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## **PRESS WATCH - Fresh evidence from the archives: When did Martin McGuinness actually leave the PIRA?**

**A previously unseen archival document compiled on behalf of the Conservative Party Northern Ireland Committee, dated 3 July 1975, and located in the Julian Amery Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge, reveals that despite Martin McGuinness's repeated assurances that he left the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in 1974, senior members of the British Conservative Party and British Army believed that McGuinness was still a prominent 'I.R.A. leader' in Derry by the summer of 1975, to quote the aforementioned memorandum, writes Dr Stephen Kelly on Slugger O'Toole.**

McGuinness's decision in January of this year to retire from active politics, due to health issues, has witnessed a plethora of journalists,

politicians and historians, fall over one another to assess McGuinness legacy.

From PIRA commander on the streets of Derry during the early 1970s to deputy first-minister of Northern Ireland from 2007 to 2017, McGuinness's transition from Republican terrorist to respected (and in many quarters admired) politician is extraordinary.

Yet, in the rush to applaud McGuinness's transition from terrorist to peacemaker one niggling question remains answered: precisely when did McGuinness officially leave the PIRA? Despite McGuinness's insistence that he left the movement in 1974, this claim has long been disputed by some of his former Republican comrades, who allege that he rose up the organisation's ranks to become the PIRAs' chief of staff in the late 1970s (1).

McGuinness joined the Official IRA, first, when the Troubles erupted in his native city of Derry in the summer of 1969. But when the movement failed to take decisive action against the British Army and police force, he jumped ship to the then embryonic PIRA. Following the disastrous British government policy of internment in 1971 the fortunes of the PIRA were transformed. The

Derry PIRA quickly took over the Official IRA in size and capacity for violence (2).

In 2001, during the Saville Inquiry into the Bloody Sunday killings of January 1972, McGuinness admitted that he was second in command of the Derry PIRA during the early 1970s (3). In recognition of his growing status and influence with the PIRA, in July 1972, alongside Gerry Adams and Ivor Bell, McGuinness held secret talks regarding a possible PIRA ceasefire with secretary of state for Northern Ireland William Whitelaw.

The following year, in 1973, McGuinness was arrested in a car carrying 113kg of explosives. He was convicted at the Special Criminal Court in Dublin, which sentenced him to six months. McGuinness was rearrested in 1974, charged with PIRA membership, convicted and once more imprisoned (4). These facts are already well known.

However, can we believe McGuinness when he continually informs us that he left the PIRA in 1974; an assertion that he repeatedly made during Ireland's Presidential Campaign of 2011, in which he unsuccessfully stood as a Sinn Féin candidate.

If we are to believe the testimonies of Airey Neave and John Biggs-Davison there is compelling new evidence to suggest, at the very least, that McGuinness was a leading figure within the PIRA up to and including the summer of 1975.

During this period Neave, Conservative MP for Abingdon and Biggs-Davison, Conservative MP Epping Forest, were Margaret Thatcher's most trusted confidants in relation to the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy.

By the standards of day Neave was a remarkable figure. On the one hand, he was a public figure: writer, barrister and politician. He was the author of five semi-autobiographical books; established a practice at the bar; and was Conservative MP for Abington from 1953 to 1979.

On the other hand, however, he was an elusive and secretive individual. During the Second World War he was recruited by MI9, a subsidiary of MI6, to work for the British Secret Intelligence Service. After the war had ended in Europe he joined the British War Crimes Executive to collect evidence against prominent Nazis and served the indictments on Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg (5).

Following Thatcher's election as Conservative Party leader, in February 1975, on his own request, Neave was appointed shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland; Neave had helped to mastermind Thatcher's bid for the Conservative Party leadership acting as her campaign manager. As a result of his hard-line stance on Northern Ireland, on 30 March 1979, Neave was assassinated by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

Biggs-Davison was Neave's deputy shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland from 1976 to 1978. A right-wing Conservative, he also served as chairman of the Conservative party's parliamentary Northern Ireland committee and was a member of the Foreign Affairs Research Institute. Described by Patrick Cosgrave as 'an argumentative and committed Catholic Ulster Unionist' he had an Ulster Presbyterian background (6).

In the summer of 1975 Neave and Biggs-Davison went on a fact-finding mission to Northern Ireland. At this time, they were charged by Thatcher with re-examining the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy.

Following the failure of the Northern Ireland Convention to reinstate some form of devolved

government in Northern Ireland (this followed the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in 1974) Neave was determined to breathe new life into Northern Ireland politics in the hope of ending Direct Rule from London.

More importantly for Neave, however, was his determination to defeat Republican terrorism, and in particular to smash the PIRA.

According to the aforementioned memorandum prepared by the Conservative Research Department, under the sub-heading 'Londonderry visit', Neave and Biggs-Davison 'reported on their visit to Londonderry', where they visited the British Army stationed in the vicinity of the Bogside (Republican enclave and McGuinness's homestead).

The British Army was reportedly 'concerned about the continued release of detainees but the situation in Londonderry was quiet and regular contact between Army officers and Martin Maguinness [sic], the I. R. A. leader was being maintained on a daily basis' (7).

Here, in black and white, British Army intelligence confirmed what many have previously already believed: Martin McGuinness did not cut his ties with the PIRA in 1974, as he previously maintained. In fact, if we are to

believe Ed Moloney, in 1977 McGuinness was made the first northern commander of the PIRA, rising to the post of chief of staff of the movement in 1978, following Gerry Adams's arrest. Thus, in the words of Moloney, 'Only eight years after joining the [P]IRA', McGuinness was its leader (8).

McGuinness, himself, speaking in 2010, admitted that if new evidence came to light that he was an active member of the PIRA beyond 1974, this might '... leave him open to prosecution ...', as it would go against what he told the Saville Inquiry during the early 2000s (9).

What this new archival information demonstrates, above everything else, is that we should not take McGuinness at his word when assessing his involvement with the PIRA. At a time when we speak of 'alternative facts' in the light of Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States, it is imperative that we do not allow McGuinness and his Sinn Féin comrades to write their own version of the past.

The mentioned archival file is available from the University of Cambridge, Churchill Archives Centre, Julian Amery Papers 2/1/73, file 2 of 3.

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Footnotes:

1. See *The Guardian*, 19 Jan. 2016.
2. See *Irish Times*. Ed Moloney, ‘Martin McGuinness: past and presidency’, 24 Sept. 2011.
3. <http://www.rte.ie/news/2001/0502/14789-bloodysunday/> (retrieved, 22 Feb. 2016).
4. See *Irish Times*. Ed Moloney, ‘Martin McGuinness: past and presidency’, 24 Sept. 2011.
5. For biographical information on Airey Neave see Brian Harrison’s entry, ‘Airey Neave’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Available from [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31488](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31488).
6. See Patrick Cosgrave’s entry, ‘Sir John Biggs-Davison’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Available from [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/70374](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/70374).
7. Record of Conservative Party Northern Ireland committee meeting, 3 July 1975.



Church Archives Centre (CAC) University of  
Cambridge (UC) Julian Amery Papers  
(AMEJ) 2/1/73, file 2 of 3.

8. See *Irish Times*. Ed Moloney, 'Martin McGuinness: past and presidency', 24 Sept. 2011.
9. Quoted in *Irish Times*, 20 Sept. 2011.

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