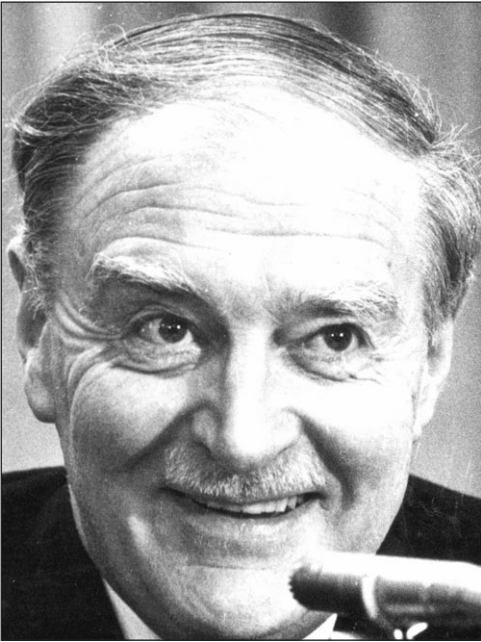




Cabinet papers 1974 in the south

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■ **HORRIFIC:** Taoiseach in 1974, Liam Cosgrave, top left, Monsignor Denis Faul, bottom left, who along with Fr Michael McGirr described the death of Patrick McElhone in Pomeroy, Co Tyrone on August 7 1974 to the Irish government. The shooting of the 22-year-old by British soldiers was, according to government papers of great concern to the taoiseach. Above right, the fallout from the UWC strike hits the heart of Dublin city centre. Three bombs in the city and another in Monaghan on May 17 claimed the lives of 33 civilians and one unborn child

Irish government shocked at shooting by British army

THE shooting of a young unarmed Catholic man, Patrick McElhone, in Co Tyrone in 1974 caused grave concern to the Irish government of Liam Cosgrave, according to secret government papers released in Dublin.

The death was raised with the Fine Gael/Labour Coalition government by TD Michael O’Kennedy, who wrote: “The account given by the dead man’s parents poses the most serious questions of the (British) army’s role and behaviour...”

The Fianna Fail TD felt that there was evidence to support charges against the military involved and urged the government to press Britain for a full-scale investigation.

In a letter in the file, two local priests, Fathers Michael McGirr and Denis Faul described the death of Mr McElhone on August 7 1974.

The deceased, they informed the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin, was a quiet 22-year-old whose only interest was playing an accordion in a local band.

“He was inclined to be backward and sheepish in conversation. He had absolutely no interest in politics,” the priests said.

The priests added: “In recent weeks a new regiment has been very active and provocative in the Pomeroy area.

“Sinister movements like spying on certain houses and harassment of the people have created a climate of foreboding and fear.

“On Wednesday searches were made in the Limehill district. The soldiers went to a number of small firms and harassed the people with their foul language and threatening behaviour.

“They spoke to the deceased, Paddy McElhone as he was cutting hay in a field.

“Later that evening at six o’clock as McElhone waited at home for his tea two soldiers called at the door, saying: ‘Come out here... We want a word with

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you.’ The young man went out and the soldiers closed the door on his father and mother.

“The mother had a view of the road and she saw a number of soldiers gathered around Paddy. She heard one of them say: ‘You’re not doing much to help the army’.

“She then saw soldiers shaking him severely. They then took him further down the road. Mrs McElhone asked her husband, Peter to go out and see what was happening to Paddy.

“Then Peter heard a shot and saw his son fall in the hay field. Peter screamed: ‘Why have you shot my son? He has done nothing.’ The soldier replied: ‘Get back into the house you f***** whore or we will shoot you too’.”

Fr McGirr said he was permitted to give the young man the Last Rites later.

The priests noted that: “All the soldiers were in a highly nervous state.

“One in particular was constantly pacing up and down the road, talking to himself and shaking his head... The local people were terrified of him.”

The people were “fearful and terrified and want the soldiers removed from Pomeroy immediately.”

On August 12, Mr Martin Burke, an official of the Department of Foreign Affairs visited Pomeroy to investigate the shooting for the Irish government.

In his official report, he stated: “Fr Faul has heard from a confidential army source that the whole affair was supposed to be a bluff planned by a group of soldiers.

“According to this, they were going to tell Patrick McElhone that they would execute him if he did not give them whatever information they were seeking... but that it backfired when one of the soldiers accidentally shot him.

“It is not plausible that a trained soldier could take deadly aim and then accidentally pull the trigger.”

The official added: “It is hard to understand why these soldiers became so interested in Patrick McElhone.

“He appears to have no involvement with politics or the IRA and, indeed, was slightly backward.”

He noted that the RUC had behaved in “a very sympathetic manner” at the scene and had assured the family that the case against the soldiers would be “pursued vigorously”.

Following these investigations, the Irish Ambassador in London, Dr Donal O’Sullivan was instructed to convey to the British prime minister, Harold Wilson, Dublin’s concern at the activities of the British army in the north “which have given rise to considerable disquiet and resentment on the part of the minority”.

“There have been many complaints from responsible people regarding the behaviour of the army in general.

“Bishop Daly of Derry spoke of their ‘intimidation and terror tactics’... in addition, complaints had been made regarding the behaviour of certain specific regiments such as the Black Watch in west Belfast and the Royal Marine Commandos in Newry.

“The behaviour of the latter meant there was a wide measure of support for the IRA in Newry,” he added.

There had also been incursions into the Republic and “in one case the firing on a Garda patrol car”.

“These incidents, taken in conjunction with the activities of the army in Northern Ireland, could prove detrimental to cooperation in security matters.”

The Irish government also raised the issue of the reaction of the British Army to border road cratering. Troops “had displayed great insensitivity to local feelings and may be said to have contributed to increased sympathy for the activities of the IRA.”

The memo went on: “British army activity in border areas is such as to cause a degree of resentment among the local people, gardai and army which can only benefit those intent on illegal activity.”

The report notes that the standard British response to allegations of misbehaviour by troops is that they operate against paramilitaries from whatever quarter.

“This appears to say that it is in order to harass the minority since most violence comes from that direction. Such harassment leads to a heightened hatred of the army and a willingness to tolerate acts of violence against it.”

Similarly, regarding the saturation of Catholic areas, the British army had claimed that this had led directly to a reduction of violence.

However, the Irish government believed that this was due to the cessation of the loyalist assassination campaign.

“The saturation strengthens the feelings among the minority community that they are receiving unequal treatment since the army does not devote equal attention to the Loyalists from whom greater quantities of arms are regularly received.”

The British army, for their part,

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denied that there was any prejudice towards the nationalist population but the Irish government felt that “the existence of this impression is hardly conducive to an early solution of the overall problem”.

A note on the file shows that the taoiseach Liam Cosgrave read the ambassador’s report on British army misbehaviour at a meeting with the Northern Ireland secretary of state Merlyn Rees in September 1974.

In March 1975 a lance corporal from the Royal Regiment of Wales was charged with the murder of Patrick McElhone but was found not guilty.

In a landmark judgement, the judge said he was satisfied that the soldier reasonably believed that he might be dealing with a paramilitary seeking to escape and that his action was reasonable under the circumstances.

The McElhone family received an ex-gratia payment of £3,000. Mr McElhone’s mother died a month after the money was paid and his father a short time afterwards.