

Patten Report and Police Bill

Wed, Aug 02, 2000

Sir, - The ill-judged reply (News Features, July 29th) by the UK Ambassador to Ireland to my article of the previous day ("The Patten, the whole Patten and nothing but the Patten") is a depressing specimen of unethical foreign policy.

He accuses me of being "short on substance and accurate analysis", yet replies to none of my specific items arguing that the Police Bill and the current implementation plan fall short of Patten, bar two. One exception is the name of the police. He says that the name is being changed "in line with Patten's recommendation", a weasel formula. The new name is not Patten's recommendation, and the promise that "incorporating the RUC" will not be used in dealings with the public has for the moment lost credibility after the amendment to that effect was dropped by the UK government.

The second exception is that the ambassador tells us that the new badge and flag require the input of the new Policing Board - which is not in Patten, who recommended unambiguous guide lines on the new badge and flag which the UK government have failed to put into its draft legislation or its implementation plan.

None of my other points of substance are addressed by the Ambassador, viz., those relating to the Oversight Commissioner, the powers of the board, the powers of the Ombudsman, the human rights standards of the new service, disbanding the full-time reserve, normalisation, and the closure of interrogation centres "forthwith", etc. This is most revealing. The ambassador appears to believe that the important outstanding issues are ones of symbolism, names, flags and emblems - what he stigmatises as "neuralgic issues". The ambassador and his Secretary of State should be advised that this is a major political misjudgement. More than symbols are stake.

The ambassador's text, a variation on a UK memorandum of which I had a copy before I composed my article, mixes truths with untruths in what is called "spin". The fact that the Bill has been improved was not denied by me; the fact that the Bill needed radical transformation is not acknowledged by him. The ambassador allows the reader to draw the conclusion that every one of my points of substance, and every remaining non-implemented part of Patten, will be addressed when the security situation permits. I would not mind if that was true. But the UK government, in its Bill and in its implementation plan, should then have made appropriate provision for movement on all these fronts when the security situation permits. It has not.

Patten had in mind delaying community and unarmed policing until the security situation permitted. No such caution was advised regarding the powers of the Oversight Commissioner, the board or the Ombudsman. Closing interrogation centres "forthwith" hardly suggests that Patten considered this an item for cautious implementation. The ambassador has drawn on a standard stratagem in an unethical foreign policy: plead internal security to deflect reasonable criticism. Low-grade Machiavellian conduct? - Yours, etc.,

Brendan O'Leary, Professor of Political Science, London School of Economics.