



***Catholic leaders need to encourage young people in the community to seriously consider policing, PSNI Chief Constable George Hamilton tells Martin O'Brien***

## **CNI PRESS WATCH - A man on a mission to keep faith in policing**

**“We might not have government but we still have the law, which is pretty important for policing, so all is not lost”, deadpans George Hamilton, Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in his comfortable if not overly-spacious office at Police HQ in**

**the Knock area of east Belfast, just before Easter, Martin O'Brien writes in The Irish Catholic.**

Mr Hamilton (49), a native of Newtownards, Co. Down, an affable man with a reputation for both straight-talking and measured words, holds one of the key positions in public life in these islands since his appointment by the Policing Board in 2014.

He joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) as an 18-year-old in 1985.

“It could sound a bit twee or trite but from my teenage years I wanted to make a difference in real people’s lives. I had a huge respect, probably given to me by my parents, for what the police did, even though looking back with the benefit of hindsight, maybe not everything was perfect.”

Twenty-three RUC officers had been murdered in 1985, in addition to the 202 who had fallen in the preceding years going back to 1969.

Was he not deterred by all that, I wondered.

“I think the risk was a bit of an issue of concern more for my family than for me” and looking

back there might have been some “youthful foolhardiness” on his part.

Apart from an older brother who had served in the RUC for eight or nine years there had been no history of a direct family connection to policing.

Mr Hamilton, awarded the Queen’s Police Medal in 2015, was something of a highflyer, climbing to chief superintendent in the RUC before becoming assistant chief constable in Strathclyde in 2009 ahead of his return to Belfast as an assistant chief constable in 2011 and the top job three years later.

I first saw George Hamilton up close at a packed West Belfast Festival meeting in St Mary’s University College, on the Falls Road in Belfast in 2015 when he famously shared a platform with the late Martin McGuinness, the deputy First Minister, and discussed the issue of dealing with the past.

His thoughts on Mr McGuinness will come later.

One of the most memorable moments at St Mary’s came when a member of the audience told him bluntly that he “might be the nicest guy in the world but I am not convinced that you are

not constrained by the politicians at Westminster in terms of you dealing with the past”.

Mr Hamilton was warmly applauded when he replied: “I am concerned that your question is framed as if I am a representative of either unionism or the British government.

“You know what? I am neither. I am the Chief Constable of the PSNI.

“I am accountable to a Policing Board, there are four Sinn Féin members on it and one SDLP. It is representative [of the community].

“They selected me, they hold me to account. I am not answerable to the Secretary of State and I am not answerable to the British government. It is my job to grow confidence in policing, in the new arrangements, and I’m going to do that and I’m not going to be fettered by Prime Ministers or Secretaries of State or anybody else.”

## **Support**

He leads a body of 6,763 officers plus 2,000 support staff who respond to half a million requests for service of one kind or another from the public each year. Mr Hamilton is responsible for a budget of just over £700m (€824m). But that budget, already cut by a quarter of a billion

pounds in the past five years is to shrink further in these times of continued austerity and could face deeper cuts by July if there is still no Budget resulting from the collapse of the Executive.

With the political institutions broken and with no return of power-sharing in sight, policing is the only part of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) that is working after nearly 20 years.

Policing has been fairly described as the GFA's greatest success because the PSNI is broadly acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants and its accountability and regulatory machinery including the Policing Board, Police Ombudsman and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, make it perhaps the most policed police service in the world.

While Mr Hamilton leads an organisation that in culture and in composition is already very different from the RUC, out of which the PSNI grew at the beginning of this century, the legacy of the Troubles and of our contested space and history still cast a long shadow.

His most daunting challenge is to make the PSNI more representative of the society it serves. And that means attracting many more applications from young Catholics because Catholics are still

seriously under-represented in the PSNI, notwithstanding the dramatic jump in the numbers of Catholics, from 8% in 2000 to 31% today, brought about by the 50:50 recruitment legislation.

This was recommended by the GFA's Patten Commission for "at least" a 10-year period to achieve a decent critical mass of Catholics.

50:50 meant that for every Protestant (or other) constable recruited a member of the Catholic community had to be recruited.

The Chief Constable does not do many media interviews and his decision to give an exclusive interview to The Irish Catholic exemplifies the priority the PSNI is giving to encouraging Catholic recruitment following its commissioning of Deloitte, the management consultants, to examine the barriers affecting the recruitment of Catholics.

That research was commissioned in June, the report completed in December and its findings released just before Easter. The Deloitte Report provided confirmation, if it were needed, that the under-representation of Catholics applying for posts in the PSNI will continue unless Catholics can be persuaded to apply in much greater numbers.

The truth is that Catholic representation has not really grown since the discontinuation of the 50:50 rule by the then Secretary of State Owen Paterson in 2011.

The dropping of 50:50 was welcomed by unionists angered by a measure that discriminated against Protestant applicants, and opposed by both nationalist parties who saw the need for its continuation.

Deloitte analysed three recruitment drives in 2013, 2014 and 2015 covering 19,000 applications and concluded: "Only 31% of applications came from individuals from a Catholic community background. Based upon the age profile of the working population of Northern Ireland, the proportion of applications from those with Catholic community backgrounds should have been closer to 45%."

While Deloitte found the Catholic community view of the PSNI performance as "reasonable/improving" some still thought there is too much of the old "RUC culture".

A key finding that Mr Hamilton and his colleagues must digest is that Catholic officers' applications are still considered as "breaking the mould" and many Catholics apply "invisibly,"

keeping it a secret from their family, friends and figures of influence in their community.

Mr Hamilton comes across as being passionate about his ambition to secure a jump in Catholic recruitment and loses no time in stressing the imperative of having a service which is “representative of the communities”.

“First of all, we have a job of work to do to convince people that policing is inclusive, that it is a warm place for people of all backgrounds, of all faiths and none.”

He stresses that there is work to be done by both the police themselves and by people of influence in the Catholic community while recognising all this may take “generational change”.

“We want to be inclusive not just because that is the right thing to do, to be representative. But we will be a better police service if we are representative, if we have an organisational mindset of being truly representative of the communities that we serve. I want the organisation to be the best that it can be and it can only be the best if it is truly representative.”

He says there are straightforward “transactional” measures the PSNI will take immediately such as



shortening the time between the advertisement appearing and the start of police college, to reduce the drop-out rate and the introduction of a simpler on-line application.

While he strongly supported 50:50 recruitment in line with Patten, he does not support its re-introduction, pointing out it did achieve “a critical mass of 30%” on which to build for the future.

“Some of the young Catholic people I speak to within the PSNI are a complete inspiration to us. Because of 50:50, the Catholic community is over-represented in those uniformed officers and detectives who go out and deliver front line service to the community when your house is broken into or whatever.”

However, Mr Hamilton admits: “There also hasn’t been the strength of advocacy for a career in policing that I would have hoped for, this far into the new police organisation.”

He can only mean from Catholic leaders and opinion-formers within the Catholic and nationalist community? “Yes, I would say probably more in the political realm than in the religious realm. I have said before publicly I do not question the bona fides of Sinn Féin as the largest nationalist/republican party in terms of

their commitment to the peace process, and part of that being support for policing.

“It is almost support for policing, rather than the very specific support for a career in policing, for Catholic and nationalist young people. They need to get themselves to that point”.

He added: “All the accountability infrastructure is in place. We are striving to be representative, we are making reasonable progress, we had the 50:50 initiative which was a government and a political decision which I supported, strategically it was the right thing to do.”

Mr Hamilton welcomes the support he has had from the GAA while pointing out that some GAA clubs are more “open” than others. And he recalls warmly a visit to St Paul’s High School, Bessbrook, Co. Armagh where Jarlath Burns, strongly tipped as a future president of the GAA, is principal: “That was a great experience. We had a full afternoon there, quite challenging too.”

While he is anxious to secure more “advocates of a policing career” in the Catholic and nationalist community he stresses: “If there are obstacles to people being convinced about the value of policing [as a career] I would ask them to challenge us because we are open to

challenge on that. It doesn't mean that everyone will get the answers they always want."

Looking forward to a deepening engagement with the Catholic community he says: "I think when people start to engage with us and we break down some of those barriers then they might feel more confident in advocating and in encouraging young people to at least think about policing as a career."

The dissident threat, classified as "severe" remains an obstacle of course – there have been three attempts to murder police officers since January which mercifully failed.

"We take the threat seriously and it does cause us concern but having said that this is a small group who are determined to do harm. From their perspective, they have to get lucky once but we have been very good at disrupting them."

Co-operation with An Garda Síochána "has never worked at a better level" and he has "a good relationship" with the Commissioner "my friend and colleague Nóirín" [O'Sullivan].

Another obstacle to recruitment arises from the legacy of the past.

I reminded Mr Hamilton that he had specifically mentioned the Judge Peter Cory report and Sir Desmond de Silva's review into the Pat Finucane case when he addressed the West Belfast Festival and asked him if the PSNI would provide all the information they have to the proposed information retrieval body.

He replied: "I have spoken on many occasions about how the past impacts on public confidence in policing. We know that it has an impact on recruitment from the Catholic community. This is deeply frustrating for me, because since becoming Chief Constable I have called for a better solution to dealing with our past. As yet, no such solution has been forthcoming.

He hopes that mechanisms outlined in the Stormont House Agreement two years ago will allow the PSNI "to concentrate on policing today rather than policing the past".

In the absence of agreement by the Stormont parties on an Historical Investigations Unit, the PSNI has 55 investigators examining 1,118 killings at a cost of £4.3m in the coming year, who would be otherwise engaged on day-to-day policing.

“As Chief Constable, I have welcomed the Stormont House Agreement and have committed that the PSNI will do all in its capabilities to support its implementation. This will include, working within my legal responsibilities, the disclosure of information.”

But with Stormont itself currently collapsed it may be some time before the Independent Commission for Information Retrieval and the HIU, both agreed at Stormont House at Christmas 2014 are established, if they ever will be.

The Chief Constable is clearly concerned by the message the Stormont breakdown conveys to society here, particularly with the marching season now just under way and its parades which, as ever, the PSNI is obliged to police.

He says there is less positivity or ‘feel good’ in the air than a year ago and, therefore, less potential for “a dampening effect on tension”.

He warns: “I don’t want to exaggerate this but this lack of political consensus, of political leadership permeates down to community level, down to the streets through parades or protests.

“Last year there was positivity, we had the First Minister and deputy First Minister together

sending the right messages to their communities about a stable, peaceful and confident society.

“I am not saying there will be trouble on the streets because Sinn Féin and the DUP have fallen out. I am saying it is subtler than that.”

I wondered if he considered having a religious faith is important in a police officer.

“I think a strong value set is important in a police officer and I don’t want police officers to be so neutralised that they are devoid of any personal belief system. I think we should have a diverse workforce and I don’t think any one particular denomination or indeed faith should have a monopoly on positive values that coalesce with policing.”

He says that having faith and policing are “not in any way inconsistent”.

“I think that they are mutually supportive so people can have a faith and with that faith they very often bring these values, or personal anchor points, that tend to coalesce around with what makes good police work.”

I remark that he has not been publicising any personal faith, unlike his predecessor, Matt Baggott.

“I do have my own personal convictions around faith, maybe I present them differently, or quietly or more privately or whatever. I am from a non-denominational group.”

Christian? “Oh, yes. There is a passage of Scripture from Micah [6.8] which talks about what God requires of us, and it says to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly and if you can do that, justice, mercy, have some compassion, and a bit of humility, those are three things that make a pretty good cop in my experience.”

“You don’t even need to be Christian to have those things, what I am saying is I can see a lot of coalescing between some of those Christian anchor points and good policing.”

Had those words of Micah inspired him in his own policing and human journey?

“Yes...it will be different for everybody by the way. I wouldn’t be advocating this as an organisational position. What I am saying is there are those sort of touchstones or anchor points, that when I am having a really difficult decision to make, or when I am reflecting on my own behaviour about how I have led something, or maybe reacted badly to something, I check myself against those words.”

I had last seen Mr Hamilton among the dignitaries in Long Tower Church in Derry at Martin McGuinness' funeral in Derry. He volunteers that he "did have a dilemma" about his attendance, that there was both a personal and professional aspect to his decision and that he had to "weigh up" whether to go, but does not question himself now as to whether he made the right decision.

"I did realise that my attendance would be read in different ways by people across the community, in different ways.

"I suppose Martin represented the sort of conflicted history that we have had, his involvement with the IRA and the pain and suffering that that organisation caused to communities, and then in the last half of his life the massive contribution that he made to building and maintaining the peace.

"So, I suppose like many people my emotions regarding him and the attendance at his funeral was a little bit of a dilemma. My values and emotions were being pulled in opposite directions and I just had a fundamental decision to make about whether or not I believed it was the right thing to do, to go."



He says, as Chief Constable and holding a senior public office in Northern Ireland, it was “appropriate to attend the funeral of [the person] who had been deputy First Minister for a decade”.

Reflecting, Mr Hamilton describes his relationship with Mr McGuinness as “a positive relationship”.

“We got problems solved together and he was a great pragmatist and he never compromised his own ideals and aspirations and values and he never asked me to compromise mine, which was important, and it was a frank and forthright relationship.”

One cannot help thinking that if Martin McGuinness was alive George Hamilton might already have been on the phone to him to assist with the next PSNI recruitment campaign.

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