



Remake, remodel

The RUC is institutionally unionist. It will have to change if it is to police the peace process

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The rapid enlisting by the Royal Ulster Constabulary of Kent's chief constable and the FBI to help track down Rosemary Nelson's killers has underlined the RUC's legitimacy deficit. The RUC does not meet the terms of reference of the Independent Commission on Policing chaired by Chris Patten, which must report this summer.

We have all watched the debate about London's Metropolitan Police. The concept of 'institutionalised racism' in an unaccountable, highly centralised police force is now officially recognised. In Northern Ireland the charge of 'institutionalised sectarianism' has regularly been made against an unaccountable, highly centralised RUC. In our book, John McGarry and I argue that even if the RUC is institutionally sectarian, the key to reform lies in the recognition that the RUC is institutionally unionist.

The very name of the RUC suggests a British, monarchist and unionist gendarmerie. To achieve national impartiality, a more neutral and modern name for any central police service is essential, such as a Northern Ireland Police Service (NIPS), perhaps matched with a Gaelic title, such as Coras Siochana Thuaisceart Eireann (CSTE). But re-naming, or bi-naming, is not all that is essential if there is to be any chance of widely legitimate policing in Northern Ireland.

Policing arrangements must be legitimate in the eyes of Irish nationalists, Ulster unionists, and those who are 'others'; and the arrangements must match the complex power-sharing and confederal relationships agreed last year.

In our book, we worked within the terms of reference of the Patten Commission and tried to address the tough questions on reform: how to reconcile the necessity of downsizing - if there is a continuation of the reduced security threat - with the imperative need to attract new and different recruits; and how to demilitarise policing while remaining conscious of the threat posed by recalcitrant paramilitarism.

We believe, as do many others, including a majority of Protestants and Catholics polled in 1995, that two-tier or federal policing offers a very good way forward, one that can respect the identities and security-interests of unionists, nationalists and others. A representative NIPS/CSTE could operate throughout the region, with specific functional responsibilities, and co-operate with new local police services, built in the first instance around local government districts. To provide flexibility it should, for example, be made possible for local governments, on the basis of cross-community consent procedures, to agree the amalgamation of adjacent local policing services, or to hire in the services of the NIPS/CSTE.

All new policing service(s) should be representative of their jurisdictions and efforts should be made to avoid homogenous local services. The UK government should set itself the target of increasing the proportion of cultural Catholics in the central police to 40 per cent within four years, and for now the goal of increasing representativeness should take precedence over downsizing; increasing female recruitment should be part of this process of change.

A policing charter for all services should make clear that police officers in the conduct of their duties must be neutral between unionists, nationalists and others, and that unionists, nationalists and others are welcome to join the police service(s). Policing should be normalised and rapidly de-militarised; police must lose the power of independent prosecution and they should operate under normal rather than emergency legislation. Training should be placed under the control of a civilian agency. Police services must be made directly accountable to elected or indirectly elected politicians. The police, and the judiciary, will need to be trained in a fresh human rights culture, based on the European Convention and the Bill of Rights envisaged for Northern Ireland.

Supporters of the agreement must hope that the current crisis of executive formation will be satisfactorily resolved, partly because of the encounters in Washington. If it is, then the last crisis in the implementation of the Agreement will involve the policing of Northern Ireland. Without meaningful police reform no one should expect the completion, let alone the

beginning, of decommissioning by the IRA, or the full flourishing of the imaginative institutions agreed last Good Friday. Perhaps most controversially, it is important to counsel that continuing violence by some paramilitaries should not be used as an excuse to halt much needed police reform. Reform will be easier if there is no return to large-scale paramilitary violence. But even if reform becomes more difficult, it is an imperative of good governance.

Policing Northern Ireland: Proposals For A New Start, by John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, is published by Blackstaff Press, £9.99

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