

How deep does the state penetration of Sinn Fein go?

Northern Ireland: the Donaldson affair and the threat to democratic rights

Steve James, Chris Marsden
19 January 2006

The exposure of Denis Donaldson, one of Sinn Fein's leading figures in the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, as a British intelligence agent of 20 years standing tears a hole in the democratic facade behind which politics in Northern Ireland and Britain is conducted, and reveals the real attitude held by the British government and an array of its intelligence agencies to democratic rights. Secondly, it reveals an astonishing level of intelligence penetration of Sinn Fein and the IRA, which raises disturbing questions on their conduct over decades. The near-silence of the British media on this question serves to emphasise its own indifference to such fundamental issues affecting democratic rights.

The closing down by the British government of the new Northern Ireland Assembly in 2002 took place under conditions in which the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), led by then Northern Ireland First Minister David Trimble, was under severe political pressure from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley.

The power-sharing assembly was established in 1999 after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. This was necessary to stabilise political life in the British-controlled six counties and to end the expensive military conflict by allowing the bourgeois nationalist Sinn Fein to assume some measure of political power. The agreement allowed for economic collaboration with the Irish Republic in the South and created the stability necessary to attract international investment to the North.

The assembly was hailed as the dawn of a new era of democratic governance in the North, in which both supposed communities were represented by designated unionist or nationalist parties in a directly elected executive. It was supported by the vast majority of voters across Ireland, including a narrow majority of Protestants—with only the DUP opposing the agreement.

The media also portrayed the assembly as a means of overcoming the poverty and inequality intensified by decades of low-level civil war. Nevertheless, in 2002, after three previous suspensions, the assembly was summarily shut down by the British government, on the face of it, to save the political career of David Trimble.

At the time, the suspension was justified on the basis of a spy scandal. Sinn Fein personnel in Stormont were accused of operating a large-scale information gathering operation on members of the British and Northern Ireland security services. Scores of police officers raided Sinn Fein's offices and three of its members were arrested. One of those was Denis Donaldson. Unionist politicians denounced Sinn Fein as having perpetrated a deed "worse than Watergate," in Trimble's words. Trimble threatened to lead his UUP out of Stormont and Blair duly suspended the assembly.

It now emerges that the sensitive information discovered in the course of the police raids was in 1,200 or so documents found in the possession of Denis Donaldson and that his was only one of three offices targeted by

police. Either the documents were planted by the security services, or Donaldson told them where to look for documents that had been made available to him at an earlier point, thanks to his connection with state agencies.

Whether or not Sinn Fein had sought to gather information on its opponents, the real scandal of "Stormontgate" was that an institution which the vast majority of the Irish voting population had endorsed was brought down by the activities of unnamed, unelected intelligence agencies operating on an unstated agenda.

The Irish expatriate web site "Irish Abroad" summed up the antidemocratic implications of the affair: "Not since the Spycatcher affair, when MI5 agent Peter Wright alleged in a book of that name that 30 of his colleagues had succeeded in secretly blackening then British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and forced him from power, has such a serious allegation been made."

Sinn Fein has insisted that Donaldson's exposure vindicates their view of the time that Stormontgate was manufactured by "securocrats" to bring down the assembly. There are, it claims, sections of the old Unionist security apparatus, particularly in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Special Branch, who hope to wreck the Good Friday Agreement, or at any rate make impossible Sinn Fein's participation in devolved government.

In an article in the *Irish Sunday Business Post*, December 25, Tom McGurk notes the strange circumstances around an alleged IRA raid on PSNI Special Branch HQ on March 17, 2002 at Castlereagh Police Station in which files on Special Branch informers and PSNI members were alleged to have been stolen. The IRA denied the raid, seven months before the Stormontgate events.

What has emerged is that the chief suspect in the Castlereagh raid was Larry Zaitschek. The New York-born chef was a close contact of Denis Donaldson.

According to McGurk, Donaldson had befriended Zaitschek while Donaldson was working in New York. Zaitschek, whose republican sympathies must therefore have been known to Donaldson's controllers, subsequently got a job in the highly secure Castlereagh security complex. McGurk suggests that Zaitschek and Donaldson were "bit players in a raid on Castlereagh initiated by Donaldson's own handlers."

No charges have ever been levelled in connection with of the Castlereagh raid, which was supposedly the source of the documents discovered in the Stormontgate raid.

McGurk outlines a scenario in which the Castlereagh raid was part of an ongoing feud between British intelligence agencies such as MI5 and the British Army's intelligence outfits, and the RUC/PSNI Special Branch.

McGurk concludes: "Given the extraordinary nature of recent events, is it too fantastic to consider the Castlereagh raid and Stormontgate as

evidence of a private feud within the British security forces? Was Castlereagh actually about embarrassing the Special Branch and was Stormontgate the Branch's revenge?"

Underlying such a feud would be the differing attitude of the rival agencies to the revival of Stormont. The British government, and the British military establishment, including presumably MI5, are anxious for Sinn Fein to be incorporated into government in Northern Ireland, including the local policing boards overseeing the PSNI.

For the military, a new settlement for Northern Ireland, in which Sinn Fein and the DUP come to terms, has the advantage of allowing further reductions in the numbers of troops and intelligence resources deployed in Northern Ireland. Since the invasion of Iraq, the British Army has been overstretched, and is known to be anxious to alleviate the pressures under which it is being placed.

For MI5, charged with opposing domestic "subversion," the escalating assault on democratic rights in Britain, particularly following the July 7 bombings, has placed it at the centre of political policing on the British mainland. Hundreds of agents are being recruited as part of a massive expansion of the agency's operations. In short, for the British government and military, Northern Ireland is to a considerable extent yesterday's war.

Not so the PSNI Special Branch. Many Special Branch members, employed before the infamous Royal Ulster Constabulary was re-branded as the PSNI, oppose the "peace process" entirely. Some, with good reason, fear prosecution as a result of investigations into some of the most notorious killings of "the Troubles" such as the killing of solicitors Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson. The long delayed enquiries into the Finucane and Nelson murders are close to being launched. Both will likely raise all manner of questions regarding collusion between British forces, Special Branch and loyalist assassins. Some former Special Branch members have even reportedly already fled the country and more have been forced into embittered early retirement.

Moreover, unlike British forces, should Stormont be revived, the PSNI and its overwhelmingly Protestant and pro-Unionist officers would be answerable to a Stormont in which Sinn Fein sat as part of the government, overseeing its former enemies.

The British, US and Irish governments, and a section of Unionists who stand to gain from new investment, see Sinn Fein's inclusion in power as the best means of ensuring conditions to organise the exploitation of all sections of the working class. But significant sections of the old and bloated security apparatus—which ruled Protestant Ulster on behalf of British imperialism since 1921—have nothing to gain, and much to lose, from the new arrangements.

All manner of provocations are possible, including attempts to trigger sectarian conflict, which presents the working class with serious dangers.

All the more reason to expect that the Donaldson affair would provoke sustained demands for Prime Minister Tony Blair, Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain, or the head of the PSNI, Hugh Orde, to give a full account of what took place. Instead, after the most perfunctory requests, all bar the Unionist parties have dropped the issue altogether.

The British government immediately declared that there would be no inquiry and then remained absolutely silent. Ireland's Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern this month urged all parties to move on from the Stormont controversy, stating, "I think it would be helpful if we continue to try to normalise society in the North where nobody is watching anybody, where we have proper political parties, proper garda [Irish police] procedures, proper policing procedures and that we all move on in that kind of a vein.

"To start checking who was spying on who, or if two spies were spying on each other, or maybe three spies were spying on each other. I'm afraid I would need to live to a very old age to ever resolve the Northern Ireland peace process."

Just as significant has been the complicity of the British media in this

attempt to put the lid back on the can of worms opened up by Donaldson's exposure. For the most part the Donaldson affair was no longer covered, let alone treated as a "hot topic," after an initial flurry of reporting for four days.

The only exceptions were reports over the New Year that point either to the possibility of other agents operating in Sinn Fein or—alternatively—to an ongoing attempt by the security services to destabilise the party.

The reports explain that three prominent republicans were visited by PSNI detectives on December 24 and December 25 and warned they were in danger of being exposed as long-term informers for either Special Branch or MI5.

The *Times* wrote that a Sinn Fein spokesman had revealed that "the BBC had given him the names of two well-known republicans who had allegedly been warned by the police that they were under suspicion as informers. The Sinn Fein officer said when he approached the pair, they denied it. He named them as Tom Hartley, a former Belfast city councillor, and Richard "Dickie" Glenholmes, a former IRA operations officer.

According to the *Times* report, "Glenholmes served 10 years in jail in Britain for attempting to spring Brian Keenan, a former IRA chief of staff, from Brixton prison using a hijacked helicopter. Glenholmes's daughter, Eibhlin (Evelyn), is one of the IRA 'on-the-run' terrorist suspects for whom Sinn Fein is seeking freedom from prosecution."

Sinn Fein has responded by accusing the British security agencies and the police of spreading false rumours to subvert the peace process by causing dissension within republican ranks and to discredit Sinn Fein by indicating that IRA activity continues—just weeks before the report of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC). Unionists have insisted that IMC confirmation that IRA activity has ended is a precondition for Sinn Fein to return to government.

In its January 1 report on the December 24-25 events, the *Observer* reported that it had been contacted in the last week of December by "a number of IRA members concerned about the existence of a group of agents inside the republican leadership.... They claimed the IRA was 'in total disarray' over the recent revelation that Sinn Fein's chief administrator at Stormont, Denis Donaldson, had been a British agent for two decades. The group of IRA men also confirmed the existence of a further three agents whom they said had been contacted by the police about their personal safety over the Christmas period."

The newspaper quoted one of the IRA group stating, "No one in the organisation bothers even to turn up to meetings anymore because no one knows who to trust. The volunteers on the ground just don't know what's going on, who will be next to be outed as an informer, or how long this has all been going on."

The three "dismissed claims in the pro-republican press that the visits on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were an elaborate plot by the PSNI to de-stabilise the republican movement even further," the *Observer* states.

The British media's sole concentration on events that can indeed be used to discredit Sinn Fein stands in stark contrast to the failure to probe the implications of the collapsing of Stormont and to demand an accounting by the government. Nevertheless, the possible state penetration of Sinn Fein and the IRA is itself a grave threat to the democratic rights of the Irish and British working class. And the fact that Sinn Fein's enemies exploit the issue does not excuse the party's response—which is to repeatedly claim that the entire affair is merely black propaganda, everyone is above reproach and there is no possibility of high-level penetration

After all, the exposure of Donaldson comes just two years after the revelation that Freddie Scappaticci, deputy head of the IRA's internal security, was a British agent. Both Donaldson and Scappaticci occupied leading positions in the Irish republican movement, while acting as British spies for decades. Scappaticci was supposedly responsible for weeding out

informers. Donaldson was part of the organisation's leading bodies and think tanks, a close ally of its current leadership and head of its US and international operations. Yet both were on the payroll of the British government.

Anthony McIntyre, a former IRA commander in south Belfast, is quoted by the *Times* as saying, "At times I feel like I joined a regiment of the British Army when I thought I was joining the IRA. It is clear that there has been extensive infiltration of the IRA just as there was with the loyalists."

Martin Ingram, a former military intelligence officer who handled agents within the IRA, told the *Times* that "Sinn Fein leaders Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams had negligently promoted British agents within the IRA over many years. The Force Research Unit, for which he worked, had been able to exploit the fact that 'the republican leadership had ignored basic security procedures,'" he said.

Ingram said Adams and McGuinness had allowed the IRA's intelligence department to be controlled by a single agent, Freddie Scappaticci, for 20 years.

"McGuinness had promoted another agent, Frank Hegarty, who had recently joined the IRA, to a senior position in charge of weapons, against the advice of other senior IRA members."

A number of other commentators, including republicans, have also noted the IRA's folly at having its own security led by a tiny unchanging group which would therefore be a prime target for British infiltration.

One newspaper report suggested that up to 15 longstanding republicans are British agents and remain to be exposed and many republican sources have claimed that Donaldson was sacrificed to defend someone higher up.

An article in the *Sunday Tribune*, January 8, makes clear how far up the republican hierarchy suspicions are reaching.

Marian and Dolours Price were jailed as young women for their part in the 1973 car bombings of the Old Bailey and Scotland Yard in London. Marian Price, currently a supporter of the hardline republican 32-County Sovereignty Committee, told the *Tribune* of her suspicions that in 1973 the British police knew information that only herself, her sister, and three other people could know.

"We were able to rule out one person immediately. The second was Gerry Adams, and we refused to believe he was an informer. The third person was Dickie Glenholmes," said Price—referring to one of those visited by the police over Christmas that Sinn Fein has given a clean bill of health.

"Through an intermediary, we sent word of our suspicions to Adams," she continued, emphasising that she was not accusing Glenholmes of being an informer, but wanted to know why her concerns were fobbed off by Adams.

More has emerged on Donaldson's own role, in Ireland and internationally. The same *Tribune* article quoted a former Sinn Fein member from South Down, Martin Cunningham, accusing Donaldson of marginalising anyone of an independent mind, or who asked questions, or who opposed orders coming from the leadership.

"Donaldson and his clique drove 40 people out of the party in South Down. He ran a dictatorship and plenty of good people, including an ex-hunger-striker, were treated very shabbily. Those he sponsored and promoted are now highly suspect."

The *Irish Times*, December 24, notes that some Irish republican supporters in the US were not entirely surprised by Donaldson's role. Donaldson was sent over to the US in the late 1980s to argue the position of the Adams Sinn Fein leadership with regard to future negotiations towards power-sharing with the British and Unionists. Over a whole period, Donaldson intervened to isolate the hard-line republicans who wanted to continue the armed struggle. The entire US movement was restructured at Donaldson's behest.

US-based former republican Gabriel Megahey told the *Times* of a

number of odd incidents which appeared to go far beyond the necessarily heated debate amongst republicans at a crucial point in their political development. Megahey explained that when he saw Donaldson buying drinks for FBI men in the Bronx, "I just had a feeling from that moment that something wasn't right."

Donaldson found unknown new recruits for Noraid, which raised money for Sinn Fein, who vanished as rapidly as they had appeared on the scene. Donaldson demanded Megahey work with republicans known to be unreliable—then denounced Megahey to the IRA Army Council for employing them.

Megahey confronted Donaldson in a car park: "You're here with some secret agenda....I don't know what it is..."

In such an atmosphere, it is inexcusable that Sinn Fein has refused to publicly take seriously the allegations of extensive, and decades-long, infiltration of its own organisation. Reports suggest that there are investigations taking place, but any agents discovered are likely simply to be quietly sidelined, rather than named and denounced, to avoid further damage to Sinn Fein's credibility.

The Donaldson affair raises vital issues for all those concerned with the dangerous erosion of democratic rights and the ongoing conspiracy by the state forces against the working class. They must not be allowed to be swept under the carpet. The tactics used against Sinn Fein can and will be used again and again against all opponents of British imperialism. Indeed there can be no question that similar tactics are currently being deployed in British-occupied Iraq.

From this standpoint, to the extent it is possible without further compromising their security, it is imperative that Sinn Fein make clear:

- * Who are the remaining British agents in their ranks?
- * Given the central role of Scappaticci, how many of those apparently murdered by internal security were innocent of the spying charges levelled against them and were in fact fingered by the security services?
- * What information was handed by Donaldson to his handlers, not only on the IRA, but on other organisations with which he was in contact?
- * Which IRA terror operations were allowed to go ahead or were even instigated by British agents in order to foment sectarian tensions and legitimise state repression?



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact