

# Margaret Thatcher, state collusion, and the murder of Pat Finucane



*The UK government's recent decision not to establish a public enquiry into the 1989 murder of Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane has resurrected a contested debate surrounding the extent of collusion between the British state and Loyalist paramilitaries during Margaret Thatcher's premiership. [Stephen Kelly](#) discusses some of the evidence surrounding this case.*

On 30 November 2020, Brandon Lewis, secretary of state for Northern Ireland announced that the British government had decided not to order a public enquiry into the 1989 murder of Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane at the hands of Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF). Although Lewis acknowledged state collusion and apologised to the Finucane family, he noted that there would be no inquiry pending a new review conducted by the Police Service of Northern Ireland. This decision was reached despite a [Supreme Court ruling](#) that the government's failure to properly investigate Finucane's murder was in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In my new book, [Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Party and Northern Ireland, 1975-1990](#), I reveal the extent of collusion between elements of the state and Loyalist paramilitaries throughout Thatcher's premiership. Accusations of alleged collusion existed long before Thatcher's arrival at No. 10 Downing Street. During the mid-1970s, for example, the British security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries were allegedly involved in a series of horrendous acts of violence, including murder. These included the Dublin-Monaghan bombings in 1974 and the Miami Showband killings in 1975.

On 12 February 1989, UFF gunmen murdered Finucane in cold blood, as he sat down for dinner with his wife and children. A prominent criminal defence and civil rights Belfast solicitor, Finucane's murder immediately sparked off accusations of collusion between elements of the British state and Loyalist paramilitaries, including [baseless claims](#) in later years that Thatcher, herself, 'ordered' the murder. While Thatcher played no part in Finucane's murder, the available evidence provides [proof](#) that elements of the state 'conspired to kill' Finucane.

Brian Nelson, a former Loyalist paramilitary, who was recruited as an agent by the British Army's most secret intelligence wing – euphemistically known as the Force Research Unit (FRU) – put forward Finucane's name as a credible target for his killers, providing them with a photograph and home address. Finucane was targeted for assassination because in the months leading to his murder, he had been investigating accusations of British state collusion with Loyalist paramilitaries in the campaign against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). Over the preceding years, he had also represented many Irish Republicans, including Bobby Sands during the second Irish Republican hunger strike of 1981. Misinformation [was also spread](#) at the time by some within the British Army that Finucane was a member of the PIRA. Before the murder, the Irish government had raised concerns on receiving information that Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) members based at Castlereagh Police Station were 'encouraging Protestant paramilitaries to attack Irish Republican lawyers', in which Finucane's name had been specifically mentioned.

Finucane's murder was only one of several incidents during Thatcher's premiership in which the state was involved in widespread collusion between Loyalist paramilitary 'death squads' and agencies of the British state. According to several sources during this period, it was common practice for the British state to share top-secret intelligence material, evidence, weapons and personnel with Loyalist paramilitaries. Raymond White, a former head of the RUC special branch, subsequently admitted that in 1986 he raised the subject of collusion with Thatcher, seeking legal clarification for the handling of British undercover agents who had penetrated paramilitary groups. The [message](#) that White received after his meeting with Thatcher regarding the use of undercover agents was to "carry on, but don't get caught". Indeed, in a 2015 interview, Michael Mates, a former Conservative Party MP and a minister at the Northern Ireland Office from 1992 to 1993, [conceded](#) that the scale of the collusion between the British state and Loyalist paramilitaries during the 1980s was much greater than he had believed it to be at the time.

The Stevens Inquiries, initially established in September 1989, were three official British government inquiries, led by Sir John Stevens, concerning alleged collusion in Northern Ireland. In the findings of his [first report](#), published in 1990, Stevens found that collusion was ‘neither wide-spread nor institutionalised’. However, [the third and final](#) of Steven’s report published in 2003 found that there ‘had been collusion in the killing of Finucane between members of the security forces, especially the FRU and Loyalists’.

In 2012, the British government, under the chairmanship of Desmond de Silva, commenced an official review into Finucane’s murder. De Silva’s findings caused a political sensation. The report claimed that employees of the state “actively facilitated” Finucane’s murder, through a dark web of collusion between elements of the British security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries. The De Silva Report also claimed that successive British governments knew about such collusion in relation to Finucane’s murder but ‘did nothing about it’.

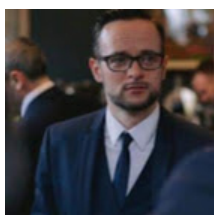
In January 2015, prime minister David Cameron, publicly placed on the record that ‘employees of the state actively furthered and facilitated Patrick Finucane’s murder...’. Cameron, however, refused to order a public inquiry into his murder. Fast forward to November 2020, and yet again, the Finucane family were left devastated by the British government’s decision not to order a public enquiry into Finucane’s murder. A decision that Amnesty International UK described as ‘[shameful](#)’.

Finucane’s assassination at the hands of UFF, together with similar controversial murders by Loyalist paramilitaries during the 1980s, continues to cast a dark shadow over Thatcher’s legacy on Northern Ireland. Indeed, Thatcher’s association with Northern Ireland during her premiership is further complicated by accusations – which she strenuously denied – that she [knowingly supported](#) the British security forces’ ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy, in which many Republican paramilitaries were found in ‘compromising situations’ and were duly ‘executed’.

Frustratingly one will never know the true extent of Thatcher’s involvement with the above controversial policies. Several relevant British government state papers remain closed, some indefinitely, while many of those directly involved either refuse to speak about these issues or have passed away. However, not all is lost. The murder of Pat Finucane, together with broader accusations of collusion, confirms the argument that throughout her premiership, Thatcher was obsessed with security-related matters in relation to Northern Ireland, channelling much of her energy and thinking into how to tackle paramilitary, chiefly Irish Republican violence. As she recorded in *The Downing Street Years*, ‘My policy towards Northern Ireland was always one aimed above all at upholding democracy and the law: it was always therefore determined by whatever I considered at a particular time would help bring better security’.

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## About the Author



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