

Clarity needed on policing

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The heavy - sometimes intemperate - exchanges over the Patten report which have been carried in the columns of this newspaper over the past week, underscore the critical importance of getting the policing question right in Northern Ireland. And it would be foolhardy to underestimate the potential for damage to the peace process and to the Belfast Agreement if the British government insists on pressing ahead with the wrong answers.

Last month the Secretary of State, Mr Peter Mandelson, issued an "end of term" summation setting out his government's responses to the Patten report. At one level, it is a plausible document, explaining that 167 of Patten's 175 recommendations have been accepted and will be implemented, while a mere six have been either partly implemented or are being further considered. But these figures conceal the reality that there has been a measurable retreat from Patten's prescriptions in certain critical areas.

Patten's clear recommendations on the naming of Northern Ireland's new police service have been compromised in Mr Mandelson's Police Bill. The role of the Oversight Commissioner has been modified. And potentially dangerous ambiguities have been introduced where Patten sought absolute clarity - for example, in the report's recommendations on badges and symbols. It may well be that the Secretary of State believes that the realpolitik of Mr David Trimble's position requires some fudge on the name. It may be that senior civil servants believe they need certain fall-back devices in the event of a deterioration in the security situation. But all of this is to second-guess Patten and his team of commissioners - which included respected figures with extensive operational experience.

Professor Brendan O'Leary probably had the mot juste of the argument in his article of July 28th. It appears to have been overlooked by the civil servants who drafted the Police Bill that the Patten report is itself a compromise between the demands of those on opposite wings of Northern Ireland's community. In nudging the Government's measures towards unionist requirements or by diluting the police service's accountability to the community, they run the grave risk of upsetting the careful balance which Patten so painstakingly set out.

At this point, it is clear that nationalist opinion from the Dublin Government to the SDLP and Sinn Fein is deeply dissatisfied with Mr Mandelson's handling of the proposals for the development of a new policing service in Northern Ireland. There are real dangers here of a substantial unravelling of the understandings which underpin the operation of the Assembly and the Executive and the Secretary of State must be very careful as he picks his steps. Mr Mandelson inherited much of the peace process as a *fait accompli*. The issue of policing is uniquely his to make a success of - or otherwise.

It has been clear from the earliest days of the peace process - perhaps a decade ago - that policing would be the crucible issue. There is no gainsaying the courage, gallantry and professionalism which the vast majority of the RUC has displayed over many years. But the political realities which the force underpinned have been swept away. It is essential that there be an absolutely fresh start - a complete break from the inherited situation in which one side of the community has considered the police to be "ours" while the other side has viewed it as "theirs". Successive British ministers and administrators appear to be unable to take this reality on board with the unreserved, crystal clarity which is required. If Mr Mandelson does not do so, it may lead on to grief.