Legion of the Rearguard: Dissident Irish Republicanism (2010), by Martyn Frampton

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As recent events have made clear, the political instability that wracked Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles has not been consigned to history. The development of a seemingly tolerable political settlement in 2007, and exemplified by the Ian Paisley-Martin McGuiness 'double act', has not addressed the essential segregation between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Nor does it mean that there are not people on both sides who still prefer resistance to accommodation.

The most obvious of these factions is the dissident Republican movement. And this movement is the subject of Martyn Frampton's new book. In it, he traces the growth within the Republicans of opposition to the strategy developed by Gerry Adams. Beginning in the 1980s, tensions grew as Adams came to increasingly control Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA (PIRA). Gradually, he set the Provos on a new course. His was a masterclass in political leadership and manoeuvring, but Adams was not without internal enemies.

Eventually, this led to schism and the emergence of new Republican groups outside the PIRA/Sinn Fein, such as Republican Sinn Fein, the Real IRA, and the Continuity IRA. Academic work on these groups and what they are up to is sorely lacking, and Frampton does an admirable job of filling in the blanks. What follows is a well-researched analysis of the groups and their activities. The most striking thing is the fact that boundaries between these groups are highly porous; members of one faction will operate in conjunction with those from others. The whole thing is largely ad hoc. The professed purpose is simply to advertise the fact that Northern Ireland is not a 'normal' state and therefore perpetuate the instability; to this end, there is a willingness to co-operate with virtually anyone who will help.

Frampton's book will quickly become the standard work on the dissidents. Given the lack of research into the subject, assembling the book at all is a considerable achievement. Those readers with backgrounds in research will know just how punishing (and exciting) the work can be if one has to play detective and research a topic where no-one has gone before. Importantly, Frampton had access to numerous key dissidents and interviewed them. Their personal perspectives are cited frequently, bringing the mental universe of dissident Irish Republicanism to life.

But a number of problems emerge. Most are definitely not of the author's own making. The reality is that these dissident Republicans are, in a structural sense, largely irrelevant. Reading this account, I felt like I was reading one of those books on a very minor, peripheral left-wing faction. And the truth is that the dissident Republicans are operating very much in the margins. The current level of violence is perfectly sustainable, and there is no appetite whatsoever for a return to the Troubles. Their base of support is tiny. Of course, one cannot guess what will happen in twenty years time, but it is difficult to believe that any contemporary dissidents have futures worth commenting on.

'Power' in Northern Ireland, the ability to make and break things and generate genuine strategic results, rests – and it always has – with the Unionist community. They have the ability to veto things that they don't like. In contrast, Republicans can complain and set off car bombs, but in the end they have to take what they are given. Arguably, Adams saw that the best that could be achieved was to gingerly ask, in Oliver Twist fashion, 'Please sir: can I have some more?'

Nor is that going to change. Confident nationalist assertions that the Protestants will simply be out-bred and outnumbered are much wobblier than they once were. It is certainly hard to envisage a change in the constitutional status of Ulster before c.2050. It is even harder to believe that all Catholics would be willing to give up on the generous British welfare state and move instead to the more miserly Irish welfare system (as more than one Irish Taoiseach has reminded them over the years).

And, most of all, it is difficult to hold that Dublin even wants Ulster to become part of Ireland – given the fact that a hardcore unified voting bloc of Protestants will be just the right size to torpedo the wretched Irish political system, with its coalitions and proportional representation. Unification would probably turn veto power in Irish affairs over to the Protestants. And this assumes that Ulster Protestants would not simply launch into armed rebellion at the prospect of forced unification; 'Home Rule is Rome Rule', after all. As entertaining to watch as the internal collapse of Ireland would be, it seems unlikely to occur; Dublin politicians won't be that stupid.

So when weighing up the future of Northern Ireland it must be questioned as to whether we should be looking at the marginal Republican dissidents or, rather, the frustrated Unionists. Even Paisley and his successor as Democratic Unionist Party leader, Peter Robinson, have been unable to silence Protestant doubts about the wisdom of sharing power with Sinn Fein. The DUP wiped the floor with the Ulster Unionists and – in the view of many – then got into bed with the PIRA once power was offered. Though this view betrays a failure to appreciate the nuances of Paisley's success in striking the deal that he did, it is, nevertheless, widely shared. Far more likely than a resurgence of Republican terrorism as a significant force is the gradual erosion of Protestant support for the power-sharing framework and the emergence of new politicians – within the DUP or outside it – willing to take advantage of it and wreck the system to service their own ends.

Another problem with the dissidents is the nature of their Republican mythology. The Republican obsession with the forces of 'history' is farcical. By 'history', Republicans mean an 'inevitable' process by which the 'Irish nation' and the 'Irish people' shall one day be reunited into a single entity. This will constitute a restoration of the 'natural' order of things in Ireland, the return of unity, and an end to division. Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, one of the dissident big hitters, speaks, for instance, of 'the undiluted gospel of Irish Republicanism' and 'the historic Irish nation which is entitled to freedom'. All that is needed is for wicked Johnny Foreigner – the Brits – to go home again, and everything will be okay. The term 'history' is employed constantly by Republicans; so frequently that, for insiders, the truth of it must become impossible to doubt. It is, in a sense, their guiding star.

This 'Irish unity' sounds jolly enough, doesn't it? One might even be tempted to down a pint of Guinness and toast the occasion. Alas, as is often the case, that most troublesome of factors – reality – gets in the way. The reader ends up feeling sorry for the people who buy into the 'history' line; do they believe in fairies as well, one wonders? Because fairies are about as real as the 'historic Irish nation' or one 'Irish people'. Ó Brádaigh himself says that 'Either you accept the existence of the Irish nation or you don't, on this there can be no middle ground'. Fair enough. But history provides no satisfactory support for belief in the 'Irish nation'. And seeing as 'history', above all else, is supposed to validate the nationalist case, there is – to say the very least – something of a hole in the argument.

It may be a perfectly legitimate aspiration for nationalists to seek a single Irish state and wash away differences between Catholics and Protestants. But let's not pretend that Ireland is historically a united entity, that the British are the obstacle to unification, or that the people in Ireland are largely one and the same tribe. Wolfe Tone, the Protestant father of Republicanism, was an anomaly. Ian Paisley, meanwhile, famously said of Charles Haughey that 'Our ancestors cut a civilisation out of the bogs and meadows while Mr Haughey's ancestors were wearing pig skins and living in caves'. Dwelling on Irish nationalism I was reminded of Hugh Trevor-Roper's scathing demolition of Scottish nationalism in the posthumously published The Invention of Scotland. At least the Scots had the inventiveness to actually make up kings that never existed and falsify ancient literature in their bid to depict Scotland as the unheralded centre of Western civilisation. Irish nationalism, in contrast, is fiction of the Mills & Boon variety: colourful, simple, and repetitive. Rarely has there been a greater advertisement for human gullibility than the narrative of Irish nationalism and the Republicans who swallow it.

The bigger problem lies in the author's highly conventional analytical framework. To be fair to him, it is still revealing and most people would think it perfectly unobjectionable. Frampton chooses to structure the book as, essentially, an 'ideological' exploration of dissident Republicanism. The analysis is set out as an argument between two factions. On one side, there are those Republicans willing to follow the Adams strategy of accommodation and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This recognises the need to be seen to respect the democratic rights of Unionists while making the case for Irish nationalism from inside the system. The long-term project is still Irish unity, but there must be patience if it is to be achieved. Above all, the struggle needs be waged politically. On the other side, there are those dissident Republicans who see Adams as having sold out Irish unity for power. They perceive the PIRA leadership as riddled with British agents (which it was and probably still is) like Denis Donaldson and Freddie Scappaticcia, and unsubtly accuse Adams and McGuiness of the same ('At what stage does seemingly total incompetence by the Adams-McGuiness leadership take on the form of strategic design?' they ask, not unreasonably). The dissidents understand the GFA as 'Got Fuck All', reject political compromise, and advocate continued violence until Britain is forced to its knees.

As presented here, then, the divide is essentially one of principle about Irish unity and the means to achieve it. This is how Frampton goes about dissecting the dissident movement. But as many who have read Ed Moloney's masterpiece A Secret History of the IRA will argue, Republican politics have far less to do with elevated ideology and principle than envy, burning ambition, and violent resentment. It is, in a sense, akin to the school playground.

What emerged for me was the fact that the dissident factions are frequently made up of people who were scalped by Adams and McGuiness. One is reminded of the fact that in the 1930s those Conservatives who opposed the policy of 'appeasing' Nazi Germany – Churchill, Eden, et al – coincidentally happened to have been scalped by prime minister Stanley Baldwin or his successor Neville Chamberlain. Moloney has detailed the story best in A Secret History of the IRA, but what it means is that this is perhaps not a clash not about Irish unity itself, but a series of vicious rivalries between the victorious (Adams) and the vanquished (the dissidents). Vanity carries people a long way, and it is on display here. It sticks in the craw of the dissidents that they have been, to put it bluntly, smashed to pieces by Adams, the architect of peace in Ulster. And what is Adams other than a classical 'Boss' in the Roman Catholic political party sense?

For instance, Frampton describes how in the 1950s Ó Brádaigh was considered to be the rising star of the IRA. Directing the (ineffective) 'border campaign' that lasted between 1956 and 1962, he was the most prominent public face of paramilitary Republicanism. Despite this military failure, when the Provos broke away from the Marxist IRA and formed the PIRA, Ó Brádaigh sat regularly on the Army Council for two decades and was the first president of Sinn Fein. Yet when Adams and his followers rose to power in the 1980s, Ó Brádaigh was pushed to the margins. Adams replaced Ó Brádaigh as Sinn Fein president in 1983. The Adams faction stressed their own (alleged) military success and highlighted the lamentable record of Ó Brádaigh as a point of contrast. It was dirty, it was guttural, and it was about power.

What we have here, I would venture, is the hostility of the defeated. I have yet to meet the man who reacts well to rejection. Ó Brádaigh certainly didn't. To be the 'rising star' of an earlier time, Ó Brádaigh cultivated an image of 'purity' to root himself within the movement. He was able to contrast that 'purity' with the later 'treachery' of Adams and McGuiness. Yet this does not obscure the reality that he had been outmanoeuvred. Frampton argues that 'It thus fell to Ó Brádaigh to once more break away and establish a Republican vehicle (Republican Sinn Fein) that would stay true to basic principles'. This could be true. Or it could be a case of Ó Brádaigh taking his bat and ball home. After all, having taken such a resounding thumping, what else (and this applies to others defeated by Adams over the years) was there realistically to do other than go into 'principled' exile?

So pride might be the driving force in all of this. And aren't these people just thugs prone to violence? Is it any more complicated than that? Which leads us to another point that the book steers clear of: Republican involvement in organised crime. It is widely known that the PIRA has long been engaged in criminal activities (playing the anti-hero by making a great show of driving drug dealers out, only to take over their business). Some even suggest that the current political settlement comes with a tacit agreement that the authorities will largely look the other way on crack dealing and prostitution. And there is no doubt that many PIRA men made a great deal of money from this. But what of the dissidents? Well, they are neck deep in it as well. For instance, on 15 August 2010, the Independent reported that the RIRA is now the 'largest extortionist gang' in the Republic, specifically by targeting drug dealers and businessmen alike for a cut of their profits. In April, one of Dublin's major gangsters, Eamon Dunne, was murdered, seemingly by the RIRA. One profitable line of work is building pipe bombs and then selling them on within the criminal fraternity, especially to gypsies. Only in Limerick have the existing drug gangs had the muscle to drive the RIRA out (a clear indication, by the way, of the military weakness of the

dissidents; the PIRA would have eaten shotgun-toting drug dealers for breakfast). And the dissidents are just as implicated in crime across the border in Northern Ireland, especially drug dealing in Belfast.

It seems to me that the internal dynamics of the Republican movement have less to do with debates over how to get Irish unity than political competition for a few (who is on top, and who is not) and old-fashioned gangsterism for the rest. Yet this is missing from Frampton's account. If looking for a study of the hard realities of Irish Republicanism, I'd recommend A Secret History of the IRA instead.

There is a larger intellectual point here about the study of politics. What exactly is the problem with the 'ideas' framework for political analysis? The answer is this: it is the product of a particular mental interpretative paradigm, emanating from a very specific time and place. To be fair to those who utilise it, it is now virtually unchallenged in the Western world. But, historically speaking, it is anomalous.

An alternative paradigm, beginning from a particular view of 'human nature' (and, moreover, which is demonstrably accurate about man's conduct), would have no trouble recognising the primacy within this Republican universe of the forces pointed to above: ambition, lust, resentment, frustration, and violence. The fundamental reason why modern political analysis struggles to get to the heart of things is that by overlooking the reality of man – and don't forget that politics is conducted by humans, not impersonal forces – the whole interpretation threatens to come crashing down.

But why is human nature, in all its ugliness, so frequently overlooked? In a word, secularisation. The modern Western mind is secularised to a degree that has radically altered virtually every conceivable pattern of thought. Until the Enlightenment, virtually anything with pretensions to being serious exercise of the mind – whether in the arts or sciences – was conducted within some kind of theological and Christian dialogue. That is no longer the case, and – here is the point – seeing as the very core of Christianity is to stress the Fallen and sinful nature of man, these crucial insights about the reality of human conduct are forgotten too.

There is more. The truth of the point is demonstrated by the convergence between the secularising tendency and what has replaced 'human nature' in thinking about politics. For secularisation in Christian societies does not mean that the basic urge to religiosity has declined. Far from it. Christianity has merely been supplanted by the religion of 'rationality'. The state of the sciences speak to this obviously enough. But so does political and historical analysis. These disciplines now start from the assumption (and it is nothing more than an assumption) that politics, whether of the past or present, essentially consists of a rational debate between opposed ideas; that political conflict is the result of this debate; and, by extension, that political studies should be observation of the ideas and the debate. The 'big story', then, is the ideology. And in this implicitly more optimistic vision of humanity, a high minded man emerges to replace the sinful creature.

The urge to seek an 'explanation' in these terms is easily decipherable. It is part of the need to find profound, larger 'meanings' for the world around us in order to replace the 'meaning' once

provided by religion. Humans have a yearning for explanation, whether supernatural or secular in nature. In order to be satisfactory, it has to be about more than the egos and schemes of small, transitory, and individual men. But in this particular search for meaning to the world, the truth of events is often lost. One finds it difficult to believe that Jean Calvin would encounter any difficulty in seeing the Republican civil war for what it is: greed, envy, wrath, and – the root of them all – pride.

Now, of course Dr Frampton doesn't talk about any of this. Nor should he be expected to, in fairness. His is a book on dissident Republicanism, not the paradigms of the Western mind. But it is indicative that in a subject area where – of all topics – one might expect it to be possible to break free from the 'ideology' framework and see the brutal reality of things, the default assumption of academics is to employ a framework that arguably obscures more than it reveals.