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Quinn debate unites parties in call for IRA disbandment

By William Graham Political Correspondent in Dublin

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STORMONT MOTION: Margaret Ritchie, back to camera, the minister for social development, and SDLP assembly member Dominic Bradley, left, meet Breige and Stephen Quinn, parents of Paul Quinn, who was murdered in south Armagh last October, ahead of a debate at Stormont yesterday in which the murder was condemned PICTURE: Paul Faith

An assembly debate on the brutal murder of south Armagh man Paul Quinn saw the SDLP, DUP, Ulster Unionist and Alliance parties unite last night in calling for the IRA to "go away for good".

The killers of the 21-year-old were described by the UUP as "Mafia monsters".

Sinn Fein, while continuing to deny IRA involvement, condemned the murder as criminal, urged people to cooperate with the police investigation, and said "no-one should seek to hide or shield the murderers of Paul Quinn".

But party assembly members remained silent when challenged by others to intervene in the debate and to publicly state that the victim had not been connected with any criminal activities.

Sinn Fein's Conor Murphy, MP for Newry and Armagh, described the motion before the assembly as divisive and called on people to reflect on "politicizing" taking place around the issue.

"We should not let this deflect from the real task, which is finding the killers of Paul Quinn," Mr Murphy, the minister for regional development, said.

"We should send out a strong message of support for the in-vestigation that is going on."

Mr Murphy left the assembly chamber during the de-bate, prompting criticism by some members, including

Alliance. Mr Quinn's father Stephen later described the minister's early departure as "disgraceful".

Sinn Fein later said Mr Murphy left because of ministerial business.

The assembly passed the motion condemning the murder of Mr Quinn and noting clarification by the British and Irish governments that they do not hold the view the victim was involved in criminality of any kind.

The wording also noted assessments by Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde and the Independent Monitoring Commission "regarding the involvement in this crime of persons who are current or former members of the Provisional IRA".

In addition, the motion, tabled by the SDLP's Dominic Bradley and Alex Attwood, called on everyone "to encourage people to come forward and assist the investigations being carried out by the PSNI and an Garda Síochána".

It was not supported by Sinn Fein but the party did not force a 'division' vote.

Instead the motion was carried when backed by all the other parties in a voice vote.

Introducing the debate, Mr Bradley said he did not think anyone in south Armagh believed that the IRA was not involved in the murder.

"There are those who have said that the murder of Paul Quinn has been politicised and they are right," he said.

"The involvement of members of the IRA in his murder politicised it from the very moment of his death. Paul Quinn's murder poses questions for us all."

He said the time was past for the IRA "to go away and go away for good". Throughout the debate republicans faced demands for the IRA's army council to be disbanded.

There was also a warning from the DUP's Gregory Campbell that if it emerged that members of Sinn Fein were withholding information about the murder it could spark a political crisis.

His party colleague Jeffrey Donaldson said: "As I have said publicly, and my party has stated clearly, if, in the fullness of time it becomes clear and apparent the IRA were involved in this murder, that the IRA were involved in sanctioning this murder, then we will not turn our backs on the consequences of that."

Ulster Unionist Danny Kennedy said he did not know how Sinn Fein could allow the IRA army council to continue in existence if it was serious about its "political project".

"Mr Quinn had committed no crime. Even if he had, the manner of his death was still unacceptable and

disgraceful. It puts his murderers on a par with the Mafia monsters who brutalised their victims," he said.

Alliance's Dr Stephen Farry said: "Four parties are clear in this assembly... Paul Quinn was not a criminal. Only Sinn Fein are maintaining that libel against his character. The only crime here was the murder of Paul Quinn."

Meanwhile, assembly authorities have been asked by the DUP's Mervyn Storey to consider whether Mr Murphy breached his ministerial code by contacting the IRA over the murder of Mr Quinn.

Deputy speaker John Dallat said the query had been noted and he had no doubt that the assembly speaker would report back.