

Dr Robert Crowcroft

The last week has offered a stark reminder of the persistent threats to peace and stability in Northern Ireland. While Afghanistan rightly garners the headlines, Britain's oldest conflict may not be over just yet. The province is certainly no beacon of harmony. Recent days alone have witnessed three car-bomb incidents linked to dissident Republican terrorists. All received significant national news coverage. On 3 August, a taxi was hijacked, loaded with 200lb of explosives, and parked outside a Londonderry police station. In the early hours of the morning, the bomb went off. No-one was injured, but several nearby businesses were badly damaged. Oglagh na hEireann, an offshoot of the Continuity IRA itself a splinter group claimed responsibility. Whether this was a gesture of the 'We are still here' variety, or an attempt at launching something more serious, remains unknown. On 4 August, a car bomb attack on a soldier in Bangor failed. And on 7 August, a bomb was found attached to the car of a Catholic police officer. As of this writing, no one has claimed responsibility for the attacks of 4 and 7 August. Earlier, on 22 July a pipe bomb exploded in the grounds of a Belfast police station, and on 10 July a bomb in South Armagh damaged a bridge. The police believe it was an attempt to draw them into the area in order to stage an ambush.

While the Provisional IRA is now locked (hopefully inescapably) within the structures of devolved government, there are still elements in Northern Ireland that pose a threat to national security; and their activities are increasing. These dissidents constitute the handful of genuine Irish Nationalists who, unlike other Republican paramilitaries, have proven impossible to buy off. While members of the PIRA and Sinn Fein have found lucrative post-Troubles careers as ministers, party apparatchiks, or drug dealers operating with de facto police protection, the dissidents remain stubbornly outside the peace process. Indeed, the biggest threat to stability in the coming years could be a violent struggle within the Republican community for leadership.

Ever since the Good Friday Agreement there has been intermittent dissident Republican violence, from the Omagh bomb to, more recently, the murder of two soldiers. While brutal, such events are in fact highly symbolic, even ritualistic, claims to power (what right-thinking Nationalists do, in other words). Their principal targets are not Unionists or the British, but a Republican audience. The events of this week will probably be forgotten, rather than represent a turning point. But make no mistake: there will be a turning point. The tensions within the Republican community are real and, given the historical centrality of violence in Irish political culture, only a fool would assume that they will not sooner or later erupt.

Now let us be clear: Irish Nationalism is a fiction. The island of Ireland has never been united except under English rule. The 'High Kings' of Ireland tradition, usually pointed to by Nationalists as providing historical evidence for their claim to Irish unity, is propaganda with no basis in fact. It is, in effect, nationalist myth-making, every bit as sublimely ridiculous as the kilt and clan tartans of the Scotch. But, even so, the problem remains. Dissident groups like the Continuity IRA, the Real IRA and its political wing the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, Oglagh na hEireann, Republican Action Against Drugs, and the Irish Republican Liberation Army are firmly beyond the control of the PIRA and Sinn Fein leadership. True, the extent to which all of them are genuinely 'Nationalist' is debatable. For instance, RAAD and the IRLA are reckoned to be criminal gangs flying the banner of Nationalism in order to legitimise their activities. RAAD claims the 'credit' for shooting approximately a dozen drug-dealers in Londonderry in the last year, as part of tackling 'anti-social behaviour'. The problem is that, in the 1980s, the PIRA made eerily similar claims when shooting drug dealers in Nationalist areas. But what they were aiming at was seizing the drug-dealers' trade for themselves in order to become organised crime kingpins of Northern Ireland. In this they succeeded (one suspects that the average

council estate drug-dealer, armed with a baseball bat, or maybe a shotgun if he was lucky, wasn't too keen on gunfights with an IRA Active Service Unit toting machineguns). Hence we should be sceptical about these latest claims to be 'cleaning up' the streets.

But whatever the criminal motives of some, or the imagined entity that is Irish Nationalism, the dissidents are unquestionably a worsening threat to peace. For instance, Oglagh na hEireann is purported to contain some of the PIRA's most experienced terrorists. And the hold of Sinn Fein and the PIRA over their community, or at least those willing to engage in violence (nearly always young males of limited education ♦ of whom there are many in the Nationalist areas of the province), may be weakening. On 5 August, Sinn Fein announced it would meet representatives of the 32 County Sovereignty Committee. Now, it may be that Gerry Adams is interested only in being able to sell to the Catholic community the fact that he is working to keep it united; but at the very least he is worried. The underhanded methods used by Adams to secure PIRA approval of the peace process, so richly detailed by Ed Moloney in his book A Secret History of the IRA, came at the price of fracturing the movement. We could be witnessing the consequences of that now.

Dissidents see Adams and Martin McGuinness as being, at best, dupes of the British or, at worst, sell-outs who executed a long term plan to surrender the cause and buy themselves plum jobs in the process. Whatever the truth, there is little doubt that, from the mid 1980s at the latest, Adams and McGuinness were seeking a peace settlement that would see the 'Brits' remain in Northern Ireland. When the Republic of Ireland ♦ which waged a proxy war against the United Kingdom at the beginning of the Troubles ♦ finally realised that the last thing it wanted was the incorporation into its proportional representation-based political system of a voting block of extreme Protestants, the PIRA was left cut off. Adams, a skilful pragmatist, came to recognise that the armed struggle had failed and that, anyway, there was a better career available to him as a 'Boss' in the classic Roman Catholic political party tradition.

In May 1987, Adams effectively conceded everything by secretly sending word to Charles Haughey, head of the Dublin government, (and thus, if they didn't know already, to London) that Sinn Fein was now seeking merely negotiations with the Unionists that would be free of British 'direction', and that, if these conditions were met, they would abide by any settlement reached. This marked the virtual surrender of the Republican movement with its aim of immediate Irish unity, and it was easy enough for the British to honour ♦ they would have liked nothing more than to get rid of Ulster. Thus, Adams adeptly redirected a movement over which he had less than total control into following a new path.

But the cynics among Republican paramilitaries ♦ and killers do tend to be cynical ♦ will not have missed a series of remarkable coincidences. The same month that Adams secretly signalled the end of the armed struggle, a PIRA Active Service Unit from East Tyrone ♦ probably the most intransigent opponents of the Adams strategy ♦ was ambushed by thirty members of the SAS while on an operation to blow up a police station. All eight PIRA members were killed in what was a carefully planned and executed hail of bullets. Given that the SAS were lying in wait, there is no doubt that someone in the higher levels of the PIRA was giving information to the British. The PIRA had lost eight of its best operatives, dealing its paramilitary campaign a blow from which it never really recovered. One of those killed was Jim Lynagh, an opponent of Adams, an unreconstructed hawk with an unshakeable commitment to the armed struggle.

Months later, in October 1987, a ship named the Eksund, loaded with a massive arms shipment from Libya, was betrayed and seized. If it had landed in Ireland, the hawks would have found at their disposal a million rounds of ammunition, 1,000 automatic rifles, hundreds of grenades, a dozen RPGs, another dozen heavy machineguns, and fifty Surface-to-Air Missile

launchers capable of downing British helicopters: not to mention anti-tank missile launchers and flame throwers. This was a staggering haul, and more than enough to facilitate a major increase in the intensity of the PIRA campaign (though it seems unlikely that the Army's response to being attacked with SAMs and anti-tank weapons would have been anything less than ruthless).
Over the next few years, another twenty PIRA members were killed by the British, as London raised the stakes in seeking to 'encourage' the paramilitaries to end the conflict ('Through this door is peace ♦ and incidentally your own survival; through this door is war ♦ and by the way we may well shoot you'). Terrorism is certainly a lot more fun when the state you are attacking refrains from a policy of targeting you for death ♦ as, in recent years, Palestinian terrorists have found out at the hands of Israel. Perhaps in that respect it was good for the PIRA that the Eksund never landed. But what is evident is that most of those killed by the British were enemies of the Adams strategy, and that there was a leak in the PIRA's Northern Command. London undoubtedly helped to clear the decks for Adams. The PIRA began to tear itself apart looking for moles; and at one point it sanctioned as official doctrine the notion that one in three of its members should be assumed to be traitors.
The purpose of this historical detour has been to underline the skills and adaptability of Adams and McGuinness; but as the post-1998 splits indicate their hold over the Nationalist community is far from total. It has long been a possibility that an alternative band of Republican leaders will emerge outside the structures of Sinn Fein to take advantage of disaffection. Certainly there is much scope for loudly advertising one's own virtues as a 'genuine' Nationalist in contrast to the Sinn Fein 'compromisers'. And it has always been likely that, sooner or later, Adams's luck would run out. He is clearly aware of this danger, given his professed desire to be seen to speak to the dissidents. On 2 and 3 July, dissident Republicans asserted their claim to community leadership by organising two nights of sustained rioting in Broadway and Bog Meadows, west Belfast. Between 11 and 14 July, rioting spread to north and south Belfast, Londonderry, and Lurgan. This constitutes a powerful challenge to the old leadership, and it indicates the dissidents' ability to exploit Catholic disillusionment with a settlement so closely linked to Adams.
Meanwhile there have been repeated attempts this year by dissidents to bring explosives across the border from the Republic. Although the incidents that we know about were foiled, it seems likely that the ones we don't were more successful. The police believe that the threat from dissident Republicans is now higher than at any point since Omagh, and that the Real IRA and Continuity IRA are co-operating. This situation could easily spiral into violence between the Republican factions. The struggle for symbolic leadership in the Nationalist community constitutes the gravest threat to peace in Northern Ireland, because it naturally entails the need for gestures, many of which will be violent; and whether it happens now or when Adams and McGuinness finally leave the stage, the people of these islands should brace themselves for trouble. Men's ambitions are difficult things to suppress.
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