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We scuttled Flanagan's FBI job, priest says

By Rosetta Donnelly

INTENSIVE lobbying by Washington-based Fr Sean McManus may explain why PSNI Chief Constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan has put back his retirement date.

The Fermanagh-born priest, who is President of the Irish National Caucus on Capitol Hill, has been working all out to ensure that Flanagan is not given a top consultancy post with the FBI.

Ronnie Flanagan, who is meeting with families of the bomb victims in Omagh today (Thursday), was originally scheduled to step down as chief constable of the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) in January.

It is now believed he will be staying in the post until the outstanding matters raised by the Ombudsman's Report into the bomb investigation are resolved. That could be as late as next September, according to informed commentators after the chief constable announced after Christmas that he is staying on.

Although a PSNI spokesman denied this week that any decision had been taken about when Mr Flanagan would leave his post - or where he would go afterwards - it was widely reported that he was to go to Washington to train the FBI in anti-terrorism policing.

Fr Sean says Ronnie Flanagan has a long and dubious record with incidents over the many years of the North's Troubles and he had grave concerns that a man such as him should be invited to train the FBI in anti-terrorism.

He said there have been several incidents - the most well known being the Pat Finucane murder - which makes him angry to see such injustice continuing to go on in Northern Ireland.

The campaign to keep Flanagan out of America used the Police Ombudsman's Report as further evidence of what believe to be a 'unfortunate choice' of candidate.

He believes that the glaring discrepancies in the Omagh bomb investigation - over which Flanagan has overall control - is confirmation to him, if it was ever needed, that he is not a suitable candidate to take a top job with the FBI.

The Irish National Caucus, set up in 1978, has a strong voice in Washington and requests from its president usually find favour within Congress.

Fr Sean said he has been lobbying for several months and that two influential congressmen - Tom Gilman and Chris Smith - have been particularly helpful.

Fr Sean warned the politicians that the FBI had just come out from under a cloud of bad publicity surrounding the leaking of secrets to the Soviets and are trying to get things back on track.

'The last thing it needs now is the baggage which Ronnie Flanagan will surely bring with him' he added.

Fr McManus has testified before Congress on the matter during which he has been very critical of Flanagan's role in Special Branch which he says has been responsible for a lot of wrongdoings in Northern Ireland.

'Ronnie Flanagan was very high up in Special Branch when Pat Finucane was murdered and it is becoming more and more evident that Special Branch is in control of agents'.

Fr Sean is confident that cases such as the murders of Pat Finucane , fellow solicitor Rosemary Nelson and many more will be solved some day and said there are many examples in America where cases are being solved which never before would have.

The priest says he has been given assurances that Ronnie Flanagan will not be going to Washington.

'I am very pleased about this. I think whatever view you take about the whole new police. the one big concern in Congress has been that there were no mechanisms for weeding out the bad apples.

'I am not saying that Ronnie Flanagan is a bad apple but I am saying is that there were so many cases of collusion, so many ridiculous incidents over there, and in any police force the buck stops with those in charge. Ronnie Flanagan was at the very top of Special branch when Pat Finucane was murdered.

'I believe that whoever was involved with the RUC and Special Branch has a great responsibility to answer. They cannot pass the buck to some person who they used as a useful idiot to carry out the murder.'

Of the new Police Service of Northern Ireland, Fr Sean said, 'I recognise the fact that the Catholic bishops and the SDLP in the

North have accepted the new police service and I recognise that as important.

'It is obvious also that Sinn Fein, at the moment, feels unable to support the new police. That too is significant for two reasons: (1) because of the growing electoral mandate of Sinn Fein, and (2), it was the Sinn Fein constituency - the broad republican community - which suffered most from the RUC.

'If there is going to be a real new beginning to police, then it is the very people that are most alienated that most support it. That has not happened and, until it does, I cannot see a new beginning.

'There is just too much suspicion and distrust and fear. That must be exorcised before we have a new beginning,'said Fr Sean.

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