

Letter to *The Belfast Telegraph*

July 31st 2011

Dear Sir,

The criticism by the Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of the PSNI investigation into the killing of Constable Ronan Kerr drew a strident rebuke from the PSNI and many unionist politicians. In declaring his belief in the innocence of one of those arrested, Mr McGuinness may have strayed outside his remit but his involvement was, I believe, for altruistic reasons, was not self-serving, did not put at risk any person's safety or impugn any innocent person's reputation. Also, Mr McGuinness did not use the 'coward's charter' of using parliamentary privilege, unlike the current First Minister Peter Robinson, former First Minister Rev Ian Paisley, Jeffery Donaldson MP and an assortment of other unionist MPs in both the British House of Commons and House of Lords.

In 1999, Dr Ian Paisley, in his capacity as First Minister and under parliamentary privilege, named people who, he believed, were responsible for the Kingsmill killings of ten Protestant workmen. Following a police investigation into these allegations, they were found to be untrue. Dr Paisley refused to retract those allegations. In 2000, Jeffery Donaldson MP, again under parliamentary privilege, named a member of the Garda as being involved in the passing of information to the IRA, which led to the killings of RUC members Bob Buchanan and Harry Breen. These allegations have been vehemently denied and are currently the subject of the Smithwick tribunal. When asked to repeat these allegations outside parliament Mr Donaldson declined.

In the British House of Lords on several occasions, John Laird, former unionist MP, launched outrageous character attacks on many people from both sides of the border, again under the protection of privilege. If these slurs were to be repeated outside Parliament, they would be subject to libel action. The protection of the British Parliament extends as much to members who are aware what they say is untrue as the member who acts ethically, honestly and responsibly.

In 1989, and again under parliamentary privilege, then UK Minister for Agriculture Douglas Hogg MP said: "I have to state as a fact, but with great regret, that there are in Northern Ireland a number of solicitors who are unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA" - during a debate on the Prevention of Terrorism legislation in the British House of Commons. Within weeks, solicitor Pat Finucane was murdered. Rosemary Nelson would follow. That these members of legislatures pay scant regard for people's reputation, integrity, privacy and safety, is an affront to both democracy and the presumption of innocence.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Cooper

Cathaoirleach

Irish National Congress