

Northern Ireland spy scandal: Questions Sinn Fein must answer

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
22 December 2005

The exposure of leading Sinn Fein official Denis Donaldson as a British spy raises profound questions.

On Friday, December 16, Donaldson made a public confession alongside Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams that he had been an agent and an informer for British and Northern Ireland security forces for two decades.

In his televised statement, Donaldson apologised to his “former comrades” and his family, saying he “was recruited in the 1980s after compromising myself during a vulnerable time in my life”.

Donaldson’s confession immediately throws light upon the “Stormontgate” spy scandal that brought down the Northern Ireland power-sharing executive in 2002. In October that year, police raided Sinn Fein’s offices at Stormont and seized hundreds of apparently stolen documents. They arrested Donaldson, head of administration at Sinn Fein’s headquarters, and two others.

All three were charged with running a republican spy ring, gathering information on their political opponents. Citing security concerns raised by the discovery of the documents, more than £30 million was spent relocating Northern Ireland security personnel and prison officers, whose safety had allegedly been compromised. Ten days after the raid, the pro-British Unionists walked out of the assembly, saying that the scandal proved that Sinn Fein could not be trusted. The British government then suspended the assembly, thus restoring direct rule from London.

The intelligence leading up to the raid was said to have been discovered in the course of investigations into an IRA raid on Castlereagh police station in March 2002.

But last week the spying charges against all three were dropped on the grounds that the case “was no longer in the public interest,” whereupon Adams hailed Donaldson as a hero, declaring that the spy ring had been an invention of the security forces.

Subsequently, Donaldson was forced to confess his real role after he was visited by the security forces and told that he was about to be outed as an agent. Fearing for his life, he went to Sinn Fein and confessed and agreed to expose how he had participated in setting up Stormontgate. In his televised statement he described the alleged spy ring as “a scam” and said that British security had “created it.”

The Donaldson affair confirms that the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that set up the power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland has not produced any let-up in the dirty tricks carried out by British imperialism over decades.

Allegations of Sinn Fein spying were aimed at discrediting the organisation under conditions where the Agreement was facing mounting opposition from within both the major Unionist parties and the police and security services. Sinn Fein has insisted that the raid on its Stormont office was engineered by “securocrats” to undermine the power-sharing arrangements.

Merely raising this point, however, ignores far graver dangers faced by the working class in Northern Ireland. The activities of Britain’s security

services have gone far beyond black bag jobs to discredit their political opponents. In 2003 Freddie Scappaticci, the former head of IRA internal security known as Stakeknife, was outed as a British agent. Scappaticci was responsible for internal discipline within the organisation, including executions. It thus transpired British imperialism was fully informed that such summary justice was being meted out and could even have played a role in deciding who was targeted.

If anything, the revelation that Donaldson was an agent is a more serious breach of security for Sinn Fein and the IRA. Moreover, it has international ramifications.

Donaldson was in the highest echelons of the Republican movement for 25 years. In 1971 he was convicted over plots to blow up British government buildings and sentenced to 10 years in the Maze prison, of which he served four years. During his time in jail he was photographed alongside leading IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands.

When he was released, he became a top official in Sinn Fein’s leadership, representing the party on numerous fundraising trips to the US, and running the Noraid office in New York—charged with fundraising for the party. As a senior IRA intelligence officer he also travelled extensively throughout Latin America and the Middle East, meeting with the PLO, Hezbollah and others. Throughout this time, and especially during his period in Sinn Fein’s headquarters, he had unlimited access to names and documents, which he could pass on to his controllers.

Additionally, Donaldson, like Scappaticci, was able to directly intervene in the internal political life of Sinn Fein, the IRA and its support network.

The British government has refused to countenance any investigation into the Donaldson affair because it would serve to expose the extent of the complicity of the security forces in spying, manufacturing political scandals and possible assassinations. Blair has refused to comment at all, while Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain has rejected calls for an inquiry.

Given these facts, the most politically disturbing aspect of the Donaldson affair is the ongoing efforts by Sinn Fein’s leadership to downplay its implications. Adams met with Hain prior to the Northern Ireland minister’s refusal to organise an inquiry. Both he and his second in command Martin McGuinness have maintained a friendly tone towards the British government, politely requesting that it rein in the security services.

Demands for an inquiry have been raised by all parties in Northern Ireland except for Sinn Fein. Moreover, the organisation has made no pledge to mount an internal investigation.

This runs entirely contrary to the response of others within the republican movement. There are reports of consternation within the rank and file of both Sinn Fein and the IRA and concerns that Donaldson is only the tip of an iceberg. Several commentators have noted that Britain only reveals its agents in order to defend someone higher up.

One of the most telling statements was made by former Noraid publicity director, Martin Galvin to the *Sunday Tribune*. Galvin warned not only of

the security implications of Donaldson's role, but also his political influence.

Claiming that he had raised "serious doubts" about Donaldson 15 years ago, which were dismissed, he told the newspaper, "I was told that Donaldson's credentials were impeccable, that he was beyond reproach, and that he had the full confidence of the Sinn Fein leadership in Ireland."

McGuinness has dismissed all concerns regarding broader state penetration of Sinn Fein. Acknowledging, "You would have to be very foolish to ignore the possibility that the British have got other agents working right through the entire process," he continued, "for every informer or agent that turned up over the years, there are thousands and thousands of people who aren't and thousands and thousands of people who would never contemplate putting themselves into the type of situation that Denis Donaldson got himself into."

Such complacency is extraordinary from the leader of an organisation that has been subject to constant state provocations, arrests, imprisonment and assassinations. It has not passed without notice. Jonathan Freedland, writing in the *Guardian*, states that the exposure of Stormontgate reveals widespread operations by "agents of the British state" that "are out of control."

Asking how the prime minister would explain this state of affairs, he continues, "Well, so far he hasn't had to—because no one is really asking the question. And that is the strangest aspect of this strange saga. Sinn Fein, who should be climbing the roof of Belfast's Waterfront Hall screaming their vindication, are oddly muted."

Freedland concludes the article by noting "that a strange kind of common interest, if not collusion, has evolved between Downing Street and Sinn Fein."

How is this common interest in suppressing the truth to be explained?

Politically, it is clear that Sinn Fein does not want anything to cut across its on-going efforts to secure a place for itself within the power structures in Northern Ireland. Adams and McGuinness are well aware that revealing state operations against Sinn Fein would inevitably call into question its cooperation with the British state and its agreement for the disarming of the IRA.

Moreover, many will draw their own political conclusions from the fact that a British agent was firmly supportive of the course taken by the Adams leadership.

Even so, the possibility of more sinister reasons for Sinn Fein's passivity cannot be excluded.

In his own remarks, McGuinness dismissed claims of broader infiltration of the republican movement, saying they emanated from Sinn Fein's opponents. It is certainly the case that statements have been made to this effect by former members, who have either also worked as British agents or have become politically hostile.

Former IRA member turned informer Devin Fulton said that Donaldson was "only one of many agents in Sinn Fein" and that "there are many bigger hitters than him still sitting out there doing their business." He also alleged that Sinn Fein had been aware that Donaldson had been an agent "for some time."

Anthony McIntyre, a former IRA prisoner who is an opponent of the Adams leadership, also suggested Donaldson could have been sacrificed to protect someone more important. "They let him go, because they were determined to protect someone else high up," he said. "I believe there is extensive infiltration from top to bottom."

McIntyre argues in the *Irish Times* December 21 that "agents have for long been central to British state attempts to shape the IRA and in particular nudge it towards a peace process." He describes Donaldson as "one such agent of influence" and draws attention to an interview with Martin Ingram on Ireland's *Today FM*.

Ingram is the pseudonym for a former operative in Britain's undercover Force Research Unit that colluded with loyalists to target republicans for

assassination and had Scappaticci as one of its agents in the IRA. Ingram testified before the inquiry before then Metropolitan Chief Commissioner Sir John Stevens into the 1989 of Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane. On *Today FM* he reportedly told presenter Matt Cooper that there are senior Sinn Fein household names presently working for the British. McIntyre concludes, "Far from the British 'securocrats' moving to undermine Sinn Fein, they are seemingly striving to protect it from serious investigation."

The Socialist Equality Party is politically opposed to Sinn Fein, which is a bourgeois nationalist organisation that represents the interests of an aspiring middle class stratum seeking their share in the exploitation of the Irish working class. Equally, we hold no common ground with the republican dissidents who hanker for the IRA to return to its policy of armed struggle. Neither do we seek to join in the attempts by other bourgeois parties, Unionist and republican, to make opportunistic use of Sinn Fein's crisis.

However, it is a question of principle for the workers movement that the activities of spies and agents are exposed. This is vital, both in politically educating the working class and in protecting workers from state provocations.

Most commentators on the possible role of "agents with influence" within Sinn Fein have concentrated on efforts to steer the organisation towards an accommodation with British imperialism. This ignores the crucial role of sectarianism in dividing the Irish and British working class and maintaining capitalist rule. There is already ample evidence that the IRA's terror campaign was allowed to proceed under the watchful eye of the security services because of the valuable political role it played in justifying state repression and disorienting the working class. The presence of agents also means that such activities could have been encouraged and planned by the British state. This remains the greatest crime that can be attributed to the security forces.

Moreover, Sinn Fein is the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland and in all likelihood will return to governmental office. For decades it enjoyed the support of a significant layer of the Irish working class. Many workers and youth joined its ranks in the belief that it was waging a genuine anti-imperialist struggle. Many will have lost their lives and liberty as a result of British spies within their own ranks.

It is imperative, therefore, that a full investigation is made into Donaldson's role, who he worked with, who recommended he be elevated into senior positions, what impact his activities had in Ireland and internationally and that the bona fides of those with whom he was in contact are also examined. Without compromising its own security, Sinn Fein is obliged to make such an accounting before the working class.



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