

News Letter

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McGuinness challenged over IRA membership



Press Eye Ltd Northern Ireland - 19th September 2011 Mandatory Credit - Photo-Jonathan Porter/Presseye. Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness to temporarily step down as Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly and run as a Irish Presidential candidate with party colleague and education Minister John O'Dowd to take his place. Left to right. Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness and John O'Dowd pictured in the Great Hall at Parliament Buildings, Stormont.

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A RETIRED senior PSNI officer has expressed scepticism about Martin McGuinness's claims to have left the IRA by 1990 – and intelligence from the Irish and US governments strongly supports his case.

Critics believe Mr McGuinness is trying to distance himself from the IRA as he runs for the position of Irish president, a campaign his party gave official backing to on Sunday. However, retired PSNI detective chief superintendent Norman Baxter yesterday affirmed the

view of Irish justice minister Michael McDowell when he said Mr McGuinness was a senior IRA figure in 2004 when the provisionals robbed the Northern Bank of £26.5m.

However, Mr McGuinness claimed yesterday that he had left the provisionals by 1990, when the IRA in his home city of Londonderry used Catholic civilian Patsy Gillespie as a human bomb. Speaking on Good Morning Ulster yesterday, Mr McGuinness said he had no inside knowledge of the attack. He then refused to say when he left the IRA.

Mr Baxter, the man who led the investigation into the Omagh bomb, yesterday affirmed claims that Mr McGuinness was still an IRA chief in 2005 - long after the Sinn Fein chief claims to have left the terror group.

Speaking to the News Letter, Mr Baxter noted Irish justice minister Michael McDowell's assertion that Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were members of the IRA army council when the Northern Bank robbery took place.

In response to a question in 2005 about who was on the IRA army council, Mr McDowell said: "We're talking about a small group of people, including a number of elected representatives, who run the whole [republican] movement.

"We're talking about Martin McGuinness, Gerry Adams, Martin Ferris and others."

Yesterday, Mr Baxter said: "Michael McDowell would have had in-depth briefings from the Garda on the composition of the IRA army council in 2005. He therefore was speaking with authority and knowledge on this subject."

Mr Baxter added: "I am unaware of any information held by the police service in Northern Ireland which would have contradicted this opinion. In my personal opinion, Michael McDowell is a more reliable individual than Mr McGuinness on this subject."

Leaks from official US government diplomatic cables in 2010, during the 'wikileaks' scandal, appeared to show that America also accepted Mr McGuinness was a senior IRA figure long after 1990.

In a cable two months after the 2004 Northern Bank robbery, US ambassador to Dublin James Kenny said that an official in the department of justice told him "that the GOI [government of Ireland] does have 'rock solid evidence' that Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are members of the IRA military command and for that reason, the taoiseach is certain they would have known in advance of the robbery".

Six months after the robbery, the ambassador reported that Bertie Ahern had raised his concerns with Mitchell Reiss, the US envoy to Ireland. The cable said: "The taoiseach...believes Sinn Fein leaders were aware of plans to rob the Northern Bank even as they negotiated with him last fall. Publicly, he has been unprecedently critical of Sinn Fein and, until recently, greatly reduced private contacts as well."

In December 2010, Irish minister for justice Dermot Ahern affirmed that the wikileak accurately reflected the Irish government's assessment.

"That was the government's view at that time, yes." he said. Asked whether the position had changed, he replied "No."

He added: "I can't go into the specifics but obviously governments are aware from intelligence into these issues."

Sinn Fein rejected the cable allegations in a national paper last year.

"There is not a shred of evidence that has ever linked the IRA to the Northern Bank robbery,"

it said.

Yesterday, Mr McGuinness insisted that Irish voters will not focus on his IRA past in the Irish presidential contest, and will instead judge him on his record as a peacemaker.

"The reality is that people know my past," he said.

"I have put myself before the electorate on countless occasions since 1982 and particularly since 1997 when I was first elected as MP for Mid Ulster. I have answered all these questions in the past, I have no concerns about going into this election."

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