

Joint submission by Professor Sir Desmond Rea, Chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board and Denis Bradley to the House Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations and Europe and Emerging Threats

Wednesday 15th March 2006

“The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Policing Advances and Remaining Challenges”

Introduction

Mr Chairman, thank you. My name is Desmond Rea and as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, I am pleased to be here to testify today along with my Vice-Chairman, Denis Bradley

Policing is a central issue in any society but in Northern Ireland no issue has been more difficult or divisive.

The participants in the negotiations that led to the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday 1998 recognised this; they believed that the Agreement would provide an opportunity, and I quote

‘for a new beginning to policing in Northern Ireland with a police service capable of attracting and sustaining support from the community as a whole’

The 1999 Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland, chaired by Chris Patten, with 175 Recommendations, became the blueprint for the new beginning and for affecting that policing change.

At midnight on the 4th November 2001 the Northern Ireland Policing Board began its job of holding the Police Service to account; and ensuring for all the people of Northern Ireland the delivery of an effective, efficient, and impartial police service which would secure the confidence of the whole community.

The Unique Policing Architecture

The policing architecture put in place in Northern Ireland is quite unique. Through

- first the accountability function of the Board;
- secondly, the provision of an independent complaints system through the office of the Police Ombudsman, and
- finally, the critical role of the Police Oversight Commissioner, who has been responsible for measuring progress in the change process, policing

in Northern Ireland is now subject to more oversight than any other police service in the Europe, if not the world.

This policing architecture has delivered the accountability, the oversight and transparency mechanisms essential for building public confidence in policing and delivering a service which meets the needs of the community.

Getting on with the Task

The Board's work has taken place during a period of continuing political uncertainty and full political and public support for policing has still not been secured. We are not yet policing a normal society, and there is still a way to travel.

But this has not inhibited the Board's commitment to its work – and despite the lack of full support, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Board have met the challenge of delivering on difficult issues and effecting comprehensive and fundamental changes to policing.

Winning the Support of the Whole Community : 50/50

For policing to win the support of the community, it must be representative of it and historically policing in Northern Ireland was not. Over the past 4 years, as the result of 50:50 recruitment provisions, real compositional change has been effected in a relatively short space of time with almost 20% of regular officers are now from the Catholic community – with a target to meet the Patten goal of 30% by 2010. Female representation in the service has doubled to 20%.

District Policing Partnerships

Engaging local people to participate in the new policing arrangements has provided challenges, but the real turning key has been the establishment of 26 District Policing Partnerships (DPPs). Set up by the Board in 2003, these partnerships are a real success story with around 500 people now having their say on local policing issues. They have become an integral and accepted part of local policing and have brought policing closer to the community and the community closer to policing in way that has never happened before.

DPPs held over 400 meetings in public during their first term, giving local people the opportunity to ask questions of the PSNI and discuss issues of concern across Northern Ireland.

The ability to question and hold the police to account has underpinned the change process and the Board itself has been given strong powers to carry out its work.

Intelligence, the Reform of Special Branch

The whole area of intelligence, the reform of special branch and the handling of informants is an area where legitimate questions have been raised in the past. The Board's review of the dissemination of intelligence between Special Branch and other parts of the Police Service has formed the basis for major change through the implementation of a series of report recommendations. The scrutiny of these areas, and the establishment of a new Crime Operations Department provides for increased public confidence. The dedicated structure and staffing of the new Department ensures that the policies, processes and practices for the management of intelligence and day to day operations now meet national professional standards.

Human Rights

Policing in Northern Ireland hasn't just survived uncertain times; in many ways it has flourished and leads the way internationally. One example of this is the approach to human rights in policing.

In February 2003, a Code of Ethics was introduced for the Police Service. This Code, which I believe is unique in European policing, lays down the standards of conduct and practice for police officers and sets out their rights, as well as their obligations under the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Board is responsible for monitoring police compliance with the Act and appointed 2 human rights experts to develop a robust monitoring framework against which to scrutinise how the police meet their human rights responsibilities.

In March 2005, the Board published its first Human Rights Annual Report which comprehensively examined the PSNI's performance against this framework. Significant progress has been made – but there are still issues to be taken forward and implementation of the report's recommendations are being closely monitored by the Board.

But it is encouraging that Report Authors, Keir Starmer QC and Jane Gordon, state that '***the PSNI has done more than any other Police Service in the UK to achieve Human Rights Compliance***'.

The Board has also been involved in ongoing efforts to research and develop less lethal alternatives to the controversial baton round and the work undertaken has considered technologies used by police services across the world. The Board supported the Chief Constable's decision to introduce CS Spray and a new baton round – and consultation initiated on the Chief Constable's intention to purchase 12 TASER units for use by specialist Firearms Officers will provide a basis for the Board's discussions on this.

The issue of less lethal weaponry for public order and non public order is one of legitimate public interest in Northern Ireland – but unfortunately as we witnessed in the extensive street disorder last Summer, the police must have access to a range of equipment to meet difficult and often dangerous policing situations. Officers need access to technologies that allow them to use no more force than is reasonable and proportionate and act in a way which is compliant with the European Convention on Human rights. The robust accountability mechanisms now provide that assurance.

Challenges Ahead ...

But despite all the progress made, looking to the future, there are still challenges ahead.

The Policing Board is committed to supporting the delivery of a policing service that is fit for the 21st century.

And that is about making the community safer for everyone. Northern Ireland is one of the safest places in Europe to live, but there is still crime and criminality. Organised crime remains a major issue but through the dedicated work of the PSNI, the Assets Recovery Agency and other key agencies, including close co-operation with An Garda Siochana, those who profit through ill-gotten gains are being brought to justice.

Dissident terrorists still pose a threat, but normalisation has and is happening. Mobile police officers patrol in Belfast and other cities and towns on bicycles, something that would have been unthinkable 5 years ago. Police stations are becoming more user friendly with the use of mobile stations and police surgeries.

No other police service in modern times has had to manage and implement such fundamental and complex changes. Whilst Sir Ronnie Flanagan embraced the initial change process, Sir Hugh Orde has provided leadership; he has grasped the mantle of change and driven the change agenda while continuing to police a changing society.

Police Oversight Commissioner, Al Hutchinson stated in June 2005 that and I quote, ***‘the policing change process in Northern Ireland represents the most complex and dramatic changes ever attempted in modern policing history’***. I believe the commitment to a process of change has put policing on the global map for the right reasons.

Others have not yet made that commitment, others choose to threaten and intimidate those who have committed to playing a positive role, while others, suffering from past injustices are still unsure. As I said earlier, Northern Ireland is not yet normal and if we are to truly move on Northern Ireland must also deal with its difficult past.

The establishment of an Historical Enquiries Team by the PSNI will answer some of the many unanswered questions and help bring closure for some. But what has happened in the past in policing cannot be used as a reason for holding back the future.

We must not look back – but engage in debate and move on together.

For policing – police must be able to police every part of the community, recruits must come from every part of the community and most importantly officers must be able to go back to their homes without fear for their lives.

In respect of Sinn Fein, they are welcome on the Board yesterday, but it is not up to the Board to sort out the politics of that.

The potential for devolution of policing and justice to a new Assembly will provide many new challenges but will also deliver on of the final parts of the policing jigsaw put together so conscientiously by the Patten Commission.

It is the hope of the Board that a long lasting political settlement is delivered and full support for policing secured. In the meantime the Board will continue to meet its important oversight role and no doubt the new Board which take up office on 1 April will do likewise.

On behalf of the Policing Board I thank the Committee for its continued interest and support for policing in Northern Ireland and in encouraging a lasting peace settlement.

The Board has produced a document which sets out in greater detail some of the areas of our work during its first term and I would like to present you with copies today.

Professor Sir Desmond Rea is Chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. He was educated at Queen's University Belfast and the University of California, Berkeley. He is an Emeritus Professor of Human Resource Management at the University of Ulster and was formerly Senior Lecturer in Business Studies and Assistant Dean, Faculty of Economics and Social Services Queen's University Belfast. Sir Desmond is the Editor of First Trust Bank's quarterly Economic Outlook and Business Review. He is a former Chairman of the Northern Ireland Labour Relations Agency, Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and Northern Ireland Local Government Staff Commission. On 31 July 2004 he completed his term as a Non-Executive Director of AIB(UK) plc.

Mr Denis Bradley is Vice Chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board since its formation on 4th November 2001 - but is not seeking reappointment when the Board is reconstituted at the end of March 2006.

He is a current Chairman and Chief Executive of Northland Films, and Director of Treatment and Education at the Northlands Centre, a centre for the treatment of addictions. He was a member of both the Northern Ireland Drugs Committee and the BBC Broadcasting Council. A founder member of the Bogside Community Association he has long been associated with local community organisations.

Mr Bradley was educated at college in Rome and served as a priest in the Bogside. He was a 26-year-old curate on Bloody Sunday but left the priesthood later in the 1970s.

Denis has been deeply involved in community affairs in Derry for many years and was a pivotal link in passing messages between senior Provisional IRA figures and the British Government, through MI6 - a move which eventually led to the IRA's 1994 ceasefire.

His Derry home was petrol bombed in 2004 by dissident republicans because of his support for new policing arrangements in Northern Ireland and in September 2005 he was subjected to a vicious baseball attack whilst watching a football match with his son in a local bar. The large number of messages of support following this attack from all sections of the community locally, nationally and internationally evidence the respect for Denis's work over the years. A well known political commentator, Denis also writes a monthly column for the Irish News and received an Honorary Doctorate of Law from the University of Ulster (July 05) for his contributions to the community and the peace process.