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Informer claim can hurt Sinn Fein

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Allegations that a Sinn Fein Assembly member was a British agent highlight the delicacy of the political situation, writes Colm Heatley in Belfast.

When a Democratic Unionist Party power-sharing sceptic alleged that a Sinn Fein figure was a British agent, his intention was almost certainly to cause difficulties for Sinn Fein.

David Simpson, a gospel-singing hardline unionist, claimed a well-known Sinn Fein man had been acting as an informer to the British since the early 1980s. Simpson claimed the alleged informer had played a role in the murder of Frederick Lutton, a cousin of Simpson.

Lutton, who was killed in May 1979, was an RUC reservist from a well-known unionist family in Moy, Co Tyrone.

Whatever the truth of the claim - and, so far, Simpson has not provided any evidence - the allegation highlights how the North's past still affects its current political progress.

Republicans have accused Simpson of attempting to derail the progress made at the Stormont assembly by making the claim.

They say sceptics such as Simpson, allied with remnants of the Special Branch, are attempting to halt the Sinn Fein political project.

Since Freddie Scappaticci, a former senior figure in the IRA's internal security unit, was outed as a British agent in 2003, the Sinn Fein leadership has been vulnerable to accusations that informers still operate at senior levels within the republican movement.

That feeling was heightened in December 2005 when Denis Donaldson, a senior and well-regarded Sinn Fein member, confessed he had been working as a long-term British agent. Donaldson was found shot dead at a remote house in Donegal in April 2006.

In the wake of the Donaldson affair, more than a dozen republicans, mainly based in Belfast, were named in the media as informers.

However, as in the case of Simpson's allegations, no proof was presented - and many of those named still play an active role within republicanism.

Simpson claims the Sinn Fein figure was recruited as an informer after being found in a compromising sexual position.

Some dissident republicans claim this related to an incident in a caravan the party was using as an election vehicle in Coal Island, Co Tyrone, shortly after the 1981 hunger strikes.

However, no proof has been offered and, unsurprisingly, Sinn Fein has made little comment on the claims. Republicans in the North were last week asking where the evidence was, and the man who Simpson is believed to be referring to said he was taking legal advice about the allegations.

What is known is that over the past two years, republicans have conducted their own inquiries into informers within their ranks across Ireland.

A fortnight ago, the Fox family from Co Tyrone, whose elderly mother and father were killed by loyalists in 1994, called on Sinn Fein to "come clean" on the role of informers within republican ranks.

Past experience of people such as Donaldson and Scappaticci, has taught republicans that nothing can be ruled out but, in the meantime, they are treating the informer claims with some caution.

The wave of hysteria that surrounded Donaldson's outing - and what were perceived as attempts to destabilise republicanism in early 2006 - have bred caution within republican circles about such stories.

Republican leaders have made no official comment on the latest claims. Simpson has refused to comment further on his claims, despite saying that he may name the Sinn Fein member under parliamentary privilege when Westminster re-opens in October.

Sources say Simpson is convinced of the accuracy of his story and is confident that a number of policemen will come forward to support him.





If his allegations are proven, it would be a blow to Sinn Fein, especially in east Tyrone, which was one of the most militant republican areas during the Troubles.

However, the DUP has something of a chequered history when it comes to naming republicans, or those it suspects of being republicans, under parliamentary privilege.

In 1999, DUP leader Ian Paisley named Eugene Reavey as one of the organisers of the 1976 Kingsmill massacre, when ten Protestant workmen were killed by republicans.

Reavey's three brothers had been killed by a UVF gang at their south Armagh home in the same year.

Earlier this year, the Historical Enquiries Team, which was set up to look at unsolved murders, said that Reavey had no connection with Kingsmill, or with republicanism in any form. Reavey asked Paisley to apologise, but the DUP leader has yet to do so.

More recently, Peter Robinson, the DUP deputy leader, alleged under parliamentary privilege that one of the most successful businessmen in the North, Peter Curistan, had links to republicanism.

That allegation was also hotly disputed, and Curistan has taken legal action in the courts to rebut Robinson's claims.

Some sources have pointed to the location of the Lutton murder as a reason why the Sinn Fein member has been implicated, rather than any hard intelligence.

Lutton was killed just a hundred yards from where the Sinn Fein man lived, and he became a prime suspect for the RUC in the follow-up investigation.

Whatever the truth of Simpson's claims, they are sure to poison the political atmosphere when Stormont re-opens in a few weeks' time.

Some observers have suggested that that was Simpson's motive in the whole affair, claiming that he wanted to cause difficulties for the power-sharing government, rather than get to the truth of collusion.

In such a scenario, allegations may be made, even on the flimsiest of evidence. Certainly, Simpson has never fully embraced the reality of power-sharing with Sinn Fein.

Earlier this year, he was seen as a key opponent to the idea of sitting in government with republicans.

While other DUP members, notably Robinson, are keen for power-sharing to run smoothly and want to get down to the business of government, Simpson has been, at best, lukewarm about the new political arrangements.

It is also claimed that Simpson has a close relationship with former members of the security forces, many of whom are opposed to Sinn Fein being in government.

If Simpson's claims prove to be unfounded - as with Paisley's allegations against Reavey - the whole episode may say more about the internal state of the DUP, and the opposition to power-sharing within sections of the party, than it does about Sinn Fein. In a wider sense, the allegations are proof that the "dirty war" waged in the North is not yet over.

Many people believe British collusion with loyalists was widespread and systematic. For many nationalists, especially the families directly affected by alleged state collusion, getting to the truth of the matter is a top priority.

At a rally in Belfast a fortnight ago, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams said the state's role in collusion must be brought into the open and admitted some republicans acted as agents for the state.

There is a growing feeling among nationalists that getting to the truth of the matter may involve washing some of the republican movement's dirty linen in public.

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