THE Weekend IRISH NEWS

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SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 19 2026 £1.80 (€2.30)

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Róis-Máire Donnelly Finding her voice as the first citizen of Belfast

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Johnny Adair **Exclusive extracts from new book about the loyalist**

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North on course for record number of air passengers

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THE number of passengers using Northern Ireland's three main airports is on course to hit record levels in 2026, data analysed by The Irish News suggests.

A total of 4.556 million passengers flew in or out of Belfast International, Belfast City and City of Derry airports in the first half of this year.

The figures, published by the UK's Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), make it the strongest ever start to the year for the north's aviation sector.

The six-month total surpasses the previous first half (H1) record of 4.398 million set last year.

However, 2024 retains the record for the most passengers recorded in a single year, when 9.32 million flew from the north's three airports.

The H1 total of 4.556 million for this year is 3.6%, or 157,666 passengers, up on the same period last year.

While Belfast International Airport was responsible for 3.2 million of those people, the CAA data shows the growth has been driven by all three airports.

Belfast City Airport saw its first half passenger count rise 7% year-on-year to 1.22 million, some 79,598

turn to P6

Full report P5

Farmer found guilty

Newry farmer Sam Cooper was yesterday found guilty on 12 charges relating to cruelty to animals PIC: ALAN LEWIS

Another pay rise for MLAs – and another conference abroad for Stormont chiefs

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STORMONT speaker Edwin Poots is facing criticism for taking his third overseas trip in 12 months while the Assembly is sitting.

The former DUP leader's latest public purse-funded trip was to Cape Town in South Africa this week.

Mr Poots, who is paid £38,000 on top of his basic MLA's salary for his duties as speaker, was joined at the event by Ulster Unionist MLA Steve Aiken and Assembly chief executive Lesley Hogg.

The speaker's pay is expected to increase in line with the controversial three per cent pay award recommended by the Assembly's remuneration board on Thursday.

MLA's pay will increase to almost £70,000 next year, a 3% increase which follows a £14,000 increase five months ago.

First Minister Michelle O'Neill described the increase as "grotesque" while Alliance deputy leader Eoin Tennyson said the move was "embarrassing".

Their attendance at the six-day Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference (CPA) cost £5,300, which includes flights and accommodation.

Last year, The Irish News revealed how Mr Poots was accompanied by his wife Glynis when he and Ms Hogg travelled to Barbados for last year's CPA conference.

The speaker's wife's travel costs were not paid for by the Assembly.

Within days of returning from Barbados, Mr Poots flew to the US for a speaking engagement at a conference hosted by a private evangelical university in Virginia.

The trip was made during Assembly term time but not paid for from public funds.

Assembly chief executive and clerk Ms Hogg's Cape Town visit is her sixth long-haul destination in the past four years.

Her attendance at various conferences as far afield as Canada and New Zealand has cost taxpayers almost £20,000.

The Stormont Assembly, which returned from its summer recess a fortnight ago, sits on approximately 70 days a year.

According to the Assembly, the

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MLAs' pay rise analysis P4

GAA Armagh ace Aaron McKay on why it's always about the team P70,71

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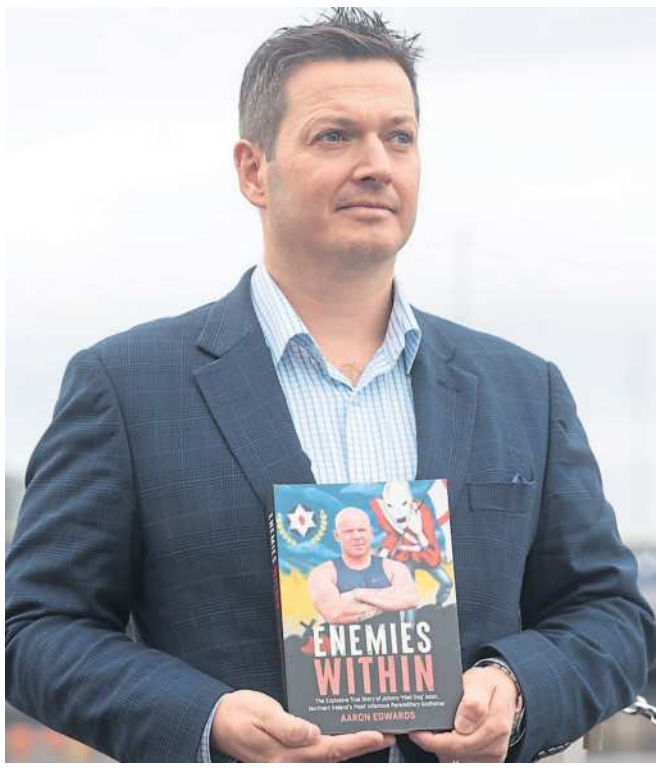
UDA/UFF chief Johnny Adair ‘touts and traitors’ as authori



Author Dr Aaron Edwards launches his new book, Enemies Within
PICTURE: BRIAN LINCOLN

In extracts from a new book about loyalist Johnny Adair, Dr Aaron Edwards reveals how the paramilitary boss descended into a state of paranoia over the role of state agents as authorities closed in on his ‘C Company’ loyalist murder squad

Johnny Adair had a mistrust of some of those closest to him

BENEATH the bravado, Adair believed he had been betrayed by people close to him. Some of those appearing before the courts for a catalogue of violent offences did so in a bid to secure more leniency.

Self-confessed C Company member Gary McMaster told a court in May 1995 how Adair shot dead alleged informer Noel Cardwell, a twenty-six-year-old man, at a flat close to the North Boundary Street UDA shebeen on 13 December 1993.

Adair pointed out: “Wee men was getting arrested and squealing on me. They were naming me in court and all. That’s part of the job, I’m the brigadier. Right, see when that happened to them’uns [the other brigadiers], they didn’t like it … I had scores of men squealing on me and I still served time beside them on the wing. At least they came forward [and admitted naming me]. It was part of the job. You’ll not get it all your own way.”

However, he also began to reflect on something altogether more insidious: betrayal – not from rank-and-file members naming him during interrogation, but by members of the Inner Council.

“It started with the government, right down to your ministers, right down to your politicians, politicians right down to your chief constable, chief constable right down to Special Branch, right down to the informer. The government wanted this war over. More importantly they didn’t want people shot every day because that’s what was happening in Belfast.

“A Protestant was being murdered. A Catholic was being murdered. A soldier was being murdered. A policeman was being murdered. First and foremost they wanted to save lives. So, the likes of Joe English – and what these c**ts was doing – was trying to slow it down. Stop it, but stop the dangerous people like Johnny Adair. And these men had no love for me.

“See if I was in the IRA, the f***ing IRA would have loved me. But these men who were the same rank as me should have loved me because of what I was doing. I was doing most of their dirty work. None of their brigades done anything. So, we were carrying them all. I’m not putting other brigades down, but they were nowhere near as active as they should have been. Because it was a war, it was a war we were fighting. The IRA never stopped. The IRA was every single f***ing day in life. Bombs or shootings. And that’s the way C Company operated.”

What hit Adair hardest was the revelation by Billy McFarland’s military commander, Person K, that he had been ordered to shoot him in 1994. Person K had travelled to the Shankill to meet with Jim Spence and Winkie Dodds to confess to them about the murder plot. Adair learned of it during a visit to the Maze by the two UDA men. ‘That makes a lot of sense now,’ he told them. ‘Those c***s were gonna kill me and youse wouldn’t have known a thing. Bastards.’

Adair summoned McFarland, Alex Kerr and Joe English to the jail to see him. ‘I want those c**s up here,’ he told Spence and Dodds. It was heading into spring 1995. In the end only McFarland showed up.

> **Beneath the bravado, Adair believed he had been betrayed by people close to him. Some of those appearing before the courts for a catalogue of violent offences did so in a bid to secure more leniency**

A whispering campaign had started that Kerr was teaming up with Billy Wright to break the ceasefire. He denied it, saying he had no intention of ‘restarting terrorism’ and joked with reporter Darwin Templeton how he, ‘was half expecting to be mentioned in connection with the Oklahoma bomb’. The real reason he had ‘got off-side’ in loyalist parlance was that he had fallen out with Jackie McDonald over a significant amount of money that had gone missing from the South Belfast UDA’s coffers, linked to an armed robbery of a Securicor van transporting £1 million on 13 April 1996. Kerr initially went into hiding with his family in Cookstown and then fled to England. According to one senior detective who investigated the incident, several of the notes were found circulating at a golf club in Dunmurry.

Adair recalled, ‘Kerr had bolted by that stage and that bastard English had taken “sick in cell”’. He was livid. ‘Either one of youse, two of youse or the whole three of youse are working for British Intelligence’. Although McFarland denied it when Adair confronted him with the allegation, Adair continued to turn it over in his mind. ‘There’s no doubt, there’s no doubt. People like me who don’t take the thirty pieces of silver are dealt with in other ways and that’s through their own’.

FOR much of the time Adair was on remand, awaiting sentencing, Ronnie Flanagan was in charge of Special Branch. He believed the security forces had to ‘get the paramilitary groups to a place where they could not go back on what had been agreed [in terms of the ceasefire and ongoing talks] and return to violence’. A key operational objective of the security forces ever since Adair’s time in charge of the West Belfast UFF was to recruit agents or casual informers to get as much information on their plans as possible. Adair believed these people were his ‘biggest threat’ – ‘the enemy within’, as he called them: “I was always trying to lay wee traps to try and smoke them out … Sadly the loyalist paramilitaries were awash with f***in’ informants. You go back to that report where John Stevens stated that 207

r paranoid over ties closed in

were working for the authorities … I would believe that, right … In modern-day loyalism, it seems, who isn't a tout? They're all f***in' touts."

Adair pointed to the weapons the UDA acquired from soldiers based at Palace Barracks and Malone Road Barracks in the late 1980s. 'Each and every single one of those weapons was in the hands of the Special Branch, days, weeks and months after the raids. Every one of them. They weren't caught on active service. They were handed over,' Adair said. 'Two Gimpies [slang for a GPMG or General Purpose Machine Gun], thirteen Browning pistols, a Magnum, a machine gun and something else. Two SA80s and two Heckler and Koch handguns all in the hands of the police.'

He wasn't the only UDA leader to sense betrayal. Frank Portinari, the London UDA leader, was released from prison in 1995 having served two and a half years of his five-year sentence. He recalled being in Belfast for Remembrance Day that year

"A key operational objective of the security forces ever since Adair's time in charge of the West Belfast UFF was to recruit agents... Adair believed these people were his 'biggest threat' – 'the enemy within'

and speaking to a cross-section of UDA members from different areas, who appeared sceptical of the peace process: "It was a strange set of circumstances. In a way I actually feel in a sense we policed ourselves. You know, we kind of put ourselves out of business. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad we did eventually. But at a time when militancy was for some still the only way, I don't think it was as stark as there's the 'peace UDA' and then there's the 'militant UDA'.

"Look, I wanted peace. There's no doubt about that one. I wasn't sure we were ready for it. I wasn't sure what was being offered was sincere. Yeah, that was a difficult one to come to terms with. And depending where you went into, which areas you went and the people that you mixed with, you kind of went on what they wanted and they didn't trust it either. And they wanted the militancy to continue.

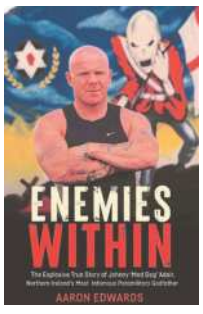
"So, I think the biggest thing that put us off on the mainland was actually the actions of people who, allegedly, were still militant and they weren't at all. They weren't at all. They were opposing those who wanted peace to give them an air of, 'Oh, look at us, we're still militant … We still want to take the fight to the enemy.' I would say a lot of that … was hanging on to their little fiefdoms. They were keeping their little fiddles going and what benefits they could get, even if it was just free fish and chips on a Saturday night. They were really … quite protectionist … And on a personal level, that left me in a real dilemma."

From his interactions with those now in charge of the UDA in West Belfast, Portinari suspected they too had not fully bought into the peace process. And neither had other areas, such as South Belfast, for that matter, despite their public commitment to the ceasefire.

Loyalists weren't the only ones to nurse doubts about the ceasefire. There were those inside the Provisional IRA who were secretly questioning the Adams leadership. In January 1996 eleven of the twelve members of the IRA's Executive passed a resolution calling for an extraordinary General Army Convention. This forced the Provisional Army Council (PAC) to call off its ceasefire at the end of the month.

British intelligence officers had always enjoyed considerable insights into the tensions between what they termed 'hawks' and 'doves' in the IRA leadership. Ever since the closing months of 1993, their dovish 'agents of influence' within the Adams camp were feeding them over-optimistic intelligence, which painted a rosy picture of how the moderates were slowly gaining some kind of ascendancy over the extremists. Some RUC and MI5 analysts believed the optimism they were reading in source reports, although military intelligence officers took a more sceptical view, probably owing to their own hawkish sources outside the Adams camp.

In preparation for a potential ceasefire breakdown, Brigadier James Balfour, the army commander overseeing operations in South Armagh, had, from mid-January 1996 onwards, been making contingency plans. He boosted the number of patrols on the ground from the estimated 5 per cent of inter-ceasefire numbers to 75–90 per cent, particularly as the army's human intelligence and signals intelligence sources suggested that amongst the IRA in South Armagh and East Tyrone, it was 'clear some members of PIRA had a congenital commitment to violence'.



'Enemies Within' by Dr Aaron Edwards is published by Merrion Press and is on sale now

Johnny Adair painting the kerb stones red, white and blue in the housing estate where he lived on the lower Shankill Road

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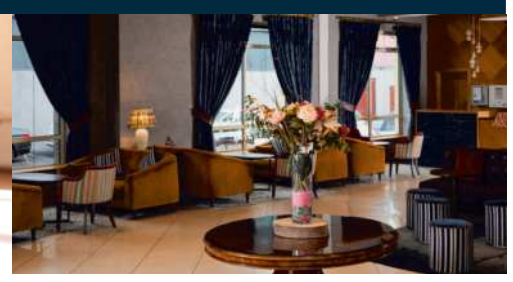
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