

FO backs down on IRA-link smears

The Foreign Office has admitted making—and been forced to correct—serious inaccuracies in a propaganda document issued through British embassies abroad and to sympathetic journalists in Britain. The document, described as a “Background Brief” and entitled *The Provisional IRA - International Contacts Outside the United States*, lists a string of organisations and individuals as alleged supporters of the IRA.

One of those identified as an IRA “contact”, Liz Curtis, a well-known writer on Northern Ireland, threatened to sue the Foreign Office when she found out about the document. Now the Treasury (government) solicitor has told Ms Curtis’s solicitors that the Foreign Office will withdraw and amend copies of the document. Similar undertakings have been given to Mr Michael Quilligan, an Amsterdam-based campaigner on Ireland, who, according to the brief, did “admit working for Sinn Fein though denying any connection with the IRA.” But Quilligan is not and has never said he was a member of Sinn Fein.

Ms Curtis was described as a member of the Troops Out movement. This, and sections of the brief on Mr Quilligan, are now being withdrawn. But the Foreign Office have refused either to apologise for the errors, or to withdraw all references to Ms Curtis and Mr Quilligan. She is outraged by this, describes the style

of the document as a “tissue of fabrication and inaccuracy”, and points out that the document as a whole is written as though anyone mentioned was indeed an “international contact of the IRA”.

Strikingly, sections of the document have been reproduced verbatim in articles by a British journalist — in the *Irish Independent* and in the *Daily Telegraph*. The journalist, Christopher Dobson, did not say in his articles that he had simply copied out some of his words, unacknowledged, from a British government handout. He referred to Quilligan as a Sinn Fein worker in both the *Irish Independent* on 2 May 1988, and in a rewrite of the material in the *Daily Telegraph* the next day.

This use of unattributed smear and government-inspired propaganda by some journalists is a typical result of longstanding government operations of this kind. From 1949 to 1975, a secret Information Research department of the Foreign Office distributed briefings of this kind to journalists.

The department was publicly acknowledged in 1975, renamed the Overseas Information department, and continued operating despite promises by then Foreign Secretary David Owen that its “grey propaganda” operations would end. In 1980, the department was wound up, but the propaganda function has remained, distributed among several other Foreign Office sections. Each propaganda document of this kind says that it is “not and should not be construed or quoted as an expression of government policy”.

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