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Was MI6 behind the Brighton bomb?

If you think so, you presumably also believe the Martin-McGuinness-as-British-spy theory

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A few months ago such a thesis would and could be dismissed as even too fantastical for the plot of a James Bond movie. It would be like saying that the Rev Ian Paisley had, despite the fire and brimstone, secretly all along been an agent of the Papacy.

But times are changing in Northern Ireland. After hanging up their guns Irish republicans have turned to their second favourite activity — poring over the past to unmask alleged traitors. Irish republicans are second only to the Lebanese in their fervent belief in conspiracy theories, fiendish British plots and the ever-present Judas within their own ranks. And just because the Shinnars are paranoid it does not mean they are wrong.

As we have discovered the British state did indeed have an amazing array of agents within the Provisional's hierarchy including Freddie Scappattici, the IRA's chief interrogator and Witchfinder-General, and Denis Donaldson, the alleged Sinn Fein spy at Stormont who turned out to be a British spy instead. But could such betrayal actually include someone like McGuinness, a man who to his followers *is* the IRA?

For three decades McGuinness, who rose from the ranks of the 1969 Bogside rioters, has along with Gerry Adams been the *primus inter pares* in the tiny, hermetic elite that has ruled the Provisionals. From 1976 he was the IRA's director of operations in its Northern Command — the bit of the IRA that did all the bombings and killings in Northern Ireland. And from 1978 to 1982 he was the IRA's Chief of Staff — the most important single post in the republican organisation.

In the 1990s McGuinness was the man Michael Oatley, the MI6 European counter-terrorism chief, approached to negotiate secretly the end of our Irish war. McGuinness was the only man, MI6 believed, who had the power to get the gunmen to cease their terrorist onslaught.

McGuinness has devoted his entire life to the destruction of the British state in Ireland. Could this all really be a lie? The allegations of his alleged MI6 role broke in the Irish newspapers last weekend in a farrago of murky documents, competitive journalism and hidden, suspect motives by embittered former agents. Allegedly a document has surfaced that "proves" McGuinness took instructions about the bombing of checkpoints from his MI6 handler.

In reality the document does nothing of the kind. All good plots, from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion to the Hitler Diaries, always revolve around "documents" that subsequently turn out to be patent forgeries. The only important thing is that enough people at the time believe in the document long enough for the presses to roll. And once the lie has been printed, then, in the world of the conspiracy theorist, it must be true.

McGuinness did himself few favours by calling a press conference to deny the rumours as "hooey". As we all now know from similar "denial" media events, be they staged by the police or new Labour, the only sure outcome is that those on the platform protesting their innocence will be arrested or thrown out of office the following week. It is one of the iron rules of our media age — all formal denials merely act to confirm the validity of the original allegation.

So where does this all leave us? For the paranoid Provo prosecutor the case against McGuinness could soon become compelling. Despite all his years of IRA activity McGuinness has only ever served one short term of imprisonment. In Derry, despite living within sniper range of the local RUC barracks, McGuinness travelled freely without bodyguards in an ordinary family saloon.

One alleged assassination attempt by the notorious loyalist killer Michael Stone was foiled when mysteriously McGuinness failed to show up at his normal newsagent on the appointed day. That McGuinness had contact with Oatley of MI6 is ipso facto damning evidence. McGuinness must have been protected by somebody. Ergo, MI6. He must have been their agent all along.

It does make a wonderful conspiracy and it might be even more plausible after a couple of glasses of Guinness but I doubt if it's true.

In the Troubles, where almost everything on the surface was a lie or a deception, the only hard certainties are the bullets, the bombs and the dead bodies left in the ditch. In the summer of 1984 Patrick Magee, a veteran bomber, acting on the orders of the IRA's Army Council, really did plant a bomb behind the bath panel of room 621 of the Grand Hotel. When that bomb exploded six weeks later it very, very nearly killed Margaret Thatcher and most of her Cabinet.

If McGuinness had been an MI6 agent then MI6 must have known about the Brighton bomb and then allowed the potential decapitation of the British Government to go ahead. Therefore MI6 was really behind the Brighton bomb. Instead of being plausible the thesis that McGuinness was a MI6 agent becomes nonsensical.

Is the Pope a Catholic? And is Martin McGuinness an enemy, not an agent, of the British state? The answer to both questions is the same.

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