

The long, long war of dissident republicans

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It is an inconvenient fact that in post-conflict Northern Ireland there are still those for whom the conflict is not over. The activities of dissident republicans provoke not only a moral outrage, but an exasperation that there are still people out there who, in the American phrase, need to get with the programme. The fact that those who continue to prosecute their war have no possibility of achieving their declared objectives ought, in the eyes of most people, be enough to make them give up. Why then do they persist? This article will look at what motivates the dissidents, the distinctions between the various factions, and, finally, the likely impact of dissident violence upon the peace process.

First though, it might be useful to consider the possibility that it would be more surprising if there wasn't a continuation of paramilitary campaigns. Wars do not ever end tidily. The recent publication of Keith Lowe's *Savage Continent* about Europe after the Second World War is a useful reminder that the war did not end for everyone in 1945: for years afterwards Polish, Ukrainian, Baltic and Greek partisans continued their own wars in the mountains and forests on the edge of Europe, while within the Soviet-occupied territories Lithuanian, Estonian and Latvian fighters persisted with their guerilla campaigns. In fact the last Lithuanian anti-Soviet resistance fighter, Pranas Koncius, was killed in action by Soviet forces on July 6, 1965, and was eventually given posthumous recognition in 2000 when he was awarded the Cross of Vytis by the Lithuanian government. More famous perhaps were the Japanese soldiers in the jungles of the Philippines. The last to surrender, Second Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda, gave himself up in the spring of 1974, still wary that he might be falling into a trap set by the Americans. He and his comrades had not simply been hiding from allied forces, they had continued to prosecute a military campaign, killing some 30 Filipino inhabitants of the island. In his autobiography *No Surrender* (1974) Onoda provides a very revealing account of how it was possible to perform an oppositional reading of all available evidence in order to reaffirm an existing worldview. Thus, after 1945 when his unit spied local people in civilian clothes going about their everyday business, they chose to interpret this as a trick, and one that entitled them to attack the impostors. Then, when the police or army rushed in after these attacks to find Onoda's unit, it

served to confirm that their original supposition had been correct: this was indeed a ruthless and cunning enemy.

Dissident republicans are also practised in making the facts fit within a set understanding of the world. Thus, the police raids that follow one of their operations, or the interrogations in police headquarters are the self-reinforcing proof that the war has not ended. It is important that the shape of that war remains within set patterns in order for it to remain recognisably the same struggle. When, in 2010, almost thirty years after the death of Bobby Sands, dissident prisoners began a 'dirty protest' in Maghaberry Prison to draw attention to their concern about strip-searching, the action also served to reinforce the idea underpinning their campaign, that the 'long war' announced by the Provisional IRA in 1974, was still ongoing and that the axis of the conflict, between the British state and an insurgent nationalist army, remained unchanged. In this scenario, they are not dissenting, or resiling, from the core republican narrative; rather it is Sinn Fein which has deserted the cause, and, by accepting the six county state, it is Sinn Fein who have become the dissenters. Certainly, seen against the flexibility of Sinn Fein's changing ideological stance, the dissidents can lay claim to a certain fixity of purpose, and to an unbroken lineage that connects them back to the earliest forms of violent republicanism. Sinn Fein however represents what the security forces in Northern Ireland labels 'mainstream republicanism', and whatever merit in the argument presented by their challengers, those who are outside that mainstream are grouped together under the loose generic of 'dissidents'. However accurate or inaccurate the denotation, the connotation is widely accepted, and dissidents are understood to be those who reject the accord contained in the Good Friday Agreement and its subsequent iterations. It is not, as we shall see, a tidy category.

Distinguishing the dissident groups

The term dissident has become synonymous with violent republicanism, but it is not the case that all republicans who disagree with the political settlement are supporters of armed resistance. The Good Friday Agreement and all that has followed on from it have articulate opponents in respected republicans like Tommy McKearney and Anthony McIntyre who voice their criticisms in internet blogs and on public platforms. For these former Provisionals – and they represent a broad strand – the republican leadership has sold out on the struggle for a socialist republic, but their critique concedes that the war is now lost and that there is no point in continuing with an armed campaign. There are others, also non-violent, who wish to mount a republican challenge to the political institutions, north and south. Foremost among them is éirígí (whose title,

incidentally, is always given in egalitarian lower case) which positions itself on the far left of the political spectrum. While its commitment to a democratic socialist 32-county republic is standard left republican, its organisational style is an assertive form of *indignato* street politics, with a strong emphasis on protest and demonstrations. Although initially formed as a 'campaigns group' in May 2006, the membership voted to formally constitute éirígí as a political party at its first Ard Fheis in May 2007. Its largest vote to date came in the May 2011 local government elections when its candidate in the Upper Falls ward achieved 1,415 first preference votes, or 12% of the vote – a respectable showing for a protest party perhaps, but not a result that could be reproduced in other constituencies, and not a sign of any strong electoral base.

The electoral presence of groups such as éirígí, or independent candidates who challenge from the republican left, is in fact no more than a minor irritant to Sinn Fein; much more serious is the challenge to its legitimacy from armed groups who choose to present themselves as the apostolic successors of the tradition that runs from the Easter Rising through to the pre-decommissioning Provisional IRA. Some fundamentalists were driven by principle to leave long before the 1994 ceasefire, and while all dissident organisations have emerged from the same gene pool, the simplest way to distinguish between them is by identifying the point at which they felt the need to break with the mainstream.

It was Brendan Behan who observed that the first item on the agenda of any new republican organisation was the split; an update on that would be that the second item is likely to concern any new alliance with another republican group. On the 26th July 2012 there was an announcement that the Real IRA had merged with Republican Action Against Drugs and other 'non-conformist' republicans (a term chosen to sidestep the word 'dissident') to form a new organisation. The objective of the new group would be as before, the establishment of a 32 county republic, and "an internationally observed timescale that details the dismantling of British political interference in our country". Such a demand would seem to require some process of political negotiation, but the statement did not elaborate on how these politics are to be developed. Instead there was a reference to the difficulties that politics engender: "In recent years the establishment of a free and independent Ireland has suffered setbacks due to the failure among the leadership of Irish nationalism and fractures within republicanism." As if to demonstrate the problem, on 25th July, one day before the statement announcing the new IRA was released, there had been a statement from an entirely different IRA, the Continuity IRA, in which it said a new leadership had been created to lead the fight for Irish freedom. No mention was made of any other IRA, but the statement referred to expulsions from its own ranks, and as well as sending a

warning note to the British the new leaders made it clear that these former members were risking their lives if they continued to represent themselves as the Continuity IRA.

This tangled web is not easy to unpick, but a chronological account allows the main developments to be seen in context, and an account of the main splits also reveals much about the neuralgic points within the body of republicanism. The sequence by which they came into being is also of significance to the groups themselves. It is allowed that those who left first had particular foresight, and the corollary is of course also true: those who stuck with the Adams/McGuinness leadership beyond the 1998 Agreement are seen to have been more easily duped. In this narrative of betrayal and steadfastness, the dissident groups came into being in the sequence set out in the following table:

DISTINGUISHING THE DISSIDENT GROUPS			
GROUP	DATE OF EMERGENCE	DISTINGUISHING FEATURES	POLITICAL VOICE
Continuity IRA	The split came in 1986 when hardliners refused to accept the policy to take seats in the Dail. The military campaign began in 1994 following the IRA ceasefire.	Led originally by the 'old guard' leadership of Ruairi O'Bradaigh and others from the pre-troubles IRA the group has struggled to seem relevant.	Republican Sinn Fein
The Real IRA/IRA	Real IRA broke with the IRA over the terms of the 1997 peace deal. Soon after its launch was responsible for the Omagh bomb. Merger of 3 factions in 2012 to form new 'IRA'.	Alliance of three previous organisations: the Real IRA, RAAD and a group of former Provisionals from Tyrone. The killing of leader Alan Ryan in Dublin in 2012 exposed links with southern drug gangs.	32 County Sovereignty Movement
Óglaigh na hÉireann	Existence first noted in 2006, but achieved notoriety with series of attacks in 2010.	Political leadership very associated with annual Ardoyne disturbances.	Republican Network for Unity

On the ground the distinctions between the various groups are much harder to draw. The fluidity of relations between them makes it hard to see any of the

dissident groups as possessing a clear profile. There are no significant ideological distinctions to be made, and the blurred lines that distinguish one group from another often have to be re-drawn as new groups emerge and allegiances shift. The killing of PSNI Officer Ronan Kerr, for example, was first attributed simply to 'dissident republicans' but Belfast Telegraph journalist Suzanne Breen presented a credible claim from former Provisional IRA men, including some who had been involved in the Canary Wharf bombing of 1996, that they had been responsible for placing the device under Kerr's car.¹ The same individuals, who now wish to be known simply as 'the IRA' also claimed responsibility for the killing of two soldiers at Massereene Barracks in March 2009, and the attempted killing of PSNI Officer Peadar Heffron in January 2010 – even though the former was claimed by the Real IRA and the latter by Oglaiha na hÉireann. It is possible that some individuals freelance for different organisations, and possible also that cooperation between factions takes place as circumstances demand or as opportunity presents itself. It is also possible however that some claims are designed to mislead, and any analysis of the dissident groups must allow for a degree of dissembling. A security briefing to the Irish Times in April 2011 suggested that the PSNI, Garda and MI5 intelligence-gathering is no longer so concerned with the brand name used for press releases, and more concerned with which individuals are involved. The security source is quoted as saying, 'What's important is who did it, rather than which group did it'.

What motivates the dissidents?

The most obvious source of information on the well springs of dissident republicans can be found in the accounts they themselves provide. Although there is no detailed political programme to be consulted, the press statements and websites make clear the overall objective of the military campaign. It is to complete the 'unfinished revolution', the fight for Irish freedom that began with the United Irishmen in 1798, and which will not be completed until a 32 county republic is established. That is the foundational belief, and is accompanied by another and equally fundamental article of faith: that the republican vanguard does not require any mass support in order to act. Republicanism has always believed that a small minority can and should act on behalf of a majority that has not yet achieved full political consciousness. The opprobrium heaped upon the dissidents can thus seem to confirm that they are acting in the same way as the Easter 1916 rebels who were booed in the streets of Dublin, or indeed in the same way as the Provisional IRA of the 1970s and 1980s who were attacked in exactly the same language as is used to describe the dissidents today. When asked in a Channel 4 interview if the military campaign did not require a degree of support at the ballot box, the Republican Sinn Fein spokesperson Cait Trainor

replied “Certainly not. We have a mandate stretching right back to 1798. We really don’t need the public to rubber stamp the republican movement.”²

It is an attitude of mind well understood by the Sinn Fein leadership, who in an earlier period – and with a good deal more sophistry – articulated this same message to a hostile press. Indeed the vanguardist stance taken by the Provisional IRA in the early 1970s drew its inspiration in turn from the generation before, the tiny band of republicans who, devoid of any meaningful support from the nationalist population, fought the Border Campaign of 1956-62, a campaign most often associated with the word ‘futile’. And yet for the diehards, the sacrifices made by the IRA volunteers in that earlier period were not entirely wasted, because they kept the flame alive. In 1957 five young men blew themselves up with their own bomb on a hillside in Edentubber, just across the border in Co. Louth, and fifty years later, in 2007, the town played host to a commemoration event at which the main speaker was Gerry Adams. Giving praise to those who had died, he said, “They kept faith with the republican past and they ensured the future of our struggle”.

Adams’ own father, Gerry Adams senior, had been one of the IRA volunteers in the Border Campaign and had passed the torch down to his son. In so doing he was handing on a family inheritance: his own father, also called Gerry Adams, had been involved in the Irish Republican Brotherhood during the War of Independence. This intergenerational sense of mission remains a distinctive characteristic of Irish republicanism, and so not only do the dissidents of today see their campaign as the continuation of earlier republican struggles, but the individuals involved very often see themselves as the keepers of a family flame. For example, Martin Og Meehan, the Republican Network for Unity leader who has been at the heart of the 12th July disturbances in Ardoyne for successive years, is the son of the legendary Provisional IRA leader, Martin Meehan, and spent three years in the prison cell adjoining his father’s. The editor of the Republican Sinn Fein paper, *Saoirse*, is Ruairi Og O’Bradaigh, son of the party’s founding figure, the late Ruairi O’Bradaigh, the veteran leader of the Provisional IRA. Leading dissidents Dominic and Declan McGlinchey, named in court as suspects for the killing of two soldiers at Massereene Barracks, are the sons of the notorious INLA leader, Dominic McGlinchey, who a generation before had attacked police barracks in the area in the same way. The person charged with procuring a mobile phone for use in the Massereene operation is Marion Price who, with her sister Dolours, was convicted of bombing the Old Bailey in 1973. The sisters are the daughters of veteran Belfast IRA man Albert Price who had been interned with Ruairi O’Bradaigh. The Price sisters’ aunt, Bridie, had been a member of the IRA women’s wing, Cumann na mBan, and in 1938 was blinded and lost both her hands when a

bomb she was carrying exploded. Also charged with the Massereene killings – though subsequently acquitted after a lengthy trial – was Colin Duffy who is described by the BBC as ‘perhaps the most recognisable name and face among dissident republicans in Northern Ireland’ (BBC, 27/3/09). In May 2012 Duffy and about 20 other family members attended court when his two brothers, Paul and Damien and their cousin Shane Duffy were charged with a number of crimes including conspiracy to murder, collecting information that could be used by terrorists, planning an explosion and leading dissident republican terrorism.

These examples are not in themselves conclusive proof of anything, but are illustrative of the dense social capital that binds republicans together in familial ties. The republican heritage and ideology allows for the sense of identity and purpose to extend beyond the immediate biological family to a group of interlinked groups and families that make up the ‘imagined community’³ of the republican movement. The research conducted by Scott Atran into violent extremism in other conflict societies shows Irish republicanism as fitting within a pattern where the gravitational pull of these affective bonds is so strong that in the end the political struggle comes to be less about the attainment of any particular goals, and more about recognising and honouring those who have gone before, and showing solidarity with the comrades bound together by ideological and group ties. Having set out to understand why some people are prepared to kill and die for a cause, Atran concludes: ‘The answer in a nutshell is that people don’t simply die and kill for a cause. They kill and die for each other’.⁴ In his sweeping account Atran evidences the power of these networks in allowing group members to maintain a world view that is impervious to outside influence, as can be seen, for example, in the way in which the Al-Qaeda Hamburg cell, living within the very heart of Western liberal democracy, resisted all its allures, as it set about planning the 9/11 attacks. It is the same ability that allowed Second Lieutenant Onoda and his comrades in the Philippine jungle to read all the signals upside down, allowed the Al-Qaeda cell to live within the belly of the beast, functioning as citizens of a western liberal democracy, while rejecting all its values – just as other Jihadist cells in England, Spain and other European states have done subsequently.

This process is also at work in shaping the dissidents’ understanding of themselves and their mission. Occupying a world suspicious of external influences, the social links serve to consolidate and reinforce a fixed world view that finds it hard to take on any new or critical perspective. While the Provisional IRA of the 1970s was in constant debate about ideas and ideologies, the dissident movement by contrast, is intellectually barren. Useful studies of the dissident blogosphere⁵ identify the ebbs and flows of particular groups, but

even a cursory glance at the main sites shows the core reality. There is an abundance of slogans and YouTube clips of men in balaclavas, but no political debate and no serious attempt to take on the arguments of their opponents. Within this echo chamber the criticism that comes from outside is barely audible, and the condemnation that comes on a daily basis from the rest of the society serves to confirm, rather than weaken, their sense of purpose. This is particularly so when the condemnatory statements come from Sinn Fein – as the arch traitors to the cause, Sinn Fein’s hostility only serves to demonstrate to the dissidents that they must be on the right path.

There are of course other factors at work, and beyond the inner core of the dissident leadership, these may prove more important in drawing recruits into the networks of the various organisations. Socio-economic factors, and in particular the recession, are clearly important in understanding why particular areas turn ‘dissy’ (as the local slang term has it). The importance can however be given too great a causal significance: Bean, for example, says that ‘dissident republicanism is much more the product of the contemporary Northern Ireland than it is of the enchanting power of any atavistic tradition’.⁶ In support of this argument he documents the structural problems of the local economy, and alludes to the extent of deprivation in the interface communities where the dissident presence is strongest. The indices of poverty and unemployment support that connection, but are not in themselves sufficient to support an argument for any simple economic determinism. Three things serve to weaken the claim. Firstly, the dissident campaign was actually at its strongest in 2001, when a new period of economic prosperity had begun in Northern Ireland, and with a 3% unemployment rate the economy had come as close to full employment as any western economy could ever aspire to. The correlation between armed attacks and the economic downturn in the more recent period is not only weak, but practically non-existent. Secondly, while unemployment in Northern Ireland has increased steadily since the financial crisis began it is still low by the standards of some Western European states, and has hovered slightly below the UK average for the period 2007-2013 when the dissident threat renewed itself. In April-June 2013, for instance the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland was 7.5% while the UK average was 7.8%, and in some regions like the North-East or South Wales it is regularly two or more percentage points above the Northern Ireland rate. In April-June 2013, for instance unemployment in the North-East stood at 10.3% (Labour Force Survey). Thirdly, the empirical evidence in support of the deprivation theory is gathered within the borders of the six counties, while the individuals who join dissident organisations come from a much wider population distribution across the whole island. In this regard, the very detailed data collection conducted by Horgan and Morrison (2011), is illuminating. Analysing the

geographical patterns of those convicted of violent dissident activity in the 2007-10 period, the authors found that 47 were from Northern Ireland, but a much higher figure, 120, were from the Republic (with 10 giving addresses in Great Britain). Counties Dublin and Louth were the most heavily represented, though it could be argued that while the home addresses are in the Republic, it is possible that the individuals originate from within Northern Ireland. Interviews conducted by Morrison (2012) however suggest it is more likely that the dissident culture has to be explained with reference to factors beyond the borders of the six counties. A Republican Sinn Fein interviewee, for example, says:

Limerick is one of the strongest parts of Republican Sinn Fein in the south, even if you go to any part of the country. They are capable of doing anything... A lot of them would be political, most of them would be political. But within our youth are armed units, among the Continuity.⁷

What does unite the dissidents, from Ardoyne to Limerick, is the sense that Sinn Fein has sold out on the struggle of the Provisional IRA, and the belief that the current dispensation is a betrayal of the republican cause. Even some of those who stayed the course after the Good Friday Agreement felt that the vote to support the PSNI at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis in January 2007 was a bridge too far. The tables in Appendix 1 show the major surge in military activity followed on directly from this, and those who wish to continue to prosecute the war would see this as sufficient rationale for the continuation of their struggle. That does not mean that they believe the longed-for republic is in sight, but it does mean that they feel a duty to make the present arrangements unsustainable.

How much of a threat are the dissidents?

On November 1st 2012 the group calling itself ‘the IRA’ killed a prison officer called David Black in a high speed assassination on the motorway near the officer’s home in Lisburn. It was the first killing of prison officer for thirty years. It was also the first killing of any member of the security forces since the murder of PSNI officer Ronan Kerr in April 2011, a gap of nineteen months – the longest since records began in 1969. Subsequent to the Black killing there have been a number of other attempts on the lives of security personnel, and it is accepted that the dissidents have the capacity to cause further fatalities. The tempo of the killings however remains far below that which was predicted in 2010, when a flurry of reports suggested the threat was approaching that of the IRA at its peak. At that point it became a commonplace of the literature on the subject, whether from academic or journalistic or official sources, to strike a

note of incipient crisis. The principal academic source for this came from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence at King's College London, and particularly from the work of Martyn Frampton who has warned that 'the danger posed by groups such as the Real IRA and Continuity IRA is at its greatest level in over a decade, and is likely to increase'.⁸ Official sources loaned their support to this thesis. The Chief Constable of the PSNI, Matt Baggott, warned consistently throughout 2010 that the threat from violent republicans was greater than at any time for a decade, and in a further alarming warning the NI Policing Board member and UUP MLA Basil McCrea claimed that he had it on the authority of senior PSNI members that by mid-2010 the dissidents had increased their capacity to 97% of that previously possessed by the Provisional IRA. As a result of the security assessments provided by the PSNI and the UK's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, the threat from dissident republicans was raised from 'moderate' to 'substantial' in September 2010. In February 2011 the Treasury contributed an additional £199.5 million to the PSNI budget, and the NI Executive a further £45 million – an overall increase of 23%.

On October 24th 2012 an updated assessment by the Secretary of State, Theresa Villiers readjusted the threat level in Britain from 'substantial', which means an attack is a strong possibility, to 'moderate', which means an attack is possible 'but not likely' (the al-Qaeda threat was kept at 'substantial'). Villiers was describing the situation in Great Britain, not in Northern Ireland. Expanding on the distinction in an appearance before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on October 30th, she said that the 'sophistication and potency' of the dissident groups was less than it had been a year previously but added the cautionary note that the threat in Northern Ireland had to be kept at 'substantial'. The caution was wise – the killing of David Black came just two days later. A more long-term perspective was provided in the final report of the Independent Monitoring Commission in 2010. The report used measured language to assess the dissident threat in terms of what had come before: 'in terms of weapons, money, personnel and support the present dissident campaign in no way matches the range and tempo of the PIRA campaign of the Troubles'⁹. The statistics bear this out. In fact, the current dissident activity does not match the level of their campaign in the 1999-2002 period, let alone that of the Provisionals at the height of their campaign. The total casualties for the whole of 2011 (1 death, 80 injuries) could be fitted into one day of the peak year of 1972 when the fatality rate ran at an average of 1.3 per day. And, it should be noted, the one killing in the 2011 year, that of PSNI officer Ronan Kerr, produced such a reaction that it was a year before any group accepted responsibility. The unity of all Irish institutions, north and south, in the face of

that killing may have put a brake on the military campaign in the same way that the Omagh bomb forced a tactical retreat in 1998, and may in part explain the gap between the Kerr and Black killings.

There are of course other considerations. The various groups are heavily penetrated by informers, and it is more than likely that the security forces are placing a heavy reliance on these sources to pressurise the various factions in the same way that they forced the IRA to a virtual standstill in the early 1990s. By one account, 8 out of 10 operations attempted by the Belfast Brigade in that period were thwarted,¹⁰ and in the period January-April 2010 security forces estimated that about 50 dissident operations, including planning and targeting, had been disrupted. The announcement in July 2012 of a new united organisation called the IRA may give some greater cohesion, but it is unlikely that the merger between the Real IRA and RAAD came from a position of strength; it is much more likely that it is an attempt to rally the troops in order to be able to remain credible as a threat. The dissidents were presented with a major virility test when the Queen visited Dublin in 2011 and, despite talking it up in advance, were unable to make any significant military or political intervention. The same process was repeated when she and Martin McGuinness had their famous handshake in the Lyric Theatre Belfast in June 2012. Despite the fury vented on the dissident blogosphere no serious challenge was mounted. That does not mean the dissidents are on the verge of defeat, or that defeat even be seen as a meaningful term. The truth is that to succeed in their limited aim of keeping the republican ideal alive the dissidents have only to succeed in a specific number of objectives. The all-island republic may lie beyond the horizon of their ambition, but a number of more short-term objectives have evolved. These are:

- To disrupt the liberal consensus and show by regular acts of violence that the Good Friday settlement has not produced the peace that was promised.
- To drive Catholics out of the PSNI and convert it back to a Protestant dominated force.
- To gain legitimacy as a community police force in nationalist areas by acting against drug dealers, thieves and those involved in anti-social behaviour.
- To agitate in contended situations, particularly during the marching season, in order to maximise adversity between nationalists and state forces, and to provide leadership for militant youth.
- To prompt over-reaction by the security forces – ideally to force a return of the British army onto the streets
- To build capacity to the point where a bombing campaign can be launched in England.

The lack of capacity has kept the dissidents operating at the lower end of their wish list. However much they might wish to stage ‘spectaculars’ they have been forced to put their focus on building a base in local communities. The growth of drug culture and anti-social behaviour has provided them with the opportunity they seek to present themselves as a form of community police. Since the PSNI have to be wary of ‘come on’ incidents staged by paramilitaries, local communities are often left feeling that the police response to emergency calls is too hesitant to be effective, and the slow workings of the criminal justice system grind too slow for those who want to see more immediate retribution. There is an additional benefit for the dissidents with ‘punishment attacks’. The PSNI clearance rate for these shootings is remarkably low – less than 4% for all paramilitary assaults. This makes it an almost risk-free form of activity for the dissident groups.

In short, dissidents have seized a market opportunity. For Sinn Fein, which routinely condemns dissident attacks, the problem is that paramilitary shootings and attacks actually enjoy the tacit support of some of its own members. An exit poll conducted by the Belfast Telegraph at the 2012 Ard Fheis indicated that the majority of delegates would not give information on dissidents to the police — even though the party is appealing to young Catholics to join the PSNI. When asked if they would be prepared to ring the police anonymously and say where dissident weapons were hidden, 36% said they would call but 14% wouldn’t. The rest were undecided. When they were asked if they would appear as prosecution witnesses if they saw a dissident attack on the police only 16% said yes with 60% refusing.¹¹

The dissidents may be incapable of winning a single seat in the NI Assembly, but they have managed to stake their claim as the custodians of the republican mantle. The protracted dirty protest in Maghaberry Prison may have failed to win any concessions from the prison authorities, but it allowed dissident republicanism to align itself with the narrative of the hunger strike. It is the dissidents who now lead the street protests in Ardoyne at the annual setpiece riot on the 12th July, while Sinn Fein representatives are mocked and jostled as they try to restore order. In Ardoyne and other former bastions of mainstream republicanism the dissidents have built upon their role as enforcers of community discipline to present a direct challenge to the authority of mainstream republicanism. The faltering nature of the peace process since the beginning of the loyalist flag protest has weakened the positive narrative that Sinn Fein wishes to place upon events. The narrative of violent republicanism may appear to be from another period, but it is one well understood in the republican heartlands.

Conclusion

Dissident republican violence will continue, but not because the cycles of Irish history have preordained it to be this way. Indeed, to construct such a thesis is to accept that there is a timeless quality to Irish history - in itself an ahistorical construct. The much less mystical fact is that wars everywhere can take on a half-life that allows them to splutter along, and in the case of the Northern Ireland conflict, which lasted three times as long as WW1 and WW2 put together, it is to be expected that rogue forces will want to continue to prosecute the war, however hopeless their prospects. The fact that this was not expected is to do with the euphoria that greeted the Good Friday Agreement, and the sense that the Troubles had ended in a Fukuyama ‘end of history’ moment.¹² With hindsight, the millennial mood that followed the 1998 Agreement was simply too optimistic. Northern Ireland had reached a watershed in its history, but it had not banished all its problems. The persistence of the dissidents is proof of that, and, having continued for 14 years after the accord, they are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

They are however unlikely to present any real threat to the stability of the political institutions. In the language of conflict resolution theory, the dissidents can be seen as a ‘spoiler’ group,¹³ but the results of spoiler activity can be hard to predict, and can on occasion run counter to the intentions of those trying to destabilise a peace process. Northern Ireland is a case in point, where the activities of violent groups have served to consolidate the centre, rather than to fragment it. The shoulder-to-shoulder solidarity shown by Sinn Fein, the PSNI and the DUP in the wake of the killings of the two soldiers at Massereene, or the whole island display of unity following the murder of PSNI officer Ronan Kerr, can be seen as high points of the peace process, rather than representing any dip in its fortunes. The test of public opinion that came in the May 2011 elections showed no evidence of real support for the dissidents – they did not win a single Assembly seat, and their combined vote was less than one per cent.

There will however continue to be a problem for Sinn Fein in the republican constituencies where the ‘micro groups’, as Sinn Fein calls them, are able to bite and nip at their heels, and where some individual leaders develop a neighbourhood swagger, safe in the knowledge that mainstream republicans can no longer exact traditional republican vengeance on them. In those communities the position of the dissidents seems more like that allowed to loyalist paramilitaries in the Protestant heartlands. A certain mandate is granted to them as enforcers of neighbourhood discipline, but this does not transfer into electoral politics. The inability to create one united republican organisation makes them appear unlikely candidates to create the unity of Protestant,

Catholic and Dissenter which, in republican theology, is deemed necessary for the realisation of a 32 county Irish republic.

That fabled republic is not in view. But neither is the end of violent republicanism.

Appendix 1: Statistics on dissident violence

Chart 1: Dissident murders – victims and perpetrators, March 2007-September 2013

PERPETRATORS	VICTIMS						
	British Army	PSNI	Prison officers	Uninvolved civilians	Republican para-military	Loyalist para-military	Total
CIRA	0	1	0	0	2	0	3
RIRA	2	0	0	0	1	0	3
ONH	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
RAAD	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Unspecified dissident	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
IRA	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

The largest category of murder victim is republican paramilitary, in each case executed by their own organisation. Two soldiers were killed at Masserene Barracks, and two PSNI officers Stephen Carroll and Ronan Kerr were both murdered.

Chart 2: Beatings and shootings, 2001-2011

In 2007 Sinn Fein decided to recognise the authority of the PSNI. The sharp increase in shootings that followed shows how dissident activity increased in the wake of this decision.

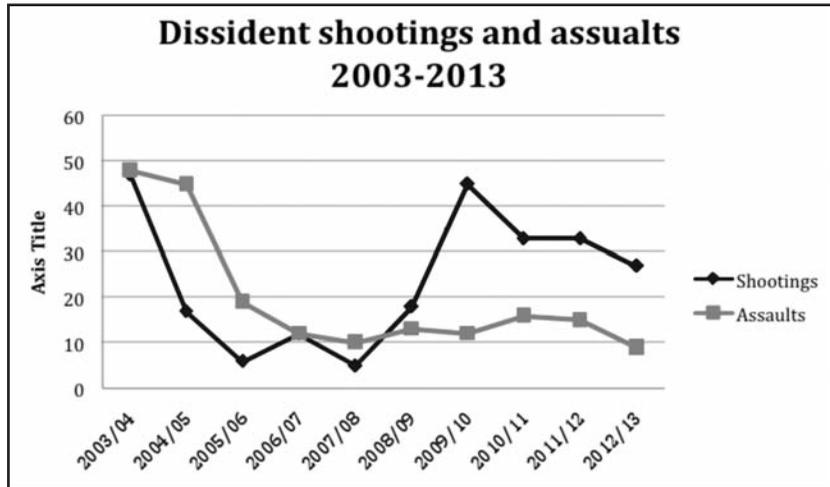


Chart 3: Dissident bombings

The pattern for bombings also shows a decline from 2001 to 2006, with a renewed upsurge beginning in 2007 – again, the resurgence of activity can be seen to follow on from Sinn Fein’s acceptance of policing and justice structures.

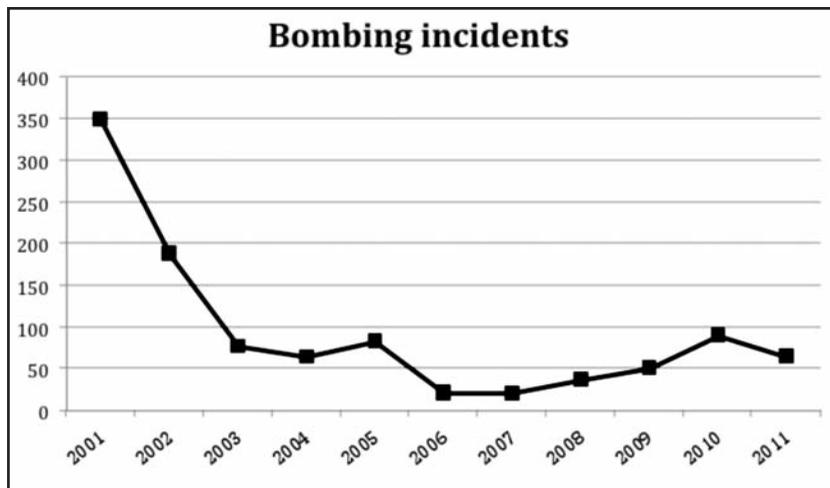


Chart 4: Shootings by Dissident Republicans in Northern Ireland, July 2012- June 2013



This map shows the distribution of shootings across Northern Ireland in the period July 2012 to June 2013. Since loyalists, in accordance with their ceasefire and decommissioning commitments, no longer used guns for their assaults (at least in this period), it is safe to assume that all shooting incidents are the work of dissidents. The map therefore provides a fairly reliable guide to the parts of Northern Ireland where dissidents are most active.

Notes

¹ Belfast Telegraph, 22/4/2011

² Channel 4 News, 24/9/2010

³ Anderson, 1993

⁴ Atram, 2010, XI

⁵ Nalton, Ramsey and Taylor, 2011; Bowman-Grieve, 2012

⁶ Bean, 2012, p.211

⁷ Morrison, 2012, p.31

⁸ Frampton, 2010

⁹ IMC, November 2010

¹⁰ Phoenix, 1997

¹¹ Belfast Telegraph, 29/5/2012

¹² Aughey, 1998

¹³ Stedman, 1997

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