Tuesday, May 2, 2017

**Libya and Westminster-why democracy doesn’t work**

On 15th July 2015 the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee announced an inquiry into “the role of the UK government in seeking compensation for the victims of IRA attacks made possible by the provision of Semtex and other weapons by the former Gaddafi regime”

It has laboured for almost two years, hearing evidence from a range of witnesses, some sentient, others not.

Despite first suggesting the inquiry , contacting the committee at an early stage and making a written submission , I was not asked to give oral evidence.

Instead the committee entertained themselves with Jason McCue, who memorably said that “Semtex has one of the remarkable qualities of not going off .” Vauxhall Cross must have winced, if they were watching. Then Willy Frazer, the man who thought up the idea of suing Libya in the USA and who was representing FAIR, from which he had been excluded after financial irregularities.

Paul Tweed appeared, as if a genie from a bottle and opined that giving victims payments on parity with American victims would be “substantial football pools-type payments”. A libel lawyer, he was unmasked by Ian Paisley as his solicitor.

Tobias Elwood smoothed in with the misleadingly named Mr Dart. Tobias treated the committee rather casually. He had no idea, as a former City type, how much money had been frozen. He came ill-prepared , he had “scanned through” the transcript of the previous week.

Andrew MacKinlay had something of the night about him and knew people even more scary. He had once been in a room with the butcher of Lockerbie, Moussa Koussa [so good he was almost named twice] . He is a known terrorist , declared Andrew, to shivers of terror from the audience. MacKinlay wrapped himself in his black cloak and disappeared. I asked the PSNI to interview Mr MacKinlay. They contacted him. He had nothing further to add to his privileged remarks.

Then, with a swish, entered the oily Sir Vincent Fean KCVO. Ian Paisley, for whatever reason was all over him like one of his bad suits. “You have given us some fantastic evidence”. [As a lawyer of over thirty years I never heard evidence referred to as “fantastic”. “Fantastical”-yes]. Paisley gushed : “I am really tempted to ask you whether you would come out of retirement and advise or lead such a group, given your intricate and intimate knowledge of the situation in Libya” . The prospect of good seats and a slap up lunch at Twickers with Ian and Danny must have been tempting to Sir Vince, particularly after his treatment in Bir Zeit. When asked by the terrifying bright, ice cold, Lady Hermon about Sinn Fein visits to Libya he replied, “ *Yes. I do not remember visits. I am trying to remember. I do not remember visits , but I would not necessarily have known. I did not see any operational relationship*.” So there you have it.

After so much gloom and obfuscation it was good to have Jack Straw that aptly named politician, and his risqué comedy turn. Only on to the stage , he mentioned his backside. Oh err Missus. The mood lightened. It was time for some nudge nudge, wink wink stuff. It turned out that Jack had survived the Old Bailey bomb. He told the audience about his little splinter. More ribald laughter. He talked of the Small Shard and the Small Scar, he might almost have spoken like Sean Connery. I wondered if his MI6 file said “small pompous lawyer, distinguishing feature-small scar to the left buttock”. As with all the rest he really couldn’t see what the fuss was about. He said:

*“I thought that what Tony Blair and Mo Mowlam achieved in 1998 was astonishing and laid the ground for almost everything that has followed since then, and no one should take away from Mr Blair the effort it took and the beneficial consequences that have followed.”*

Yes, thank you and good night.

So ended the oral evidence, in October 2106.

Despite posters advertising Tony and his Big Whoppers and Gordon Brown , the Scottish Hypnotist, neither turned up. Both wrote in to say they were awfully sorry but they had better offers elsewhere.

The committee threatened to go to the United States to find out what really happened but in the end they just lost interest.

Then the committee set to work. Here is the result.

*“If, by the end of 2017, it is apparent that the situation in Libya makes successful negotiations unlikely in the short or medium term, the UK Government itself should establish and finance a reparations fund ahead of the outcome of such negotiations. This would provide payments both to community projects, and individuals, whether as a one-off payment or as a pension. It would also allow time for progress to be made on establishing a list of eligible victims across the UK, preventing additional delay.”*

So, if I were a member of the new government, I would say that there is hope, in the medium term, that a government will be formed in Libya and therefore the UK government proposes to do nothing.

The report is long on waffle and short on criticism and the demand for firm action. It is what I have come to expect , sadly, from this bunch of time servers. There is no demand, there is no timescale, there is no deadline. It will just wander off into the Westminster night.

That’s democracy for you. Remember it when you vote in June.