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1986 secret files reveal future SDLP leader Alasdair McDonnell passed on intelligence about loyalist arms importation

3-4 minutes



Dr Alasdair McDonnell, in 1989

The files have been made available to the public from Ireland's national archives, via the Ulster University CAIN project (Conflict Archive on the Internet).

The future MP and SDLP leader, based in south Belfast, had been given information "from a reliable source" according to the declassified document, written by Irish government official Liam Canniffe (who later went on to head up Ireland's embassy in west Africa).

The document refers to Dr McDonnell incorrectly as "Allister" rather than "Alasdair".

It says that “a loyalist source” (who is unnamed) “said in the past weeks arms had been brought in by trawler along the Co Down coast, either at Kilkeel, Annalong or Portavogie for loyalist paramilitaries”.

It concludes with a very specific piece of information: “The cost of the consignment was between £83,000 and £87,000.”

The document is dated October 30, 1986.

This was an extremely pivotal time; it came in the wake of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, hated by unionists.

And on November 10, Ulster Resistance – a quasi-paramilitary organisation – was formed, with Rev Ian Paisley at the forefront.

Dr McDonnell was asked yesterday how he had come by such detailed information from a loyalist source.

He said he had no recollection of any of this, saying he “cannot for the life of me” remember having such a conversation.

The NI Police Ombudsman has previously stated that in the mid-1980s loyalists were believed to have been focussing their efforts on obtaining arms from South Africa.

The ombudsman had said “my investigators have seen police intelligence that in December 1986 senior members of the UDA, UVF and Ulster Resistance met to discuss the purchase and importation of arms with funds jointly raised by the three organisations”.

By June 1987 they had “finalised plans for the supply of £100,000 worth of firearms, principally AK47 rifles and copies of Browning 9mm semi-automatic pistols”.

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Alistair Bushe