

RUC: Repressive Unionist Chauvinists

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During a recent address to a high powered inter-church conference in Dublin, Down and Connor Auxiliary Bishop, Michael Dallat, made the following comments:

In Catholic West Belfast, one cannot miss the professionally printed and strategically planted notices demanding that the RUC be disbanded. ... No indication is given as to who or what will replace the RUC. No society can exist without a police service. This is a very sensitive area. I do not know how many really want the RUC disbanded. Many Catholics, moderates who have had no connection and no sympathy with the violence, would not go for disbandment but they would want radical and genuine reform of the police in Northern Ireland, so that we may have a police service that is acceptable to all sections of the community.

When the IRA called a cessation of its military operations on August 31 1994, it gave a new impetus to the debate regarding the acceptability and efficacy of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) as a police force. Much of the discussion to date has concentrated on whether the RUC, despite its history, is capable of being reformed into an acceptable community police service within a new democratic state. A variation on this debate is whether the RUC are capable of being reformed sufficiently in the interim period prior to the establishment of a new democratic Ireland.

In February 1995, during a Sinn Féin discussion on policing, Jim Gibney, a member of the Ard Comhairle (Sinn Féin executive), expressed a compelling need for Sinn Féin to consider a comprehensive and viable alternative to the RUC especially for nationalist areas across the six counties. The easiest part of this debate he said: 'is to raise the slogan, correct though it is, "Disband the RUC." The hard job is to come up with an alternative which is viable.' In making his assertions, Gibney underlines the importance of action as well as rhetoric.

It is important that we, as republicans, involve ourselves in all debate regarding the future of Ireland. In seeking a viable alternative to the RUC, however, it is equally important, particularly in light of comments similar to those made by Bishop Dallat, that we articulate clearly our analysis that the RUC are an inherently irreformable body and that the complete disbandment of this discredited force is required as a step towards eventual lasting peace in Ireland.

The RUC were formed as a 'Special Constabulary' comprising 30,000 men in 1921. Their origins were as an armed militia created to maintain and protect the interests of unionism and conservatism in the six counties. They were funded by a British treasury who felt 'it was the easiest way to police the state,' and in effect, they were the northern equivalent of the infamous Black and Tans. They were both one hundred per cent Protestant and one hundred per cent loyalist. In the main, they were members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) or one of the other loyalist institutions. The make up of this anti-Catholic state militia was summed up by General Ricardo, a former UVF leader from County Tyrone who stated:

Every man ... who has lost a job or who is at a loose end has endeavoured to get into the 'Specials' and many have succeeded ... Their NCOs are not good, the pay is excessive, and there is much trouble from drink and consequent indiscipline ... They form a distinctly partisan force and it is impossible to expect the impartiality that is necessary in an efficient police force.

In describing them this way, General Ricardo, essentially one of their own, underlines the innate contradictions within this purposely created sectarian body.

From the outset, the RUC fulfilled a military as opposed to a policing role. In every decade since their formation, they have been responsible, both directly and indirectly, for organising sectarian attacks on nationalist areas, many of which resulted in the slaughter of Catholic men, women, and children. The infamous Arnon Street and the McMahan murders, when whole Catholic families were murdered in their homes and on their streets, are an example of the atrocities which were to become synonymous with RUC behaviour throughout the 1920s.

Over the next fifty years, the RUC were to serve their political masters well. Savage attacks, such as those carried out on workers during the 'Outdoor Relief Strikes' of the 1930s, exemplified their behaviour. During this time, some Protestant workers were to experience at first hand the brutality that their Catholic counterparts had been experiencing since the foundation of the state. Protestants who were prepared to defend workers' rights were portrayed as papist supporters as the Orange card was once again produced to good effect. These attacks by the RUC on Protestant workers were deliberately designed to maintain a sectarian divide, underlining the paranoia of Stormont ministers about the prospect of working-class unity.

During the 1940s and 1950s, as attacks on nationalist communities continued, there was a steady increase in RUC membership that remained exclusively Protestant. A crack paramilitary unit, containing up to five hundred RUC men was established and trained by the British army. At their disposal were

weapons more common to a conventional army including heavy 'Bren' machine guns, mortars, grenades, anti-tank weaponry, and armoured vehicles weapons to be used against beleaguered Catholics in the six counties.

In 1968, during the Civil Rights' Campaign, the RUC and B Specials played their familiar part in undermining legitimate protests when they batoned, beat, and intimidated protesters off the streets. In 1969, they actively engaged in arson attacks on many nationalist areas, particularly in Belfast, resulting in the destruction of homes and streets. These attacks on peaceful civil rights demonstrators in the late 1960s proved to be a watershed as nationalists, who for decades had borne the brunt of state brutality, began to organise in defence of their communities. Any notion that the RUC could operate impartially when dealing with civil-rights demands died with Samuel Devenney, from Derry, who was beaten to death by RUC men as he sat in his own home in April 1969.

At the height of the sectarian murder campaign of the 1970s, RUC members were directly involved in arming loyalist paramilitary killers. One of the most notable cases of this period concerns the self-confessed loyalist assassin, Albert 'Ginger' Baker. Baker's contact, an RUC sergeant who supplied weapons to kill Catholics, was stationed at Mountpottinger Barracks in Belfast. This activity by the RUC, like the plastic bullet murders of Nora McCabe and Paul Whitters and the interrogation and torture of young nationalists like the Beechmount 5 and Ballymurphy 7, show clearly why the RUC will never be acceptable to the nationalist community, a community whose wounds cannot be healed while the RUC remain in existence.

For years, those who dared to challenge the corrupt sectarian nature of the RUC were dismissed as extremists by those whose interests were in the maintenance of the status quo, including some 'Castle Catholics' who conceded only that there were 'rotten apples in every barrel.' The Stalker and Stevens inquiries of the 1980s put paid to this notion and showed that the RUC barrel itself was putrid. What these inquiries proved, if proof were needed, was that the RUC are a law unto themselves and that contacts between the RUC and loyalist paramilitary organisations exist at every level. Attempts by Stalker to investigate these contacts were thwarted as the RUC closed ranks to protect their membership. This wall of silence, which had the full support of their Chief Constable, underlined the absolute power and sectarian nature of the force.

Bishop Dallat is correct when he says that no society can exist without a police service, in particular, if that society is to be democratic. The crux of the issue in relation to disbandment is that the RUC were formed to protect and maintain a society which was not democratic and one which, by its very nature, is incapable of being democratic. Bishop Dallat does not appear to accept this reality and his remarks, which are at best naive, at worst disingenuous, reflect this. The RUC, like the state itself, is irreformable. This is not simply a cliché, but a statement of fact. If we are to create a true democracy, then we must also create a police service that is reflective of this, a democratic police service

which will work for and protect the interests of everyone, a police service devoid of sectarianism, and one which will not discriminate against any section of the community.

It is also a statement of fact, however, to say that the RUC will not disappear overnight, and although the case for their disbandment is crystal clear, experience has shown that they will not simply pack up. Instead they will hang on by their fingertips in an attempt to create a false impression of acceptability. Commercial advertisements, such as those sponsored by the NIO to promote the RUC, are part of this. So too are attempts to enter nationalist communities through school programmes and youth work, a cynicism which becomes outrageous given the number of nationalist children maimed, killed, and orphaned by the RUC.

The question remains, however, with what do we replace them? The creation of a new independent police service is not going to be an easy task but it is one which we must accomplish if we are to see a lasting peace established. Those who talk of reform, of changing badges and the colour of uniforms, must not do so out of a sense of frustration because the task at hand appears too great. There may well have to be certain reforms in the short term for reasons of practicality. For example, community representatives could be delegated to look after policing requirements in their particular area. The mechanics of such a scheme would need to be discussed thoroughly with input from all who live in the community so that people's opinions are heard and respected. Within this, there may have to be some link with the present RUC but this should at all times be minimal.

Long-term radical reform of the RUC is impossible. For example, suggestions of a two-tiered approach to policing our communities, whereby the RUC liaise on a daily basis with appointed community wardens, is impracticable. The RUC are the main cause of many of the problems within our communities, so how will community wardens deal with such problems? In a mixed area with a significant Catholic minority dominated by a unionist community police, the relationship between this force and the Catholic minority would be akin to that of the local black people and the racist police forces that operate in the Southern states and other parts of America. A new police service, with a democratic input from elected political representatives and a principled code of conduct for professional standards as well as a national watch dog, is needed. But this is only possible in the context of a democratic state.

There are other forces in society such as the Fire Service and the Society For The Protection Of Cruelty To Animals who, on the whole, are seen to act in an impartial manner and are accepted by the community in general. There is a consensus among the community that the issues with which these organisations are involved reflect the interests of everyone. There is no such consensus with regard to policing in the six counties. The role of the RUC is to maintain the state at all costs. The *raison d'etre* of the RUC is one of sectarianism and

conservatism whose duty it is to protect unionism, in particular the interests of middle/upper class unionism. There is a strong need for a new independent police service whose interests are community based, democratically controlled, and which are representative of the whole population of the island.

The issue of policing must be resolved as part of a negotiated settlement, and republicans must set out the broad framework of principles for the new police service: democratic accountability, community interests, impartiality and non sectarianism. Sinn Féin must give leadership and direction to the debate. But the details of the new police service cannot be decided by any one group or political party. Instead these must be worked out in negotiation with a broad cross section of the people, ensuring that all interests and fears are addressed, and that for the first time we have a real police service based on consensus. There is an onus on us all to create the conditions whereby the establishment of an independent, community-based police service representative of the needs of the whole community can be realised.