

The contemplative Ombudsman

Cian O'Neill

Nuala O'Loan remains the most famous UK ombudsman in office due to the Omagh Report furore, and the barracking of Ronnie Flanagan. Trim and alert, watery blue eyes. She is a picture of calm. Her image is professional, lawyerly, and impersonal in public performance. Yet who is she?

O'Loan left London and lucrative legal practice to live in Ireland. Why? "Money is not the motivator." She worked in legal academia in the University of Ulster (UUJ), then consumer rights, and later the old Police Authority. "I didn't anticipate it to be a difficult place to live, mmmm, it did turn out to be slightly difficult." Tragically, she lost her first (unborn) child in a bomb attack on a lecture given in UUJ by the then Lord Chief Justice. "It was a miracle. It really was. People should have been killed. I spent years with the ceiling coming down on my head in the middle of the night. That's all gone, thank God. Pain has taken a rightful place in my life, instead of a very dominating place."

She secured the Ombudsman post to her astonishment, having applied only on the second round. "I don't belong to the grey suit brigade, I know that I've got a black suit on, but do you know what I mean?!" (laughs)

So she has then a sense of humour. Yet do accusations of anti-police bias anger her? "No, I mean, some of the things that are said about one can...what's the

word...cause concern? (laughs) I have refused to enter into dialogue. It is tempting."

Truth for O'Loan is empirical. There is no hypothesis. But is there ever a temptation to hypothesize? "There can be a tendency to want to do that." With Omagh? "We don't know if the bomb could have been prevented." Do you feel responsible for the consequences of publishing your findings? "No. That's the role." Is the role political? "I think that the function of the office is to provide a complaints service. It is inevitable that that is done in a wider context." Is this the easiest job in the world? "No."

The office of the Ombudsman has made significant efforts to incorporate a fuller conception of geographical relevance. Consultations with NICEM, ethnic community groups and the travelling community evince O'Loan's interest in a global context. As explains her supporting the visit of the Dalai Lama to Belfast some years ago.

This refers to her hitherto unknown contemplative side. "The mysticism of Buddhism is very interesting." Yet she is both spiritual and circumspect. "The actual philosophy of Buddhism I actually find some difficulty with. That you are the author of all your own destiny—a child who is abused is not the author of their own destiny."

Uncertain at this point is the success of her term. She "cannot explain" the persisting doubts of Catholics in the effectiveness of police review. "I don't think we are far enough down the statistical path." That success depends also on securing the confidence of the Police Service. "That will take a little time." What shall she do after her seven year term in office is finished? "Disappear totally," she laughs. "If I can do this (job) as well as I can, that'll do me." ♦

Politicians go Euro

Bernard Conlon

Thirty years to the day after the event that consolidated the Northern Ireland conflict, nationalist and unionist politicians were in Brussels to open The Office of the Northern Ireland Executive. This was both symbolic and ironic, since the Office and the Belfast political project are marked by an almost fundamentalist dearth of political symbolism and allegiance.

The First Minister, David Trimble and his Deputy, SDLP leader, Mark Durkan performed the opening on 30 January. The well fitted-out offices are virtually next door to the European Parliament's palatial buildings.

Such a prestigious location raised predictable howls from some quarters. The same voices, with equal predictability, will also read conspiratorial significance into the fact that the Embassy of Ireland has also recently moved into the same building.

This reality, whether by design or accident, highlights the ideology of neutrality of the North's nascent and still very fragile political configuration. The golden harp on a blue background, emblem of the Irish state outside the Irish Embassy is in stark contrast to the functional sign proclaiming the Northern Ireland Executive Office: devoid of any trace of British or Irish identification.

The nationalist members of the Northern Ireland Executive are probably all Irish citizens, three of whom actually come from the South. Such proximity will therefore serve a host of practical and political possibilities, in the informal and intense networking atmosphere that is Brussels?

At the actual opening, the nearest thing to symbolism was the harp being played by the teenage son of Irish EU officials and the gifts of Irish linen, crystal, whiskey and cream liquor. The music was also strictly neutral, to such an extent that the young musi-

Nuala O'Loan—not a member of the grey suit brigade

