

Lessons Learnt

Dissident Irish Republicans and British Security



Aaron Edwards

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Background

The 'Lessons Learnt' project was originally funded by a grant from King's College London. In May and June 2010 Robert Dover and Michael Goodman, with AHRC funding, ran a series of 5 policy seminars on *Lessons Learnt from the History of British Intelligence and Security*. These were held in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Cabinet Office, King's College London and The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Just under 180 people attended the seminar series in total, from both academia and government. The output from these has subsequently been published in a book called *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Georgetown University Press, 2011). The rationale for this initiative and the current one have come from the 2004 Butler Report into the Iraq war (and the intelligence situation that contributed to it), which concluded that the historical lessons had been forgotten, and that a regular review process should be instigated.

The Current Project

This current project aims to build upon the 2010 seminars, improving and developing the relationship between researchers and government via the production of research and briefing papers, and seminars held in Whitehall. The primary impact is on improving national security, achieved via academics contributing to the development of the government's analytical capability.

The project is split into two halves:

- Highlighting historical examples of good analysis.
- Improving understanding of regions of current interest.

Leading academics have been specially commissioned to produce research and briefing papers for a Whitehall audience. This publication series reproduces the reports.

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(April 2012) – Dr Aaron Edwards

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About the Author

Aaron Edwards is a Senior Lecturer in Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Born in Belfast in 1980, he obtained his PhD in political science from Queen's University Belfast in 2006 and has written widely on the Northern Ireland 'troubles'. For over a decade he worked closely with Northern Irish terrorist groups, particularly the UVF, on their internal disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. In 2007-08 he co-ordinated a major EU funded peacebuilding initiative at International Conflict Research (INCORE), a United Nations/University of Ulster centre for excellence in peace and conflict studies. Now responsible for overseeing Counter-Terrorism studies at Sandhurst, he has lectured to military and civilian audiences across the world – from the UK, Republic of Ireland and Germany to the United States, Jordan and Iraq – on aspects of terrorism and insurgency. A Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Huddersfield and an external member of the Insurgency Research Group at King's College London, his most recent book is *Defending the Realm? The Politics of Britain's Small Wars since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

Executive Summary

The resurgence of dissident republican violence poses a very real challenge to the Northern Ireland 'peace process'. However, it has also much broader strategic implications for British security than is often acknowledged. This report argues that the threat posed by dissident Irish republicans, which has intensified since the 1990s, remains unbowed. Therefore, a two-pronged approach is required by government: the first is to ensure that mainstream republicans remain included in the 'peace process' and the second is to maintain a vigorous security stance against the dissidents. Indeed, the fact that republicans remain divided over the ways and means by which to achieve their ends – namely British withdrawal, an end to partition and a united Ireland – makes the 'republican family' much more volatile than conventional wisdom cares to admit. What kind of threat dissident republican terrorists pose, what it is that they want, and, moreover, how they can be persuaded to abandon their violence, raises important questions for British strategists that have, hitherto, not been adequately answered by politicians, government officials, or 'terrorism experts'.

It seems that nothing, short of the complete attainment of their objectives, will persuade dissident republican terrorists to renounce their commitment to violence. So deeply wedded are they to the purity of 'armed struggle' that attempts to engage them in dialogue, thus far, have proven unsuccessful. Indeed, the lack of any integrated response from London and/or Belfast has led to a strategic imbalance between the ends, ways and means in confronting the threat posed by dissident republican terrorists. This poses fundamental questions for all of those involved in the business of national security.

The resurgence of more militant forms of republican dissidence has pointed to the fragmentary basis of this militant nationalist political tradition. Indeed, republicans have demonstrated more volatility at times than their loyalist counterparts. Loyalist terrorists have, apart from a handful of incidents (including murder and orchestrated civil disobedience), maintained a cohesive stance since the Provisional IRA dumped arms in 2005. To external observers, they may well appear divided, but internally they have nonetheless demonstrated a much more vigorous discipline largely absent from republican ranks. This has been the case since the two largest paramilitary groupings, the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) moved to sideline and, in some cases, violently quell dissent within their ranks. The instrument of violent repression continues to cast a long shadow over loyalism in a way that has not been so apparent in republicanism.

Although it is largely a matter of academic debate over whether dissident republican terrorists can be contained, defeated or persuaded to abandon their violence, the historical

record does allow us to examine how the Provisional IRA, the most durable form of republican terrorism, was brought to an end. In exploring the Provisionals' move from 'long war' to 'long peace' it is possible to argue that it was the state's application of a mixture of coercion, deterrence and brute force that hastened the end of Provisionalism's 'armed struggle'. This more nuanced examination challenges conventional wisdom, which suggests that the Provisionals took the magnanimous decision to call off their violent campaign in favour of a negotiated settlement because of a realisation that their struggle could be better achieved through political dialogue. However, this grossly underestimates the strategic constraints imposed on the republican movement by the British state, while also overestimating Gerry Adams' Machiavellian credentials and the ability of the Provisionals to continue with their violence.

Indeed, the Northern Ireland 'troubles' throw into sharp relief how the application of force by the state, alongside the deployment of other social, economic and political instruments of national power, brought to an end the Provisional's terrorist campaign. It was by strategic outmanoeuvring and co-opting the Provisionals into the political institutions of Northern Ireland that ensured compliance. Moreover, coercion (i.e. the 'stick') has been frequently overlooked in the rush to proclaim the virtues of dialogue (i.e. the 'carrot'). As this report explains it was, above all, the development of good co-ordinating structures between the civil authorities, police and British Army which played a decisive role in bringing about an end of IRA terrorism in the past. That its political rewards fell far short of its stated objectives is a spectre that continues to haunt republicanism in post-conflict Northern Ireland.

This report aims to answer the broad question: 'What do Irish Republican terrorists want and what would persuade them to give up violence?' In terms of the current threat environment, categorised by the Joint Terrorist Analysis Centre as 'severe', this refers directly to the challenge posed by so-called 'dissident' Irish republicans. However, it must be understood within the wider historical, political and strategic context of Northern Ireland-Related Terrorism (NIRT). Indeed, it is important that we question the British government's current conceptualisation of terrorism, as 'residual' or 'NIRT', and consider what the implications are in light of the very real challenges that this type of terrorism poses in the early 21st Century.

The following report, therefore, has three principal objectives:

- First, it asks what kind of threat is posed by dissident Irish republicans and other forms of NIRT;
- Second, it focuses on the strategic use of force in resolving the 'troubles';

- Finally, it makes recommendations for the enhancement of the government's analytical capability in respect to NIRT, with a particular focus on the implications for Britain's Counter-Terrorism strategy.

The main lines along which military events progress, and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue throughout the war into the subsequent peace.¹

Stupidity was as necessary as intelligence, and as difficult to attain.²

Series Editors' Notes

The 'troubles' in Northern Ireland have been a strong feature of contemporary British intelligence and security history. Not only has the armed conflict caused turmoil and division within the communities of Northern Ireland, it provided the backdrop to military service in the UK, and a tightly knit clandestine battle between dissidents, intelligence officers and the policing services. Much of what happened in Northern Ireland during the recognised period of the troubles informs official counterinsurgency and counterterrorism thinking today, and yet analysis of this ongoing set of problems is impossible without a knowledge of the history and the claims to history that are constantly made and remade by warring groups in Northern Ireland.

The negotiated peace settlement of 1998 was the most promising recent attempt to bring some sort of calm to the region, and whilst political cohesion has certainly occurred in Northern Ireland, community cohesion can still be seen to be chronically wanting. By unhappy chance the seminar that accompanied this piece of research, in April 2012, coincided with the discovery of a large dissident Republican device, and the publicity surrounding a mother's movement called 'Move On' which aims to highlight the number of punishment shootings by dissident Republicans of those alleged to have socially transgressed, be it via drug taking/pushing or in pub brawls or other anti-social behaviours.

Dr Edwards focuses on the historically informed question of what do Republican terrorists want, and the resultant paper, which follows here, provides an excellent example of where deep historical scholarship can inform current public policy thinking as officials and the communities affected seek to understand and move towards peaceful coexistence.

Robert Dover & Michael S. Goodman

¹ Clausewitz, Carl Von *On War*, edited and translated by M. Howard and P. Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 605.

² Orwell, George *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), p. 279.

Dissident Irish Republicans and British Security

Introduction

The threat posed by physical force republicanism to British security can be traced back to the 1798 rebellion by the United Irishmen.³ Yet, it was the development of dynamite over 100 years later which brought a direct challenge to the heart of the British Empire. Republican bombs rocked London, the centre of imperial trade and commerce, between 1883 and 1885. Irish republican bombers returned again to the imperial metropolis in the early years of the Second World War, targeting British cities, including London and Coventry. The IRA's 'Border Campaign' of 1956-62 saw physical force republicanism rear its ugly head again, albeit with limited strategic effect, given that most nationalists greeted it with apathy or indifference.

Nonetheless, it was the outbreak of the 'troubles' in the late 1960s that has posed the most serious and sustained challenge by violent Irish republicans. The emergence of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (Provisional IRA) out of the ashes of intercommunal strife in Belfast and Londonderry in August 1969 was initially geared towards defending the Catholic community against attacks by militant loyalists and the local state's security forces.⁴ By 1971 the cutting edge of the Provisional IRA had emerged to mount a guerrilla campaign against the embattled Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the British Army, which had been sent to keep order between Protestants and Catholics.⁵ The Provisionals had three principal objectives: they sought the withdrawal of Britain from Ireland, an end to partition and the unification of Ireland.

³ For an expert analysis of the mainstream republican claim to lineage and legitimacy stretching back to the time of Theobald Wolfe Tone in the late 18th Century see English, Richard *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003), especially pp. 340-341.

⁴ For more on this point see Alonso, Rogelio *The IRA and Armed Struggle* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

⁵ For more on the military response see Dixon, Paul, 'Hearts and Minds? British Counter-insurgency in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3, (June 2009), pp. 445-474; Edwards, Aaron 'Misapplying Lessons Learned? Analysing the Utility of British Counter-insurgency Strategy in Northern Ireland, 1971-76', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (June 2010), pp. 303-330; Bennett, Huw, 'From Direct Rule to Motorman: Adjusting British Military Strategy for Northern Ireland in 1972', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 6, (June 2010), pp. 511-532; Irwin, Sir Alistair, and Mike Mahoney, 'The Military Response' in Dingley, James (ed.), *Combating Terrorism in Northern Ireland* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 198-226.

By the 1980s republicans had come to realise that their 'armed campaign', by itself, was not achieving their stated objectives. They were faced with a strategic dilemma. Either they could escalate their terrorist campaign or 'cash in the chips of the 'armed struggle'.⁶ In 1994 the Provisionals called a ceasefire. Despite a return to war in 1996-97, the 'whole struggle was going political' and the IRA were relegated to a subordinate position, guided by the policy dictated by Sinn Fein.⁷ The arrival of Tony Blair and New Labour in government ushered in a new spirit of compromise, which eventually saw Sinn Fein brought in from the cold to the multi-party talks aimed at a settlement. On 10 April 1998 the Belfast Agreement was signed at Castle Buildings, Stormont, between the British and Irish governments and all of the parties to the conflict, with the exception of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), who walked away from the negotiations.

Although there are many commentators who proclaim that the Belfast Agreement of 1998 effectively 'heralded an end to the 'troubles',⁸ evidence suggests that the underlying antagonism and grievances which led to the military conflict remain unresolved. In many ways, it exacerbated conflict within the republican community over Sinn Fein's 'peace strategy', leading to the resurgence in dissident republican activity and widespread civil disobedience in nationalist areas. For those working at the sharp end of so-called interface violence (i.e. areas where residential segregation between Protestant Unionists/loyalists and Catholic Nationalists/republicans is most acute), the only visible difference remained in the winding down of the military conflict. Indeed, it is common to hear commentators proclaiming a resounding shift in the context, overplaying the 'relaxed security situation' in the Province.⁹ That bombings, shootings and targeted assassinations (i.e. terrorism) continue – emanating for the most part – from sections of the Republican community, is worth further investigation. It is also prescient to assess, albeit tentatively, the success of counter-terrorist strategy in ending this brand of terrorism.

The roots of dissent

'Provisionalism's founding moment during the Northern Irish state's crisis in 1969-1973,' argues scholar Kevin Bean, 'casts a long shadow over its subsequent history'.¹⁰ Importantly, those republicans who later formed the nucleus of the Provisional IRA had provoked a split with what they regarded as a crypto-Marxist leadership. They abhorred

⁶ Interview with Danny Morrison, 23 November 2010.

⁷ Moloney, Ed *A Secret History of the IRA: Second Edition* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 471-472.

⁸ Horgan, John and John F. Morrison 'Here to Stay? The Rising Threat of Violent Dissident Republicanism in Northern Ireland', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (August 2011), p. 644.

⁹ Gilmore, Margaret 'MI5 in Northern Ireland', *RUSI Monitor* (March 2008), p. 6.

¹⁰ Bean, Kevin *The New Politics of Sinn Fein* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), pp. 53-54.

the Dublin-based leadership's failure to protect the Catholic community in Belfast. An IRA Army Convention was called for December 1969, at which the dissidents walked out and formed an interim leadership.¹¹ However, by walking out of the Convention and ensuring a similar outcome at the Sinn Fein *Ard Fheis* in January 1970, the Provisionals effectively became dissidents, opting to pursue a guerrilla-based military strategy.¹² For most of the 1970s the Provisionals allowed the military instrument to overshadow their political ambitions; their violence, in the words of M.L.R. Smith, was aimed at transmitting 'the political message that PIRA would continue operations until the British authorities acceded to its demands'.¹³ In certain respects the Provisionals were in danger of allowing their means to dictate their strategy, rather than the policy they had set for themselves.¹⁴ Indeed, it was the lack of a coherent political platform that made Provisional violence all the more vigorous. While the Official IRA called a ceasefire in 1972, the Provisionals carried on with their armed struggle, killing 1,711 people between 1970 and 2002; the majority were members of the Security Forces. Over half of the Provisionals' victims were murdered in the 1970s.

On the political front, the Provisional IRA continued to develop its political wing, Sinn Fein, which began contesting elections amidst the republican hunger strikes of 1981. Arguably, the extent to which electoral success had begun to temper republican strategy was not yet obvious. The outpouring of sympathy for the Provisionals from sections of the nationalist community amidst the hunger strikes led to further success at the polls. However, the priority for many within the movement was still the cutting edge of the IRA's 'armed struggle'.¹⁵ This was illustrated by Danny Morrison's well-known slogan about the 'ballot paper and the Armalite' at the 1981 *Ard Fheis*.

It was not until the 1986 *Ard Fheis* that the scales tipped in favour of the party and the abandoning of abstentionism, which would permit Sinn Fein to take its seats in the Irish Dail. The motion to accept the resolution approving taking seats in the Southern Parliament was rejected by the then President of Sinn Fein Ruairí Ó Brádaigh. The split was again provoked by a Northern-based leadership centred round Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. Ó Brádaigh established Republican Sinn Fein soon after walking out

¹¹ Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹³ Smith, M.L.R. *Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 97.

¹⁴ For more on this point see Drake, C.J.M. 'The Provisional IRA: A Case Study', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (1991), pp. 45-46; Edwards, Aaron 'When Terrorism as Strategy Fails: Dissident Irish Republicans and the Threat to British Security', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (April 2011), pp. 318-336.

¹⁵ Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Fein*, p. 63.

of the meeting and crucially upheld 'the historic right of the Irish people to use whatever degree of controlled and disciplined force is necessary in resisting English aggression and bringing about an English withdrawal from our country for ever'.¹⁶

Republican Sinn Fein later sprouted an armed wing, the Continuity IRA, in the early 1990s. The Real IRA emerged from a further split in Provisional ranks in 1997, forming the 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32 CSM) on 7 December 1997, which continued to lobby for British disengagement – even after RIRA's claim of responsibility for the Omagh Bomb atrocity in 1998.¹⁷ The 32CSM 'shared a common concern regarding the failure of the current peace talks to tackle the key issue of Irish Sovereignty' and 'understood and agreed with the IRA in its decision to re-organise, this is still our position'.¹⁸ Both groups have been responsible for a broad range of plots and attacks since the 1990s, including bombings in Northern Ireland and on the British mainland.¹⁹ It is these two armed groups, the CIRA and RIRA, which pose a significant challenge to the peace process.

These splits confirm the truism that republicanism has always been a fragmentary body of opinion. It has often eschewed cohesion and republicans have remained divided over ideology, strategy, tactics and objectives. The risk of a split meant that the Provisionals became an uneasy coalition of interests. As one expert has written:

*[Provisionalism] was an ideological hybrid formed from the tension between the universalist, democratic framework of the nation and the particularist elements of communal identity and sectarian essentialism. The defining characteristic of its political practice was a stress on political subjectivity and agency expressed through Provisionalism's belief that its armed struggle would provide the vanguard to challenge imperialism and secure national liberation.*²⁰

The historical weakness of traditional republicanism in Northern Ireland meant that this coalition would fragment once a firm party line departed from the aspirational belief that armed struggle would bring about their objectives. As former Provisional IRA commander Anthony McIntyre reminds us:

¹⁶ Republican Sinn Fein, 'Historic Sinn Fein Declaration'. Archived at: www.rsfi.ie/1986.htm accessed 21 September 2011

¹⁷ 31 people, including two unborn babies, died in the no-warning car bomb on 15 August 1998.

¹⁸ 32CSM, 'In Defence of the Nation: The 32 County Sovereignty Movement – About Us'. Archived at: www.32csm.info/aboutus.html 22 September 2011.

¹⁹ For an overview and narrative of the evolution of the threat see Tonge, Jonathan 'They Haven't Gone Away, You Know'. Irish Republican 'Dissidents' and 'Armed Struggle', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (2004), pp. 671–693; Frampton, Martyn *Return of the Militants: Violent Dissident Republicanism* (London: ICSR, 2010). Archived at: http://icsr.info/publications/papers/1289498383ICSR_TheReturnoftheMilitantsReport.pdf accessed: 1 September 2011.

²⁰ Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Fein*, p. 251.

On occasion it has been the emergence of individuals at the grassroots level of an organisation who were unhappy with elements of strategy or elements of leadership. On the other hand, dissenting voices may emerge from within a dominant bloc at the centre of a movement. Sometimes it can be violent but quite often amounts to nothing more than the expression of an opinion contrary to the dominant line.²¹

Dissent within Irish republicanism, therefore, has had a long history and will remain for as long as Britain maintains a presence in Ireland.²²

Resurgence of dissident republican violence

While the longer-term roots of dissidence can be traced to the 1986 split and the Provisional's embracement of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, it was Sinn Féin's acceptance of the legitimacy of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the rule of law at a special *Ard Fheis* meeting on January 2007 that led invariably to the resurgence of dissident republican terrorism. As with most other votes on policy, an overwhelming majority of delegates (some 90%) voted in favour of the motion to support the Adams' 'peace strategy'. Though there was 'little hint of dissent from within the Provisional movement', argues Martyn Frampton, 'there was more to it than that'.²³ Recognising the unpopularity of such a move, as well as a growing feeling of unease amongst its grass-roots, Sinn Féin opened up a dialogue with the wider 'republican family' through the medium of forums. This was promptly rejected by dissidents, including Ó Brádaigh, a long-standing critic of the Provisional's strategy, who complained bitterly that the Adams leadership had gone so 'far down the constitutional road' that they had become 'indistinguishable from the Unionists in their support for British rule in Ireland'. As he colourfully observed, 'The British will seek to have them complete the work of collaboration by steeping their hands in the blood of Irish Republican activists'.²⁴

It was perhaps with a touch of irony that Sinn Féin's endorsement of policing took place against the backdrop of the publication of a report into alleged collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, something not lost on influential dissidents like Francie Mackie, who proclaimed that Sinn Féin's Emergency *Ard Fheis* was 'not in session to express an Irish political will but to endorse a British political

²¹ McIntyre, Anthony 'Of Myths and Men: Dissent within Republicanism and Loyalism' in Edwards, Aaron and Stephen Bloomer (eds.) *Transforming the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), p. 117.

²² Frampton, Martyn *Legion of the Rearguard: Dissident Irish Republicanism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), p. 207.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 286-287.

²⁴ Ó Brádaigh, Ruairí 'Provos embrace total collaboration with British Rule', *The Blanket: A Journal of Protest and Dissent*, 28 January 2007. Archived at: <http://indiamond6.ulib.iuou.iu.edu:81/ROB280107.html> accessed 19 September 2011.

will in Ireland. I urge you to reject this will'.²⁵ Indeed, the 32CSM, the political wing of the Real IRA, maintained a narrow republican stance, which suggested how:

*Republican engagement with British politics in Ireland must be grounded on the necessity of resolving the question as to whether Britain has any right to be here. The issue for republicans is not the manner of the British presence but the very fact of it. For republicans the ultimate resolution is British disengagement to facilitate Irish consent as to how we wish to govern ourselves. It is in this context alone that Unionist consent can experience true democratic expression. Issues such as policing in its current context are secondary matters to distract the body politic from addressing the core cause of the conflict. That is the British intent. Alternatives to British solutions in Ireland are Irish solutions in Ireland.*²⁶

As with most other dissident discourse, this speech reaffirmed the commitment to the use of force to achieve republican objectives. This contrasted sharply with statements by the Provisional IRA, which claimed that 'We firmly believe that our republican goal of a united Ireland is achievable through purely peaceful and democratic means'.²⁷ Of course, the key difference – as noted above – was that the military instrument had now been firmly subordinated to the policy being pursued by the Sinn Féin political leadership.

By November 2007 the first serious attempts had been made by dissident republicans on the lives of two police officers. Constable Jim Doherty was shot and wounded as he dropped off his daughter to school near the Bogside area of Derry. Soon afterwards another officer was shot and wounded by a gunman as he drove out of Dungannon police station. One of the most serious developments was the dissident attack on Palace Barracks in Holywood in April 2010, the home of MI5's second largest headquarters outside London. It later transpired that dissidents had been surveilling the installation for some time.²⁸

These dissident attacks were aimed at targets representing the continued British presence in Ireland. For Irish republicans imbibed in the physical force tradition the attacks are seen as unfinished business. This was summed up by former Provisional IRA leader Brendan

²⁵ Mackey, Francis 'British policing is not an alternative: National Chairperson of the 32 CSM addresses delegates at an emergency Ard Fheis', *The Blanket*, 25 January 2007. Archived at: <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/FMCA280107.html> accessed: 19 September 2011.

²⁶ 32CSM, 'No other law: the Politics of Policing in Occupied Ireland', *The Blanket*, 15 January 2007. Archived at: <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/32CSM210107.html> accessed: 20 September 2011.

²⁷ Text of Irish Republican Army (IRA) Easter statement, (released 5 April 2007). Archived at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/ira050407.htm> accessed: 21 September 2011.

²⁸ Barnes, Ciaran and Alan Murray 'Bombers used video cameras to spy on MI5 HQ', *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 September 2010. Archived at: www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/bombers-used-video-cameras-to-spy-on-mi5-base-14947375.html#ixzz0zPhYgfeO accessed 22 September 2011.

Hughes, who had been shunned by his old organization for questioning the basis of the peace dividend. As he wrote in the leading dissident online magazine *The Blanket*:

*As I walked up the Falls and past the commemorative garden built to honour the dead volunteers who had given their lives resisting the repression inflicted by the British Army I thought to myself that despite all the promises and new arrangements, the British hadn't gone away, you know.*²⁹

The sense of betrayal by Adams percolates the thinking of those who, although they do not advocate a continuation of armed struggle, remained intellectually and politically committed to the aspiration of a united Ireland, sooner, rather than later. Former Provisional IRA volunteer Tommy Gorman summed this up neatly when he said that the IRA had been effectively 'defeated'.³⁰ This analysis is shaped by both a belief in the continued futility of armed struggle and acrimony over the Provisional's abandonment of its republican principles. As McIntyre has written, 'A revolutionary body that settles for and then seeks to legitimise the very terms it fought against simultaneously delegitimises and arguably criminalizes its own existence'.³¹

²⁹ Hughes, Brendan 'Who is still here?', *The Blanket*, 22 January 2002. Archived at: <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/whois.html> accessed: 9 September 2011.

³⁰ Interview with Tommy Gorman, Belfast, 23 June 2011.

³¹ McIntyre, Anthony 'Republicans acknowledging a democratic basis to partition', *The Blanket*, 10 February 2002. Archived at: <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/partition.htm> accessed: 29 September 2011.

Britain's response to Irish Republican terrorism

Britain has a long history of responding to the challenge posed by Irish republican violence. The Metropolitan Police Special (Irish) Branch (MPSB) was itself formed to counter growing Irish republican activity in London in the late 19th Century. Special Branch assumed the lead in countering Irish republicanism until the early 1990s, when Prime Minister John Major took the decision to pass this over to the Security Service, MI5. This policing lead in mainland Britain was mirrored in Northern Ireland, the main battleground for IRA operations during the troubles. However, 'police primacy' was not something arrived at easily. Following the breakdown in law and order in 1969-70, the police were subordinated to military command and the Army spearheaded the combating of IRA terrorism between 1971 and 1976. Operating from a disadvantage, the military lacked intelligence on the enemy and initially responded with colonial policing tactics, techniques and procedures completely unsuitable for application in what were essentially British cities.³²

By the late 1970s the British Labour government had begun to swing the pendulum of primacy for security matters away from the military and back towards the police. However, it was the return of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher that saw the military instrument finally subordinated to civilian control, where it was to remain for the remainder of the 'troubles'. The military did perform a vital supporting role for the RUC in the pursuit of an evidence-based approach to Counter-Terrorism. Northern Ireland security policy had been geared towards reassuring the community, disrupting and defeating terrorism.

Covert processes aimed at steering the Provisionals towards the political process were also allegedly undertaken. These ranged from infiltration of the republican movement by informers and *agents provocateurs* to formal and informal dialogue between government representatives and republican plenipotentiaries. This culminated in the decision of the Provisional IRA to call a ceasefire in August 1994. Claiming to recognise 'the potential of the current situation and in order to enhance the democratic process and underlying our

³² For more on this point see Edwards, *Misapplying Lessons Learned?*

definitive commitment to its success, the leadership of the IRA have decided that as of midnight, August 31, there will be a complete cessation of military operations'.³³

One of the key planks in the Provisional movement's decision to enter the 'peace process' lies in its strategic calculation that a military stalemate had developed. As the former Sinn Féin Director of Publicity, Danny Morrison, argued:

[T]he fact of the matter is that the armed struggle went a certain distance, and I would argue, as far as it could go without deteriorating into something unseemly and impossible to end. Ironically, in the 1990s the IRA was probably better armed than ever as a result of the delivery of the weapons from Libya – the ones that got through before the capture of the Eksund³⁴ – and, for all we know, with other weapons that got through from other places. Yet both sides had reached a military stalemate. A military stalemate had developed where each side had, not necessarily brought the other to the point of exhaustion (and that's a relative term) - but had explored almost all means of conscionable confrontation.³⁵

Evidence suggests that this interpretation of a 'stalemate' was central to the Provisionals' justification of their decision to negotiate with the British state. The argument has been recently deployed by former IRA Army Council Chairman, now Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, who told supporters in Derry:

When the British conceded they could not defeat the IRA that posed a very difficult question for us, could the IRA defeat the British army? I have no doubt that if the IRA had not called a ceasefire in 1994 would be fighting now and for ever but I would have been a very poor leader of Irish republicanism if it continued and more young people went to their deaths.³⁶

Magnanimity has always been a strong suit of Provisionalism. Despite Provisional claims to the contrary, however, it is possible to argue that they were strategically outmaneuvered, if not defeated, by the British state. Reflecting upon the IRA's decision to end its armed campaign, Anthony McIntyre complained:

The political objective of the Provisional IRA was to secure a British declaration of intent to withdraw. It failed. The objective of the British state was to force the

³³ PIRA, Irish Republican Army (IRA) Ceasefire Statement, 31 August 1994. Archived at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/ira31894.htm> accessed: 21 September 2011.

³⁴ The Eksund was a vessel ferrying over 150 tonnes of guns and explosives to IRA arms dumps in Ireland when it was intercepted by French customs officials. Had it not been intercepted there is every likelihood that 'the war could be fought almost indefinitely'. See Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, p. 26.

³⁵ Interview with Danny Morrison, 23 November 2010.

³⁶ 'McGuinness slams dissident republican 'imposters'', *Derry Journal*, 10 September 2011.

Provisional IRA to accept - and to respond with a new strategic logic to - the position that it would not leave Ireland until a majority in the North consented to such a move. It succeeded.³⁷

Inclusive political negotiations certainly played a part in husbanding the IRA into the democratic process, but it was by no means the only explanation for its decision to end its 'armed struggle'. While dialogue certainly acted as the adhesive binding republican terrorists to the 'peace process', it was the 'coming of age' of intelligence and the strategic use of force in the state's counter-terrorist framework – in which the military's role was scaled back in favour of a police-led law enforcement response – which brought the Provisionals to the negotiating table.

It has often been thought that dialogue was the primary means by which the Provisional IRA came to the realisation that its goals would be better achieved by peaceful means. Perhaps a more precise (if somewhat unpopular) view is that the Provisional IRA were brought to the negotiating table through a mixture of coercion, deterrence and brute force in constraining their options and heralding their strategic defeat. Indeed, so conspicuous by its absence is any detail on the civil-military strategy used to contain and defeat the threat posed by terrorism in Northern Ireland that one cannot understand the 'peace process' without appreciating how this 'Rolls Royce of an operation'³⁸ served to constrain Provisional options. Indeed, by 'including republicans, but excluding republicanism' from the peace process, as McIntyre, has correctly observed, the New Labour ensured compliance in its own 'peace strategy'.³⁹

Current British security policy

The arrival of a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010 led to a shift in the national security lexicon. The threat posed by dissident republican terrorists had noticeably increased, from ranking alongside animal rights activists in the 2008 National Security Strategy⁴⁰ to becoming much more of a concern in the updated 2009 version. That the threat remained 'small', though, led to conclusions that it was more of a 'softer' risk than a 'harder' threat. With the issuing of a new National Security Strategy in October 2010, the focus remained on the small yet 'persistent' threat from 'residual

³⁷ McIntyre, Anthony 'Irish Peace Vote: We, the IRA, have Failed', *The Guardian*, 22 May 1998.

³⁸ Interview with former senior RUC/PSNI Special Branch officers, Belfast, 4 April 2011.

³⁹ For more on this point see Edwards, Aaron 'Interpreting New Labour's Political Discourse on the Peace Process' in Hayward, Katy and Catherine O'Donnell (eds), *Political Discourse and Conflict Resolution: Debating Peace in Northern Ireland* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 46-61.

⁴⁰ HMG, *National Security Strategy* (London: Cabinet Office, 2008), p. 11.

terrorism' in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the National Security Strategy and the Strategic Defence and Security Review, both published in October 2010, elevated the threat from dissident republican terrorists to a par with international Islamist groupings.⁴¹ This was further emphasised in the most recent version of the government's Counter-Terrorist Strategy CONTEST (July 2011), which highlighted the challenge posed by dissident republicans.⁴² Crucially, however, the government has avoided analysing this type of terrorism in any great depth. Instead, it has siphoned off responsibility for NIRT to the Northern Ireland Office and the devolved Assembly. In this respect it has slipped off the radar, with many people arguing that the long-running Irish conflict has been consigned to the 'dustbin of history' because of the relative success of the 'peace process'.⁴³

While this is perhaps the best case scenario, it does not reflect the empirical evidence. Dissident activity 'goes far beyond the targeting of police, soldiers and targets of "national security", as Horgan and Morrison have argued, with a shift towards the establishment of a community policing role in republican areas.⁴⁴ Arguably, the Provisionals contributed to this problem when they left community activists powerless in the face of deep-seated societal problems which the IRA had traditionally been involved in monitoring. The vacuum occasioned by the IRA's departure from the stage in 2005 has since played into the hands of dissidents eager to champion community grievances.⁴⁵ It has also pointed to a diminution of resources available to tackle the threat, a point made consistently by Margaret Gilmore, who argues that 'the upward trend in terrorist activity must urgently be addressed - even if this means the utilisation of extra resources'. Gilmore reminds us that even though attention is directed towards the Islamist terrorist threat, 'the risk from Northern Ireland's dissidents must neither be overlooked nor under-estimated'.⁴⁶

On another level there appears to exist something of a 'knowledge deficit' permeating all sections of the national security apparatus, from PSNI officers on the beat to the approximately 4,000 British soldiers garrisoned in the Province. The termination of Operation Banner in 2007 led to over-optimism about the stability of the security

⁴¹ HMG, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, Cmd. 7953, (London: TSO, October 2010), pp. 11, 14, 27, 29; HMG, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review* (London: TSO, October 2010), pp. 4, 41-42

⁴² HMG, *Contest: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism*, Cmd. 8123, (London: HMSO, July 2011).

⁴³ For more on this point see Edwards, Aaron and Cillian McGrattan 'Terroristic Narratives: On the (Re) Invention of Peace in Northern Ireland', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 23, No. 3, (June 2011), pp. 357-376.

⁴⁴ Horgan and Morrison, 'Here to Stay?', p. 643.

⁴⁵ An example of this phenomenon is the Concerned Families Against Drugs, a group backed by ONH armed groups in Derry and Belfast. The ONH have raided suspected drug houses in both cities.

⁴⁶ Gilmore, Margaret 'Murder in Northern Ireland', *RUSI.org*, April 2011. Archived at: www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4D99D92CD7AF9/ accessed: 21 September 2011.

situation. It also prompted a false sense of security, which was unfortunately grimly illustrated by the shooting dead of two Royal Engineers soldiers and the wounding of several other men in a RIRA attack in Antrim in March 2009. Within 48 hours of the attack, a Catholic PSNI officer, Stephen Carroll, had been murdered by the Continuity IRA, in Craigavon. The strategic, operational and tactical lessons from the long-running campaign were not adequately captured nor transmitted in any durable way. It was left to informal folk wisdom – at a mainly tactical level – within the ranks of the police, Army and Security Service to pick up the slack.

Moreover, in the rush to label dissident Irish republican violence as ‘criminal’, devoid of any ‘strategy’, or political party representation, a much more nuanced evaluation of the threat was lost. It could be said that the dismissal of ‘residual terrorism’ as some kind of aberration amidst a relatively stable political environment actually hampered our understanding of the phenomenon. As with terrorist groups elsewhere, ‘physical force’ Irish republicans have not historically sought external electoral ratification to justify their actions. Anyone with a passing knowledge of PIRA violence would note that it did not contend elections – via its Sinn Fein proxies – until the 1980s, over a decade into its ‘armed struggle’. Moreover, it could be argued that in the rush to seal off informed discussion about the challenge these armed groups pose to British security, that Counter-Terrorism officials leave themselves at a disadvantage.

Arguably, HMG has resorted to sidelining the issue of NIRT from mainstream British politics by establishing the convention that it remains the preserve of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. Nowhere has this been better illustrated than in a House of Commons debate on 7 June 2011 on the revamped PREVENT strand of CONTEST. In response to a question by Patrick Mercer MP, Home Secretary Theresa May MP made perfectly clear where responsibility for NIRT lay:

*The Prevent strategy that I have outlined specifically does not cover Northern Ireland-related terrorism because it is important that we work through the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Assembly and Ministers there, in looking at these issues. There is a responsibility for this in Northern Ireland, and it would not be right for us to bring Northern Ireland-related terrorism under the Prevent strategy that I have announced. However, certain aspects of the Prevent strategy have some commonality with themes in relation to Northern Ireland-related terrorism, and I am sure that others will draw on that.*⁴⁷

⁴⁷ House of Commons Debates (Hansard), 7 June 2011, Vol. 529, Col. 59.

Confusion was repeated on 4 July in a House of Lords debate on the draft 'Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of duration of non-jury trial provisions) Order 2011'. The debate revealed the absence of consultation on the legislation with local politicians, including those responsible for making security decisions.

There have been some important consequences of avoiding systematic discussion or debate about the challenge posed by NIRT. It could, for instance, be said that, in closing off debate, HMG is admitting that no coherent strategy exists for dealing with either a spike in dissident republican violence or, indeed, the wider problem of deep-rooted sectarianism. Furthermore, the failure to tackle sectarianism allows NIRT a breeding ground that may lead to further instability in the future. As CONTEST reveals:

2.35 Despite the significant and continuing progress in stabilising the political situation in Northern Ireland, some republican terrorist groups continue to carry out terrorist attacks. Support for NIRT remains low and dissident groups do not represent mainstream opinion across Northern Ireland. But the frequency of these attacks has increased significantly, from 22 in 2009 to 40 in 2010. There have been 16 attacks to end of June 2011 including the murder of Police Constable Ronan Kerr in April 2011. 22 Many more attacks have been successfully disrupted.⁴⁸

There are several possible explanations why the government might have avoided formal discussion of the challenge posed by the dissidents. First, it has admonished centralised responsibility for the threat, preferring to pass the portfolio to the NIO and devolved administration in Belfast. Second, the pressing issue of Islamist terrorism may have precluded the building of a suitable framework for understanding the evolution of the threat. Third, because of the 'age of austerity' and frugality in government expenditure, it may wish to avoid tackling the threat head on. All three possible interpretations have merit, though the burden seems to have been taken up at the tactical level, i.e. by those on the frontline, such as police officers, Ammunition Technical Officers (ATOs), and other defence and security professionals. Moreover, the dearth of corporate memory inside institutions such as the NIO, PSNI, Army and the Security Service might actually be hampering the formulation of a strategy by which to counter the threat.

Improving the government's analytical capability

What is, perhaps, more concerning about CONTEST is the dearth of firm empirical evidence about the state of the security situation in Northern Ireland. One could argue

⁴⁸ HMG, *Contest*, p. 29.

that this has left a 'blind-spot' in the government's analytical capability. Interestingly, there is no mention of the threat to law and order posed by loyalist terrorists either, particularly from members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), an organisation which claimed to have ended its campaign of 'armed resistance' in 2007.⁴⁹ The UVF recently brought weapons back onto the streets of Belfast. As the Independent Monitoring Commission made clear, 'when put under pressure, [the UVF] failed to throw off its violent propensities' – murdering a man in cold blood in May 2010. Interviews with senior UVF members point to a weak centralised leadership and the inability to replicate a 'civilianised' model to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate across its 1,500 strong membership.⁵⁰ There remains a strong likelihood that an attack on the Protestant community would elicit a response from loyalist paramilitaries as they become increasingly balkanised.

Furthermore, interviews and focus groups with high-ranking former and serving members of the RUC/PSNI (particularly Special Branch and CID officers) and the British Army, it has become clear that the lessons from the 'troubles' have been lost and, as a consequence, may be making Counter-Terrorism operations less effective. The government might consider factoring the dissident challenge in the round, as it does with other aspects of security policy. The National Security Council is, of course, the appropriate forum for consideration of the security response to armed challenges, including both dissident republican and Islamist terrorist threats to homeland security. The absence of any integrated lesson-learning programme has severely undermined the capabilities of the Security Forces in tackling the dissident threat. Moreover, the lack of direct experience of the 'troubles' for many of these personnel means that corporate memory has never been more important. Investment in 'lessons learning' workshops and a wider engagement with the existing network of community-based contacts would go some way to addressing this 'knowledge deficit'.

⁴⁹ For more on the UVF's internal fluctuations see Edwards, Aaron 'Abandoning Armed Resistance? The Ulster Volunteer Force as a Case-study of Strategic Terrorism in Northern Ireland', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 32, No. 2, (February 2009), pp. 146-166.

⁵⁰ Richard Reed and Aaron Edwards, 'Loyalist paramilitaries and the peace process', *Fortnight Magazine*, No. 477, (July/August 2011), pp. 6-7.

Conclusion

This report has suggested that republicanism has always been a volatile creation. Like the Provisionals, dissident republican terrorists continue to find willing recruits from all over Ireland. While dissident republican terrorists may lack the technical expertise and 'popular support' to wage a more accentuated armed campaign, this has not deterred their acolytes from flocking to the cause of 'armed struggle'. However, the socio-political context has not been ripe for the campaign to gain any kind of momentum and it has faltered because of a lack of support from within the nationalist community. Nonetheless, there has been a shift in the geographical spread of activists being arrested in areas where the Provisionals were never very strong, such as North Armagh, which raises questions about whether national security assets have been directed towards dealing with the mutated threat in these areas.

More generally, perhaps, the same conditions which gave birth to Provisional terrorism are no longer in place. Nevertheless, even with the absence of 'root causes', there is every likelihood that the dissident republican challenge will remain at a constant level. And in any case, a strategic failure to link their ends to means makes the dissidents no less of a threat. They have proven that they possess the subversive intent and capability to sustain their violent challenge. As such, the hard-core of dissident republicans remain committed to the overall objectives of a British withdrawal, an end to partition and a united 32 county Irish Republic similar to that espoused by previous generations of republicans.

As this report has also endeavoured to suggest, a skewed understanding of the methodology by which the Provisionals' 'armed struggle' was finally brought to an end limits the options open to those in the business of national security. Consequently, it leaves them 'fighting blind'. The knowledge deficit must therefore be addressed if those in the front-line fight against dissident republican terrorists are to be given the backing they need to frustrate, contain and ultimately defeat the various manifestations of physical force republicanism, which remains very much a challenge for British security today.



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