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## A prison record will see you right in the North

**O**ne useful barometer of how much things have changed in Northern Ireland is the shifting pattern of public patronage, the people and groups who get jobs and grants from the government and from peace funds.

Thirty years ago you needed to be in the Orange Order. Nowadays a prison record or, if you are middle class, membership of a pressure group like Amnesty, the Committee for the Administration of Justice or the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders carries far greater cachet.

Until direct rule, Northern Ireland's public bodies used to be packed with retired Unionist politicians and their relatives. The system operated both as a means of patronage and as a way of keeping the levers of power and influence in "safe" hands.

New faces are now being drawn into the charmed circle of British government sponsorship. One Shankill Road community worker told me: "There's not much point applying for a grant unless you have a few ex-prisoners on the committee. That's the way it is. Some of the prisoners are sincere enough. Some are dubious. But they are all being bought off."

In nationalist west Belfast, the vast majority of government largesse in working-class areas is flowing to groups in whom Sinn Fein and ex-prisoners are prominently represented.

The middle classes are not as colourful, but there, too, a new elite and new standards of acceptability are emerging without much public debate or scrutiny of what is involved. Didn't anyone think it strange that the person chosen by the Independent Commission on Police Complaints (ICPC) to investigate allegations that the RUC had threatened Rosemary Nelson and Colin Duffy was Geratyn McNally?

In one sense she was an obvious choice: an up-and-coming barrister with an interest in civil liberties and a long record of public service. In the past those eminent qualifications might not have been enough to outweigh the fact that she is also a



Liam Clarke

woman, a Catholic and an Irish-language enthusiast.

That was prejudice, but in most societies a line might have been drawn at the fact that she is vice-chairman of the Northern Ireland lawyers group of Amnesty International. Amnesty has campaigned on the Rosemary Nelson and Pat Finucane issues and has been highly critical of the RUC and the administration of justice in the North.

### Public bodies used to be packed with retired Unionist politicians

It is therefore a highly partisan group but, even though McNally did the right thing and declared her position within Amnesty before she joined the ICPC, that didn't stop the Northern Ireland Office from selecting her, the ICPC giving her the Nelson inquiry and, for that matter, the RUC accepting her supervisory role.

This is arguably a more tolerant standard to outside interests than would have applied in England. There, a House of Lords ruling to extradite General Pinochet was overturned when it was discovered that one of the judges, Lord Justice Hoffman, was involved with a charity that had links to Amnesty. Hoff-

man was criticised for poor judgment by Lord Irvine, the lord chancellor, for taking part in the case, even though Irvine accepted he had behaved impartially.

If Amnesty has come in from the cold, then so has the Committee for the Administration of Justice (CAJ), a civil liberties pressure group to the fore in highlighting state abuse of human rights. Nelson was a member of CAJ, as was Felim Hamill, the IRA's quartermaster in Britain until his arrest.

Now CAJ members are everywhere, and I should point out at this stage that I used to be one myself.

Mike Ritchie, a former CAJ activist, works for the main republican prisoner's welfare group, which is publicly funded. Professor Brice Dickson, a current member of CAJ and Amnesty, is head of the publicly funded Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. On it he is joined by two other CAJ members.

These are groups that, in the bad old days, would have been marginalised. The new dispensation has to be about inclusion or it won't work. The danger, however, is that a new politically correct elite will in time become every bit as exclusive as the old Unionist oligarchy.

The commission, in particular, gives cause for serious concern. As the victims' pressure group Families Against Intimidation and Terror, which seems not to be on the inside track of this public-sector patronage, points out: "The list of commissioners contains many people who are eminent in their own field but not one who has made their reputation agitating on behalf of victims of terrorism." Not one Unionist either.

Several applied, including Lady Sylvia Hermon, a former law lecturer, and Brian Garret, one of our most eminent jurists and civil rights experts, but none was chosen.

Looking at the list of members, it is impossible to believe that Mo Mowlam has fulfilled her statutory obligation to ensure "that the commissioners, as a group, are representative of the community". She should make space in her brave new world for Unionists and victims of terrorism before she is forced to by a judicial review.