

Disaster of New Garda Commissioner

The decision by the government to appoint Mr Jeremy Andrew Harris, O.B.E., former Assistant Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to the position of Commissioner of An Garda Síochána is a grave mistake. It is a bizarre and inexplicable appointment, and no adequate explanation has been given by the government for making it. Whatever about the professional policing qualities possessed by Mr Harris, there are a number of compelling reasons as to why he should not have been chosen for the role of Commissioner.

The most serious charge against Drew Harris is that, as a senior PSNI officer, he repeatedly sought to frustrate enquiries that were being made on behalf of relatives of persons killed by the Royal Ulster Constabulary or by loyalists acting in collusion with elements in the RUC. The relatives concerned are Irish citizens, while Mr Harris at the time was a link to MI5, an intelligence asset working for a foreign State. Another serious issue concerns evidence given by Mr Harris to the Irish government-commissioned Smithwick tribunal investigating the deaths in an IRA ambush of two senior RUC officers, allegedly set up as a result of a tip-off from within Dundalk Garda station. The evidence given by Mr Harris was dismissed indignantly by a former Garda Commissioner and is said to have caused much ill feeling in the Louth Garda division.

Mr Harris, referred to as "an expert in high risk covert policing ... and critical incidents," was also the most senior link officer between the PSNI and MI5, the British Intelligence agency which had been most heavily committed to countering Irish insurgents and whom many believe to have been involved in unlawful activities, including murders committed in both parts of Ireland. Although no longer a PSNI officer, Mr Harris remains legally restrained by the terms of Britain's Official Secrets Act. He will therefore be legally precluded from divulging details of sensitive and potentially explosive material relating to MI5 operations and possible criminal activities against Irish citizens in both jurisdictions in Ireland.

There are other concerns arising from this unprecedented appointment: for example, there was the issue of the selection committee established by Justice Minister Flanagan, which included two senior UK police commanders, but no current or retired Gardaí or Irish military intelligence personnel. Doubts have been expressed as to whether Mr Harris had been properly security vetted. Arising from these particular doubts, we would echo calls that have been made in some quarters, urging the transfer of national security matters from An Garda Síochána to a new agency dealing exclusively with such issues. Another concern would be as to whether the new Commissioner can command the loyalty of his entire force, given the rancour over Smithwick and suspicions within the wider body of the force concerning his past RUC and PSNI service. We are strongly of the view that the five-year tenure of Commissioner Harris could be marked by endless controversies.