



## Comment

### After the Adams arrest what do we know and what has changed?

**Mick Fealty writing on the Slugger O'Toole web site examines the implications for people on both sides of the Irish border.**

So after four days of being questioned in thirty three taped interviews, Gerry Adams emerged, if not exactly blinking into the light yesterday, then clearly very happy to be back amongst his own activists. As, it must be said, they were to have him back.

For a party that twenty years ago was probably the most resilient of any political movement on these islands, Sinn Fein looked strangely lost without Adams' steady hand at the tiller.

In retrospect, the decision to arrest rather than *interview under caution*, which would have given the Sinn Fein leader discretion to break off when it suited his purposes rather than the PSNI's, seemed to take Sinn Fein completely unawares.

What followed looked like something short of an emotional meltdown. Conor Humphries of Reuters [noted](#) the contrast in tone:

After Sinn Fein pointed the finger at "dark forces" in the police service and their Protestant partners in government accused it of a "thuggish attempt" at blackmail, a calm Adams toned down the rhetoric and said he supported the police.

**Where does it leave us, and what does it tell us?**

*One*, the extent and degree of difficulty raised by Sinn Fein's legacy issues from the past leave them a very long way from any easy transition from Adams's leadership to the successor generation.

*Two*, [as noted by Jon Tonge](#), this is a problem postponed rather than resolved. The DPP may yet bring charges, or they may not. It might refuse on the grounds of insufficient evidence or public interest [as the Secretary of State already has in another prominent case](#).

*Three*, the main politics involved relate to [promises made by Sinn Fein to its own activists](#) back in early 2007 on the nature of its relations with the PSNI. The internal shock arises from the public proof of the party's quite proper lack of operational control.

*Four*, [Mr Justice Sweeney's revelation of 'letters of comfort'](#) gave rise to the *perception* that Sinn Fein had been accorded privileges not widely available to others. Being seen to be anything less than rigorous with Mr Adams was probably not an option for the PSNI.

*Five*, having chosen constitutional politics, Sinn Fein realistically has nowhere else it can go. All roads lead back to Stormont Castle and its tetchy and slowly deteriorating relationship with First Minister Peter Robinson and the DUP.

If [Martin McGuinness's 'dark side' narrative](#) has its roots in anything real these days it is in the deal Sinn Fein struck with the state for peace. Unable to agree an amnesty the party's past has become increasingly difficult to manage for both Sinn Fein and the British.

Any 'interference' more likely amounts to the state's refusal to prevent the Adams arrest than any direct connivance in it.

Robinson [warned Sinn Fein yesterday that it had crossed a line](#), and that whilst "what we need in these circumstances is leadership – it is patently absent in the republican movement".

As Mr Adams noted in his remarks to the press in Irish it is the McConville family that is 'at the heart of this process'. He also [noted](#) quite rightly that "largely speaking the victims of the conflict have been the strongest supporters of the peace process".

This is very true. Most have been tending their wounds silently as a willing price for a peace that has changed the lives of a whole generation. But in this regard Sinn Fein and Mr Adams have been [careless of the good grace consistently shown them by these victims](#).

In the old vernacular, [an awful lot of political delph has been broken](#) in the last few days. Going forward, [taking the rest of us for eejits as Bertie Ahern once put it](#) *should not* be an option.

### **And what happens next?**

This issue of any possible charges arising will be long fingered with the local PPS until after the election. Sinn Fein therefore will want to waste no time in doubling down on its local and European election campaigns north and the south.

Their strongest suit is probably the weakness of their main rivals to power.

In the north the SDLP's greatest achievement has been to manage its own decline, but has failed thus far to make a successful pitch for the vote it lost to Sinn Fein between 1998 and 2007 Assembly elections.

In the south according to some polls, the Irish Labour Party may be sitting on as a little as a quarter of the actual vote it got just three years ago in the last general election. There are a lot of votes and seats up for grabs, particularly in Dublin.

It's those non traditional Sinn Fein floating voters that may be affected by this episode. Key to the party's attraction has been [the considerable communicative talents](#) of deputy leader Mary Lou McDonald who has spearheaded their anti austerity pitch to great effect.

But as the Irish Times columnist and former Fianna Fail special advisor [notes](#):

Since Wednesday night, McDonald has had to go on media and use 1980s rhetoric about how the arrest of her party president was politically motivated. She was also required to say again and again that she believes Adams was never in the IRA.

Each time she parrots this incredible line from Adams, another piece of the credibility and standing which she has acquired cross-examining overpaid charity executives and challenging incommunicative bankers seeps away.

In the south it is the distraction from the party's live agenda and its credibility which is likely to affect voters more than concern for the intricacies of Northern Ireland's far away past, which is experienced more as the tragic tale of [a mad old uncle banging round the attic](#).

The abiding presence of Adams on the legislative floor of the Republic's parliament makes the gap between Sinn Fein's version of the truth and what actually happened increasingly difficult to hide from southern voters.

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