough

Chief Constable, to return to rural policing for one moment, am I right in understanding that in some rural police stations and I may give an example, Beleek, that although there are on the establishment a certain number of people, policemen who will be in attendance there, that there are occasions when there may only be one policeman in and he may only be a part-time policeman? Also, where there is a town such as that, how can we possibly expect to see policemen on the street?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

It would be rare that that would be the case and clearly I would not want to go into detail about the number of officers that are deployed in any particular stations which might be vulnerable, and to people paying undue attention to them. I come back to the general position in my response to Mr McGrady's question. We are very conscious of the needs of people in rural areas, as far

as County Fermanagh is concerned that might be one of those areas. Again I emphasise nothing will be done without us coming to the Board, without the Board having an opportunity to fully deliberate it, but it might be one of those areas where in-fact by reducing the number of stations that we man we can actually provide greater numbers of officers to be available to police the area. And that is what is important; that we constantly question how we go about our business and that it perhaps is not necessary to maintain the estate in the way that we always have maintained it.

Mr McGrady:

I pursue the same theme as we did in the last question. First of all I would like your further extension of your answer to my first question regarding the evolution of the District policing partnership boards and how you see that contributing, or not contributing to address crime in the rural community. The other aspect following from the meeting is, irrespective of the theory, it is evident that there is a very poor police response to queries and phone calls for help, for immediate help, in the rural community. Now whether that is to do with the presence of personnel, the absence of personnel who are engaged in other duties but very, very often there is no response whatsoever in any time frame. That I find totally unacceptable.

Chairman:

I suspect Chief Constable that Mr Foster's question is in the same area as that, hence, we will take it now.

Mr Foster:

It is getting back to rural areas in Fermanagh. I would put to you again Chief Constable. You did refer about how you place police possibly in supermarkets but to the person living out there in the isolation of the countryside that is of very little use; it is no comfort to them whatsoever. This

is why I say, tread carefully so far as closing police stations is concerned in rural areas. There is a real need out there, I can assure you.

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Chairman, I repeat that we will tread very carefully, and we will tread carefully hand in hand with the Board on that whole issue. I do not accept that “very, very often” there is no response. I would be appalled and I want to know of any single occasion when there was no response, because I would be as equally disturbed as you would be about that.

The truth is that in some rural areas where distance is a factor of life that it does take longer to respond than in other areas where police are immediately available, so therefore that can have effect. And what we are doing in terms of the information technology available these days is seeking to put in means of screening all calls, for assistance and being able, in conjunction with the person making that call, to explore what priority should be attached. Because clearly in any given area the officers available could have perhaps six differing calls to attend in any one given time, and we need the scientific means of prioritising those calls. Very often people call and it is not necessarily an urgent matter so we need, rather than just to act through gut feeling, to have the technical means, and we are working and hope to in the near future have available to us those means to properly prioritise calls for assistance. In some rural areas it is a problem and there is no point pretending otherwise. We do not have officers available in every lane, in every street, on every street corner, and we will not which is why it is all the more important to prioritise calls so that we get the very best response that we can.

Mr McGrady

Can I ask a supplementary question? What I refer to is the fact that perhaps there is only one available patrol car, ie two officers for an entire district comprising several towns: that is not an acceptable level of policing.

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

I have said repeatedly Chairman, that there are difficulties, there are deficits that we have faced. We are confident that we are turning the corner in relation to those deficits, but we do need the means so those officers that are available can prioritise the calls for their assistance. People will ring up and in some instances it might well do that that call can be made within a couple of hours time, in other instances it might be that the call requires an instant response and officers need to know how they can categorise those calls and respond accordingly.

Mr McFarland:

Could I ask the Chief Constable for his current assessment on the state of the ceasefires and security situation as regard to republican paramilitaries, both the Real and Provisional IRA.

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Mr Chairman, we have seen the recent attack that thankfully did not result in more major injuries and that highlights indeed that dissident republicans continue to pose a major threat. We have had a whole range of successes; we have seized material, we have made arrests and we have very seriously dented their capabilities as have colleagues in the Garda Síochána, as have other colleagues in an international sense. However, they are still there, they still pose a threat. So far as the Provisional IRA are concerned they continue to pose a threat because of their capabilities. So far as their announced cessation of military operations is concerned we see that that holds. But undoubtedly they are still intact as an organisation, so we must consider them

to continue to pose a threat in terms of their capability should they decide to act differently.

Chairman:

Mr Attwood.

Mr Attwood:

Mr Chairman, very briefly if I could follow on. You have seen media speculation recently that there is about to be or there just has been a further act of decommissioning which would clearly give us the process that the politicians are seeking. Have you any advice on that?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

I have no doubt that it is being considered but I have no intelligence certainly to say that it has happened, and I have no firm intelligence to say that it is going to happen imminently.

Mr Attwood:

To reiterate what was said before, Chief Constable. Given that on a previous occasion the British Government initiated a public enquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and at the same time, there were continuing criminal investigations into that murder, and that the British Government acknowledged that the two could sit comfortably together - a criminal investigation and a murder enquiry, and given that it is 10 years since the killing of Pat Finucane and many, many more years since the killing of your colleagues on the way back from Dundalk. Given that justice delayed can be justice

denied, are we not approaching the stage where it is important that these matters are now seen to be conclusively dealt with?

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

These are matters for Government, Chairman, and members will be aware that the Government intention is to have all these matters examined by a judge of international standing and to take the advice of that person. If he or she decides that if a full judicial examination such as been suggested is appropriate it is my understanding that that is the route Government will take. If Government chooses to take a different approach they will get full co-operation from us. I think there is not a direct comparison to be made with the Lawrence case and I do emphasise the point that very great care would need to be taken so that on-going investigations are not compromised, but I have to say the on-going investigation into the murder of Pat Finucane should not take many months more.

Chairman:

Chief Constable, you are coming towards the end of your watch and perhaps two of the most significant events in the history of the province in the last 40 years or so have occurred on that watch. The peace process itself and the Patten reform, some members have already asked you about the state of the process, you may have something else you want to add on that. However, maybe you could comment on Patten and the change programme and the state of PSNI and your hopes for the future.

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Chairman, in terms of the overall process, of course there are difficulties which still exist and which lie ahead and those difficulties are posed in the form of organisations and individuals who do not want political process and who are quite willing to engage in violence and attack others in some

distorted attempt to prevent that progress. However, I have no doubt whatsoever that the overall trend of movement is inexorably in a positive direction. I think we cannot allow the difficulties that exist to detract from the fact that the world has changed, and in my view changed forever for the better, and I have no doubt there is a better, safer, more prosperous future ahead for all the people of the province.

So far as Patten is concerned it was always my view that there were issues in the Patten Report that we had not addressed in our own fundamental review because it was not part of our brief so to address those issues. Referring for example to the arrangement for accountability, I am referring to the arrangements in relation to a change of crest and title and I have to say I think the Board has done a magnificent job in producing a new crest which, with effect from the 5th April, will come into full being.

In respect of all those other changes, many of them were changes which we as a result of a fundamental review recognised were appropriate. We as an organisation, I think have grasped the programme of change very significantly, very rigorously. The organisation is now well placed.

We always knew there would be difficulties, difficulties for perhaps an 18 month, even two year period. But we are coming to the end of that period and I look to the future both with great hope and as a natural optimist. Certainly the colleagues with whom I have been privileged to work, with whom I continue to be privileged to work, I have no doubt will see the Police Service of Northern Ireland continuing to provide the very highest standard of policing service it is humanly possible to provide to all our people irrespective of what background, what tradition, or what culture any of our people come from.

Chairman:

Chief Constable, on behalf of the Board, I would wish to thank you for your leadership over difficult years and not least through the challenges of the Patten reforms, and on behalf of the Board I would wish you all the very best in the future. We are delighted that you have in-fact been promoted to the Inspectorate and we wish you well in that role and thank you very much for your appearance today. Thank you.

Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan:

Thank you very much indeed Chairman and Members, and can I wish the Board every continued success for the future. I have no doubt that the Board and the Police Service of Northern Ireland will enjoy the most fruitful of relationships with proper professional tensions that if they did not exist neither of us would be doing our job. Can I commend the Board for all that they have done thus far, and wish the Board and indeed, as I will be wishing my colleagues in my organisation, continued success. Thank you very much.