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Murder doesn't suddenly become legitimate simply because one-fifth of the electorate turns a blind eye

Malachi O'Doherty, Belfast Telegraph February 11th, 2020.



The killing of Paul Quinn asks entirely reasonable questions of Sinn Fein's fitness to govern, argues Malachi O'Doherty

Sinn Fein supporters are in cheery form this week because of their astonishing performance in the southern election. And some of them are in smug form, too, delighted by the failure of what they saw as a strategy to damage the party.

That is how they represent the discussion last week about the murder of Paul Quinn and the Finance Minister Conor Murphy's past maligning of him as a criminal.

Even on Monday, callers to the Nolan Show (the biggest programme in the province) accused Stephen of trying and failing to influence an election by interviewing the bereaved parents of Paul Quinn on his radio and television shows. This annoyed them, yet it had no apparent impact on the result.

For, despite the revival of the story about Paul Quinn and the shaming of Conor Murphy, Sinn Fein's vote measured up to what the polls had anticipated. If there was villainy to be remarked on it was, apparently, the media coverage of the story, not Conor Murphy's comments.

These callers and commentators were forgetting who it was that had revived the story in the first place. Who was it that had brought the issue to life? One was Mairia Cahill, who had written about it. But lift-off was achieved by Mary Lou McDonald herself, assisted by Conor Murphy.

If Conor Murphy had not misled his own party leader, whether intentionally or not, about what he had once said in a broadcast about Paul Quinn, she would have been better equipped to field questions and dampen the story down.

But Murphy had told her he had not said what he was accused of saying and she walked exposed into a party leaders's debate, where she would have the denied statement quoted to her.

A party leader, humbled in such a way in an election debate, is a legitimate story in anybody's reckoning.

In observing that the party was not damaged by the humiliation of Mary Lou McDonald, by the presumed inadvertent deception of Conor Murphy, the commentators were pointing to a new development.

No longer, some were saying, will it be possible to hurt Sinn Fein simply by raking up the past and reminding voters of how the party has endorsed, excused and even commemorated murder.

You can now cast up against them the lies told about the bombings of Claudy and Birmingham, the excusing of hundreds of kneecappings, the annual tributes to murderous "martyrs" and you'll have no impact at all on election results.

And that, for Sinn Fein, is progress. They are understandably glad of that.

But murder isn't made legitimate, or moral, just by the blinkered ignorance of a section - about a fifth - of the electorate. So, what point are these tweeters making?

Well, some of them profess to be coming to the defence of victims who, they claim, were ill-used for political motives. It hardly mattered to them that the Quinn family had been happy with the coverage.



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Some said that those who had brought up the story of Paul Quinn's murder were not interested in victims, had shown no previous record of concern for victims, which is slander against journalists and politicians and others who have spoken many times about the need for consideration for those who suffered during the Troubles.

Tweeters claimed that the only reason people were concerned about Paul Quinn and his family last week was because there was an election on.

Yet, one had only to watch the Nolan Show and the interview with Paul Quinn's parents to see the shocked and appalled expressions of people in the audience. Their emotional response was genuine.

The cynical ones in this argument are those who accuse the friends and supporters of the Quinn family of interference in an election.

And when you consider that this accusation comes in defence of the party of Conor Murphy, the party which maligned Paul Quinn and which for decades has been the apologist, endorser and commemorator of the IRA, then it isn't hard to see who benefits from the lie.

What those commentators at the weekend were marvelling at was that the electorate - or a fifth of it - has absolved Sinn Fein of any need to be answerable for the atrocities it defended and which many of its senior members participated in. That is indeed a marvel.

It is good news for Sinn Fein. But there is no decency in being glad of it. Then take the argument that people were only attacking Sinn Fein because there was an election on. For one thing, it is not true, since Micheal Martin and Leo Varadkar had attacked Sinn Fein many times. As had the media.

But what do these people think an election is for? It is a contest in which political parties compete for votes; in which they try to damage the reputations of their rivals and promote their own. And in which the media gathers round to monitor and debate the issues.

Sinn Fein and its defenders seem to think that dragging up the fact that the party has maligned murder victims and commemorated killers is somehow playing dirty.

They seem to be saying that they want elections to be governed by a new understanding, that reminding the public of Sinn Fein's endorsement of - and organic links to - the IRA is improper, not playing fair.

This is the argument of political wimps, though it sounds very clever the first time you hear it.

Yet, maybe even in that there is some intimation for progress. For implied in that wimping is an understanding that the past was, indeed, shameful.

They are only glad it doesn't seem to hurt them anymore, because it has long had the potential to.

They wouldn't have wanted atrocities excluded from debate if they didn't fear being damaged by blame.

Well, maybe now that they think they are not damaged by reminders of the past, they will feel more free to be honest about it. But that would be a lot to hope for.

Sinn Fein could have come out fighting and defended the maligning of Paul Quinn - citing that old expert, the dogs in the street.

It could have included more emphatically in its campaign its assertion that the IRA was a noble and dignified force, serving the people in the most self-sacrificing way. Thankfully, it didn't.

My fear is that they are saving that bit for when they hold office, that one day Tanaiste McDonald will receive the army council at Leinster House and bestow the gratitude of a humble nation on those gnarled and bitter men.