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Finucane an indictment of British collusion

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By Jim Gibney The Thursday Column

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When human rights lawyer Pat Finucane was at the height of his legal prowess there were few solicitors in the north of Ireland prepared to advocate the rights of people the state forces viewed with contempt.

Loyalist assassins claimed his life in his 39th year and this year Pat Finucane would have celebrated his 60th birthday.

It is impossible to say the direction Pat's legal life would have taken in the intervening 20 years.

But prior to his killing a clear pattern had been established where he devoted a considerable amount of his time and his legal practice to defending those the state sought to crush through an array of repressive measures including murder.

An indication of Pat's legal legacy can be seen in the stance his family have taken in pursuing relentlessly for 20 years and against powerful opponents – inside and outside the British government – the truth about the circumstances surrounding his murder.

I first met Pat and his wife Geraldine when they lived in a small third-storey flat in Lenadoon. It was the very early years of his legal practice.

That first meeting was about Pat preparing a constitution for the Relatives Action Committee, (RAC) a group campaigning for political status for protesting political prisoners.

It was not unusual to see Pat at RAC meetings in Belfast offering legal advice to distraught relatives fearful about the imprisonment of their loved one.

I recall his dedicated study of international protocols governing the treatment of POWs captured in, what were described as, 'conventional' wars as part of Sinn Fein's attempts to pursue a legal route to end the protest for political status and prevent the prisoners embarking on a hunger strike by securing them recognition under the protocols as POWs.

Pat was comfortable no matter the circumstances he was in, whether with campaigning relatives, in jails with political prisoners or representing both in the well of a courtroom with his legal arguments honed in their defence, invariably before a hostile judge.

In life Pat was a voice for the most vulnerable and powerless people – those who felt the full force of the state bearing down on them. People bewildered and at a loss left to cope with the aftermath of losing a relative in violent circumstances with their only anchor the search for truth or a prisoner isolated from his family and community facing a lengthy period behind bars.

When the political prisoners in the H-Blocks faced their greatest challenge – the Hunger Strike of 1981 – Pat was there as Bobby Sands's solicitor.

For those in need, with encouragement from Pat, the future was less daunting.

Armed only with his sharpened legal brain Pat Finucane was a formidable obstacle for those in the British government and military that operated in darkened recesses where people's lives were expendable.

At the time of his killing he represented the families of those killed through the British government's shoot-to-kill policy and use of plastic bullets. The work that he was doing was stalled by his murder.

Today his son, a solicitor, is carrying on that work in pursuit of the truth for the families whose relatives were killed in the British government's shoot-to-kill policy.

The intention of those who killed Pat was to kill off the search for the truth, to demoralise those relatives he worked for, to remove the legal spotlight from those darkened recesses.

Of course the opposite has in fact happened because Pat's family, particularly his wife Geraldine, has ensured that in death, as in life, Pat Finucane remains a symbol of hope and a barrier to those who believe they can kill and torture with impunity whether here or elsewhere in the world.

Their search for the truth has put a

worldwide focus on the British government's policy of collusion.

Wherever Pat's name is mentioned the British government is indicted for his killing and that of hundreds of others through collusion. Twenty years on, the public interest can only be served by an independent inquiry into Pat's murder.

The British government thus far has managed to keep the lid on the Pandora's Box that is collusion.

But the truth is seeping out.

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