



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2016/52/26
Creation Dates:	18 December 1986
Extent and medium:	4 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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Meeting with Peter O'Hagan, Chairman of the Lisburn Branch
of the SDLP on 18 December, 1986

I met with Peter O'Hagan, a principal of a local primary school in Lisburn on 18 December. We had last met on 11 September when he told me of the widespread intimidation of catholics in a number of estates in Lisburn which at that time resulted in 120 families having to leave their homes. During our conversation he spoke about the current problems in Lisburn. The following are some of the points he made:

UDA

In the past number of weeks the UDA have switched their attention from the Lisburn estates to the town centre where loyalist graffiti flags and bunting are everywhere. While business people will not openly admit it many of them, especially in the building and pub businesses in the town, are now paying "protection money" to the UDA. There have been reports of some business premises being damaged by UDA for failure to pay. Lately there are reports that handguns are being carried by members of the UDA in Lisburn (a new development).

John McMichael

While there has been a long history of loyalist violence in Lisburn, it should have been one of the most unlikely towns in Northern Ireland for sectarian violence to flare up in the 1980's. Since the last outburst of loyalist violence in the early 1970's the town had become a

prosperous middle income former town for Belfast. Most of the people living there are employed with a high proportion of white-collar jobs. The PIRA and Sinn Fein have virtually no support in the town and indeed the SDLP has to vie with the Alliance Party for the catholic vote.

He believes the main reason for the intimidation and attacks is the malevolent influence of one man - John McMichael. He has directed the UDA violence since their attacks first on RUC homes early in 1986 and then transferred it to the catholics after unionists began to speak out against the former action. He is known by some to be extremely violent and ruthless while at the same time he publically pleads that there is no sectarian violence in Lisburn and the UDA action is only against "republican elements" in the town.

News Media

One reason that the problem was allowed to go on without sufficient action being taken to control the intimidation was the news media failure to give the problem enough coverage. This was understandable in the case of the Dublin and even the Belfast media who were not really interested in any violence which stopped short of a killing. However, the problem was compounded by the treatment given to the issue by the local newspaper the "Ulster Star". They took their cue from the UDA and indeed were and have been so blatantly biased that "one would be forgiven for believing that the newspaper was a UDA newsheet".

RUC and the Courts

The blame for allowing the UDA to intimidate so many people and get control of the town must lie with the

RUC. When the attacks on the Day of Action and around Easter started O'Hagan approached local Chief Superintendent Matthews who assured him everything would be done to bring the matter under control. By the time the RUC got around to doing anything the damage was done. "It was a case of too little too late".

Even though 126 charges were brought against the UDA for petrol bombing and related offences, to the best of his knowledge there have been no convictions yet. He believes these cases have not yet worked their way through the courts system. On the Day of Action intimidation went on in full view of the RUC and unlike other places no charges have been taken against anyone. As an indication of the impact which the intimidation has had on the Catholic population of Lisburn some 25 children of his school's population of 400 have left Lisburn.

Recently however, a new RUC Chief Superintendent (Willis) has taken over and he believes that he will be much more effective. Already there are many more RUC patrols in the estates and the military (who have a large barracks in Lisburn) have been brought in to assist them. (This represented a change of some significance; when O'Hagan had asked the RUC to avail of the military to beef up the patrols the former Chief Superintendent had ignored his request).

Churches

The parish priest Canon Cunningham still ignores the problem and refuses to address the matter even when asked. One of the curates Fr. Murray is concerned and has helped in individual cases but he will not take a public stand on the issue. Likewise the local protestant clergy have been silent and some when asked have attempted to blame it

on both sides and of course on the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

General

The local member of Parliament Jim Molyneux has never commented publicly on the intimidation. He contrasted this behaviour with that of John Hume and other leaders in the SDLP who have never shrunk from condemning violence no matter from where it came. No one, he commented, takes Molyneux to task for this.



Liam Canniffe

24 December 1980

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