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Mick Fealty: Time for the IRA to catch up

Time for the IRA to catch up

Witnesses in the Robert McCartney murder case were too scared to testify. Has the peace process in Northern Ireland really filtered down to ground level?

[Mick Fealty](#)
guardian.co.uk, Wednesday July 2, 2008

All three of those accused of the Robert McCartney murder have been acquitted. The dead man's sister Catherine [noted](#):

We hadn't got very high expectations. As a layperson sitting in that court listening to the evidence we have heard, would I have put someone away on that evidence? No. I wouldn't have so I can't expect the judge to do so.

Back in 2005, Sinn Féin invited all the sisters and McCartney's girlfriend to its annual conference. Gerry Adams, party president [spoke](#) about the dreadful nature of the crime, but then went on to qualify these remarks a few moments later by underwriting the extralegal political purposes of the IRA:

We know what a crime is both in the moral and legal sense, and our view is the same as the majority of people. We know that breaking the law is a crime. But we refuse to criminalise those who break the law in pursuit of legitimate political objectives.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, and despite a huge number of pious messages from both the IRA and Sinn Féin, the only witnesses to take the stand were two survivors of the attack, and a woman driver (witness C) who was simply passing by. Witnesses A and B [refused to testify](#) because even the anonymity being offered by the court was not enough to make them feel safe enough to do so.

No one – neither current nor former members – from the republican movement (including the defendants) took the witness stand. Party self interest came before the more general interests of justice.

Robert McCartney's murder was short, brutal and entirely without any political cause. Yet, since it had been carried out by an "off duty" IRA team, it caused Sinn Féin huge political embarrassment. It also pointed to a wider problem within so-called republican communities which the party had. At the time, [Brendan O'Neill](#), writing on Spiked, observed:

In an attempt to rein the crisis in, Adams seems willing even to upset his colleagues in the IRA by taking a hard line over criminality and the McCartney murder. But where he and the IRA might succeed in resolving the McCartney affair and appeasing the grieving McCartney family, they can do little to stem the wider moral disintegration of republican communities in Northern Ireland. The McCartney murder acted as a catalyst for a deeper malaise within post-republican republican communities.

Three years later – and just over a year since the party finally recognised the police – even people firmly lodged within the "green zone" of Martin McGuinness's own movement are becoming victims. Three men in the last few months have been killed in Belfast and Derry, the latest being 23-year-old Emmet Sheils. The grief of his father and mother is as palpable as that of the McCartney sisters.

McGuinness has [told the killers](#) that they don't have a mandate for what they are doing; that they have come to a fork in the road, and it is now time to decide whether they are for a peaceful future, or not. But there is no reference to McGuinness's own problematic journey from gunman to junior statesman.

In its recent campaign to have powers of oversight on policing and justice devolved to Stormont, Sinn Féin has, rather belatedly, been lauding the ways of civil policing and the criminal justice system. Their partners in government, the Democratic Unionist party, don't believe that there is sufficient confidence in their own community, but have signalled a willingness to find an interim solution that will help build that confidence. If it bears fruit, we are not likely to know much before the end of the summer.

From the beginning, the peace process was a behaviourist project. It was never as interested in genuine changes of hearts and minds, as it was in outward behaviours. Moral consciousness and other forms of introspection were of little interest – and possibly of little practical use – to a society conditioned to profoundly self-harming behaviour.

Sinn Féin is now determined on stabilising the peace. But it needs to find a way of acquiring new habits of mind to go with its new political status. And it will need to find ways of serving the general will, rather than its own narrow, party-political self interest.

But, as Aristotle noted, it is often difficult for an individual to become virtuous if he or she has not acquired the habit of acting virtuously. The same may be said for political parties. Sinn Féin, reconciled at long last to a peaceful pursuit of its long term goal of a united Ireland, has, it seems, still to learn the power of the virtuous act.

And that may yet prove the movement's long-term undoing.

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