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## In informing, as in politics, timing is everything

(Patrick Murphy, [Irish News](#))

What is the difference between giving information to the police and being an informer?

Gerry Adams is to be applauded for his leadership in urging people to give information to the police on the Robert McCartney murder. But his reasoned and responsible sentiments may confuse some less experienced republicans, who for years have been led to believe that giving information to the authorities about republican activities is called informing.

In the hierarchy of hatred in Irish history, the informer has always been top of the pile. Best described in Liam O'Flaherty's novel of the same name, the fate of the informer was inevitably death. The family's sorrow at the loss of a loved one was made worse by shame and social exclusion.

For 30 years here life copied literature. Dozens of republicans and others were murdered because the IRA branded them as informers. They met gruesome deaths, usually on lonely border roads, and many of their bodies have never been recovered for a decent burial.

The republican movement's new-found allegiance to policing in Northern Ireland suggests that it is now time to re-examine not just the concept of informing but the cases of those alleged informers who were murdered for supposedly pursuing what now appears to be Sinn Féin policy.

There are two problems in defining these victims as informers.

The first is that most of them probably passed on no information. Their judge, jury, confessor and executioner was the British agent Stakeknife. The more he murdered, the safer his own position became.

Describing these people as informers insults their memories and offers support for his inhumanity and barbarity – and his escape from justice.

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The second problem is that if any of them did pass on information, their alleged crimes must be judged in the light of more recent developments.

Some were supposedly responsible for the loss of arms and explosives. In recent years the Provisional IRA leadership said "Not a bullet, not an ounce" and then promptly gave away a complete arsenal. The loss of one gun is informing. The surrender of an arsenal is a brave step.

Other alleged informers were accused of compromising the IRA's membership. IRA leaders dismantled the entire organisation and told the British that they would never again take up arms against them. The loss of one volunteer is informing. The disappearance of a whole army is inspired leadership.

Jean McConville was supposedly guilty of informing by speaking to a British soldier. Republican leaders have spent years in cosy and highly secret chats with the ultimate commander of all British soldiers, the British prime minister. She found an unmarked grave. They found seats in Stormont.

There was no debate on whether or not these people should have been murdered. There were no party votes, no extraordinary Ard-Fheiseanna, no back-slapping and hugging – just hands tied with electrical wiring, mouths bound with tape and bodies shrouded in bin bags.

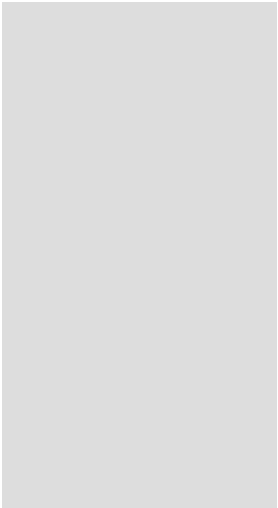
Some died because they allegedly gave information to the police. Now Sinn Féin urges us all to give that same type of information because, they say, the time is right.

The time is right for two reasons, both related to politics rather than policing.

It offers some hope for the tarnished political career of Tony Blair, who has presided over what may be the most corrupt government in modern British history. In return he abolished the Assets Recovery Agency, the one organisation which represented a challenge to Sinn Féin's vast financial resources for forthcoming elections.

The second – and more important reason – is that Sinn Féin now has the opportunity to share power with Ian Paisley. Thus the IRA struggle was not for the freedom of the Irish people or the principles of Irish republicanism – it was for party political power.

Those who were condemned as informers died because a British agent decided that, having tortured them, they were out of line with party political policy at that time.



For the IRA it would appear that in informing, as in politics, timing is everything. Their victims' deaths represent an unresolved part of the conflict and, above all, an appalling human tragedy.

It is time for the Provisional IRA leadership to either apologise for killing them or apologise for being like them.

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