

FOREWORD

Northern Ireland - The Paradoxes

To begin to understand criminal justice in Northern Ireland you first have to realise the paradoxes which exist here. The international and national media show us pictures of civil unrest, killings and funerals yet comparisons of crime in the United Kingdom show Northern Ireland as 43rd out of 43 police areas in crime statistics - our most peaceful region. But how accurate are these statistics, when nearly half of the population have traditionally distrusted the police, and where, in strongly nationalist areas, police are unwelcome and always in grave personal danger? Set against this, one has the findings of the International Victimisation Study that Northern Ireland overall has a low crime rate compared to other countries.

The political paradox is of a region with over 500 years of enmity and bitterness, with the recurring media cliché of 'two divided communities' yet the traveller on the Heathrow British Airways shuttle will see nationalist and unionist MP's chatting, sitting and joking together, having spent Northern

Ireland question time in the House spitting invective at each other (usually to near-empty benches). The three MEP's - one nationalist (John Hume, SDLP) two unionist (Dr Ian Paisley, Democratic Unionist and Jim Nicholson, Official Unionist) work together most of the time on social and economic issues, yet their parties fight interminably over the political future of Northern Ireland.

And what of the community? The unemployment levels have consistently been the highest in the United Kingdom, yet for those at work, especially two earning partnerships, housing costs are low. Apart from the London area, Northern Ireland has the highest number of BMW's per head of the population. With conspicuous wealth and comfort sitting cheek by jowl with desperate poverty and the hopelessness of long-term unemployment it is surely surprising that 'ordinary' crime is so low. Additionally, the stoicism of the population in the face of 3,000 deaths directly or indirectly attributable to the last 24 years of 'the troubles' is remarkable. If these killings were

translated in statistical terms to the rest of the United Kingdom we would have seen approximately 100,000 deaths in England, Wales and Scotland.

It is against this complicated background that the criminal justice system exists and operates, based on English law layered over with emergency legislation. One could query the use of the adjective 'emergency' for legislation introduced over twenty years ago. How can government justify the continuing use of sometimes draconian measures while at the same time claiming normality? It will be with the help of practitioners, such as those whose analyses are contained in this publication, that solutions will be found - plus, of course, movement from politicians who for too long have seen 'No' as the most important word in their vocabulary.

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