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McGuinness: there was no need for Bloody Sunday inquiry

Sinn Féin regarded Bloody Sunday inquiry as not necessary, says Blair's former chief of staff

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- [Nicholas Watt](#), chief political correspondent

[The Guardian](#), Wednesday March 19 2008

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The most expensive judicial inquiry in British history - to establish why paratroopers shot dead 13 unarmed protesters in Derry on Bloody Sunday in 1972 - is privately regarded by Sinn Féin as an unnecessary concession by the British government, according to Tony Blair's former chief of staff.

In remarks that were described last night by unionists as "astonishing", Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness is quoted by Jonathan Powell as saying he could not understand why Britain set up the tribunal in 1998.

In his memoirs, serialised in the Guardian this week, Powell writes: "The inquiry ... has failed to give satisfaction to either side. The nadir for me was when Martin McGuinness said to me in a private conversation some years later that he didn't know why we had done it: he thought an apology would have been quite sufficient."

The remarks by McGuinness were met last night with disbelief by unionists who have long been angered by the inquiry, which has yet to report and has so far cost £181.2m. The legal marathon began in April 1998, and heard evidence from the last of 922 witnesses in January 2005.

Lord Trimble, the Ulster Unionist leader when the inquiry was established, told the Guardian: "I can remember repeatedly urging Blair not to go down the road to setting up that inquiry and indeed similar inquiries. That was done over a period of time, so I am astonished that we have that comment from Martin McGuinness."

The remarks by McGuinness, Northern Ireland's deputy first minister, who told the Bloody Sunday inquiry in 2001 that he was the IRA's second in

command on the day of the shootings, may also surprise nationalists. Senior figures agitated for a quarter of a century for a proper judicial inquiry to be held into Bloody Sunday.

Powell writes that he and Blair were deeply sceptical about an inquiry, though he decided to go ahead after reading the report in 1972 by Lord Widgery, the then lord chief justice for England and Wales. Powell describes the Widgery report as a "complete and utter whitewash".

Days after Blair announced the inquiry on January 29 1998, Powell had doubts. "I wrote in my diary that we had not thought the issue through enough. Sinn Féin were pushing for the soldiers to be punished even before the inquiry had started.

"The aim had been to demonstrate to nationalists and republicans that we were even-handed and that the British government no longer had anything to hide."

In the final extracts from his memoirs, *Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland*, Powell also confirms that relations between Blair and Peter Mandelson became strained when the former prime minister appointed his old friend as Northern Ireland secretary in 1999. Powell writes: "Tony [became] increasingly fed up with Peter, saying he was trying to appeal to the Prince Charles-Daily Telegraph element in what he was doing in Northern Ireland ... He commented on how pompous Peter had become."

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