



ORMEAU ROAD MEMORIAL: Mark Sykes at the memorial to the victims of the Sean Graham's massacre on Ormeau Road in south Belfast PICTURE: Hugh Russell

# Public confidence in police needs to be restored

**C**OLD fury gripped the nationalist and republican people as we watched in shock and disbelief as police officers confronted the grieving relatives of those who were massacred in Sean Graham's Bookmakers shop on the Ormeau Rd in February 1992.

Mark Thompson, director of 'Relatives for Justice', sent me a video recording of the incident, practically as it was happening, and my immediate thoughts were - why is Mark sending me old film footage of the RUC?

It took me a few minutes to realise it was not the RUC but in fact the PSNI - the police service that I and many other republicans and nationalists turned ourselves and others inside out, to support.

Rage raced through me. I wanted to rush to the Ormeau Road, as I have done many times before, when this much-attacked community was under siege, and stand with them again in their hour of need.

But Covid regulations put a brake on my emotional instincts and I calmed myself down by contacting friends, who like me were furious.

Every time I looked at the video, I had flashbacks of the media coverage from the mass murder scene in February 1992.

In February 1992 people were visibly distressed by the violence and loss of life - they were again visibly distressed in February 2021 by the actions of the police.

What was particularly shocking and alarming was the age of the police officers involved in the confrontation with relatives and the manner in which they pursued them and in particular Mark Sykes.

Their behaviour is incomprehensible given the changes we were told took place in the changeover from the RUC to the 'modern, human rights compliant' PSNI.

But where is the human rights training and awareness when the

Jim GIBNEY



police pursue relatives seeking comfort and solace in their faith and the memory of their murdered loved ones?

Where was the human rights training in the treatment of Mark Sykes, particularly in police custody?

Mark is in his mid-50s. He is highly respected in his community. He narrowly survived the massacre in which his 18-year-old brother-in-law Peter Magee died with Jack Duffin (66), William McManus (54) Christy Doherty (52), James Kennedy (15), with a number of others shot and wounded.

Mark Sykes carries the physical scars of the massacre.

He has a bullet in his chest, close to his heart which cannot be removed and gunshot

wounds on his upper arms caused when he protected his head from the gunman.

Mark posed no threat to anyone.

He was forcibly arrested, manacled with two sets of handcuffs and placed for 90 painful and agonising minutes in a cramped and confined space in the back seat of a police car.

Against his will he was trapped unable to move in the back of the car, windows closed, in the precincts of Musgrave Street barracks.

Against his will he was driven around Belfast city centre.

The police did not speak to him or ease his distress by removing the manacles; the atmosphere was one of silent intimidation and fear.

How could the police have this unbridled power over a defenceless manacled prisoner?

There is a long-established, paper-trail-based arrest procedure where the arrested person's every movement is watched and documented from the point of arrest to the point of release or detention.

This was spectacularly breached in the case of Mark Sykes.

Did any police officer make an enquiry about his whereabouts for the 90 minutes? Did the police area commander intervene?

At the heart of this entire episode lies disrespect by the police, at all levels, for the community of the Lower Ormeau and by extension the entire nationalist community.

The hurt and pain caused to relatives is compounded by the inexplicable delay in publishing the Ombudsman's report into the Sean Graham massacre.

This needs to be published immediately.

And speedy measures need to be taken to restore shattered public confidence in the police.

A good start would be to remove legacy from the police's remit - because it more than any other issue is destroying any hope of a new beginning to police in the north.

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## ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 22 1921

### Devlin Calls for Peace

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, the debate on the Address was resumed by Captain Wedgwood Benn (Liberal) who moved an amendment stating: 'That the policy in practice pursued by the Executive in Ireland had failed to secure the repression of organised outrage; had involved the officers and servants of the Crown in a competition in crime with the offenders against the law ... and had frustrated the prospects of an agreed settlement of the problem of Irish self-government.'

Captain Benn maintained that the policy of the Government was condemned by all moderate opinion and, if persisted in, it would disrupt the whole Empire. The Prime Minister had recently said we had 'murder by the throat', but outrage and crime had increased since then. Captain Benn charged the servants of the Chief Secretary with being guilty of pillage, looting and terrorism. The [Chief Secretary] used systematic terrorisation of the population in his attempts to restore order. The Hague Convention was being violated by the Government in Ireland.

Sir Hamar Greenwood [Chief Secretary] denied that the Government were condemned by foreign countries. Captain Benn was the friend of Mr Erskine Childers who was an extreme friend of Sinn Féin.

Mr Joseph Devlin [Nat.] said the Chief Secretary asked whether he denounced the origin and authors of all the trouble in Ireland. 'Most gladly do I denounce the authors - who sit there', he replied, pointing to the Treasury bench. The Chief Secretary had attacked Mr Erskine Childers who took a gallant part in the war. It was a strong commentary on the policy of the Government that when Mr Childers went to Ireland he should have developed a detestation and a loathing for the Government's policy. As

'Mr Lloyd George', the P had denounced the burning of farms as 'foolish and iniquitous': 'Was that fine moral philosophy to be changed now that he was the PM? What [Mr Lloyd George] said of the reprisals in South Africa in 1901 he (Mr Devlin) repeated now in his impeachment of the Government. Judge Wakely had at Sligo charged the uniformed officers of the Crown with deliberately burning property of citizens.'

It would be better that there should be an honest and peaceful arrangement between the two nations in order to end the present horrible condition of things.

As the war in Ireland entered its third year and the Coalition intensified its use of repression, Devlin and his Liberal and Labour allies piled the pressure on Lloyd George who was now inching towards negotiations. Captain William Benn, then a Liberal MP, was father of Tony Benn, the later Labour Minister.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX  
e.phoenix@irishnews.com