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Opinion

Viewpoint: Police must be free to fight crime

Thursday, January 10, 2008

If there was ever any doubt that the PSNI is under strain because of investigations into the distant past, the Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde has removed it. In his evidence to a Stormont committee, he warned that a " tipping point" could be reached when he had to concentrate resources on tackling contemporary crime.

His description of how much effort is being devoted to crimes dating back many years was frightening, to anyone concerned about the low clear-up rates for current offences. More and more police officers are being taken away from day-to-day problems, he said, to service public inquiries and, now, 44 - 46 additional inquests, as a result of a Strasbourg ruling.

When a Chief Constable feels it necessary to tell politicians and public that his "real experts" in criminal investigation and intelligence are now spending 99% of their time servicing inquiries going back five to 20 years, everyone must sit up and take notice. What do we want from our police service if a tipping point is reached - more resources devoted to digging up the past or preventing the spread of crime today?

Sir Hugh has spelled out his dilemma, in charge of a slimmed-down force, but it is up to the politicians to listen, learn and start to address the problems he has outlined. When and if policing and justice powers are transferred to the Assembly, MLAs will have a say in allocating resources, and they now know there is a heavy price to be paid, by the police, for re-examining terrorist incidents.

Under direct rule, it has been easy for politicians to sit back and demand that inquiries should be held into every controversial killing, or allegation of collusion, but it is time for a strong dose of realism to be applied. The wishes of the victims of terrorism deserve every consideration, but many of them would accept that these have to be weighed against the police time and expertise used in investigations that may not deliver either charges or closure.

Now that the public meetings of the Eames-Bradley Group are focusing attention on ways of dealing with the past, preparatory to recommendations being made this summer, every possible avenue must be explored. There is no avoiding pain, for one category of victims or another, but new means of exorcising the past - not more inquiries - must be found.

Bringing this vital project to a successful conclusion may take years to achieve, but it could benefit most from active leadership by the First and Deputy First Ministers. They have proved they can work together on routine issues, and now they should be tackling the really difficult ones, like dealing with the past - and letting the police get on with solving everyday crime.

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