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IRA did not offer to shoot killers of Robert McCartney

Suzanne Breen

Provisional IRA's claim that McCartney family declined an offer to punish his killers is 'pure fiction', say Robert's sisters

The Provisional IRA never offered to shoot those directly involved in the murder of Robert McCartney, the McCartney sisters have told the Sunday Tribune.



Graffiti condemning the IRA began appearing in the nationalist Short Strand area after the murder Pa

The claim was made in a statement by the IRA in March 2005 and has been widely reported in the media, including in recent days, as fact. The IRA claimed the family rejected its offer.

However, Catherine McCartney said: "The IRA never made such an offer. We always wanted Robert's killers to face punishment through the courts, but this offer never existed in the first place. It's pure fiction."

It was just one of the many examples of the IRA and Sinn Féin spinning the story in an attempt at damage limitation following the murder, which Sinn Féin initially attempted to portray as the result of a bar-room brawl.

In terms of minimising the electoral repercussions for the party, Sinn Féin's tactics appeared to have worked, in the North anyway. It suffered minimum short-term electoral damage, losing a council seat in the Short Strand area of east Belfast and failing to make gains in south Belfast.

The effect in other parts of the city, and across the North generally, was negligible. In the Republic, however, the killing damaged Sinn Féin's credibility considerably as it sought to widen its support base.

The party was particularly concerned about the effect publicity surrounding the murder would have in the US where the McCartney sisters embarked on a high-profile visit, meeting President Bush.

The British government and unionists used the murder – which followed on the Northern Bank robbery – to exert pressure on Sinn Féin to sign up to policing and on the IRA to decommission. Ultimately, this strengthened the hand of

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Gerry Adams and those in the leadership who wished to cement Sinn Féin further into the peace process.

While Sinn Féin publicly supported the sisters' campaign for justice, Catherine McCartney said it privately worked to undermine them. On the ground, there was a widespread whispering campaign to demonise the sisters. They were alternatively presented as SDLP stooges or dissident republicans.

Paula McCartney said she handed Gerry Adams the names of six alleged suspects in the murder. She said he insisted he didn't know any of them but a photograph of the Sinn Féin president with one of the men was published in a newspaper the following week.

The IRA claimed to have expelled a high-ranking member, along with two other volunteers, over events on the night of the murder, but this man was later seen in the company of high-ranking Provisionals and is still well regarded in those ranks. The sisters do not believe he was ever expelled.

Sinn Féin and the IRA stated that witnesses were not being intimidated and were free to give evidence about the murder. The litmus test was whether or not anyone with vital evidence came forward after these statements: they did not. On the ground, there was still ongoing intimidation.

Robert McCartney's two friends, Ed Gowdy and Brendan Devine, both told the court they'd met the IRA several times after the murder. Between them, they had around eight meetings with the paramilitary organisation.

"If the IRA was simply advising these men to tell the truth about Robert's murder, as they have said, why did it need to meet them so many times?" asked Catherine McCartney. "If the IRA's only motive was to reassure these men that they should give an honest account of events, I cannot understand the need for more than one, or at most two, meetings."

June 29, 2008

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