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Chapter Seven

Why Terrorist Campaigns Do Not End: The Case of Contemporary Irish Dissident Republicanism

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Abstract:

The issue of how, why, and when terrorist campaigns come to an end has now become a topic of serious scholarly enquiry.¹ Within such debates, political

¹ Pre-eminent here is the work of A. K. Cronin, especially *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009). See also R. Alonso, 'Why Do Terrorists Stop? Analysing Why ETA Members Abandon or Continue with Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34 (2011); A. K. Cronin, *Ending Terrorism: Lessons for Defeating al-Qaida* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2008); J. Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (London, Routledge, 2009).

historians will want academic analysis to reflect the frequently unpredictable messiness of such endings: when terrorist groups desist, they often do so in ways that involve violent spillage across the historical line which broadly divides conflict from peace. This chapter will focus on one significant case study in terrorist persistence: dissident Irish republican violence in the wake of the decision by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) to bring its own campaign of armed struggle to an end. I will offer a very brief account of dissident republican activity, and then attempt to explain such activity by situating it within a wider hermeneutical framework of nationalism as such. The central argument will be that we can only properly understand dissident Irish republican terrorism if we acknowledge and interpret it as a very recognisable species of nationalist zealotry, with family resemblances to many other nationalisms throughout politics and history in Ireland and elsewhere. Such an account normalises dissident republicanism and seeks to explain its (to some observers, surprising) durability; it does not ignore the non-ideological motivations and dynamics of dissident groups and individuals; nor does it offer any legitimising framework for such ongoing violent republicanism. It does seek to explain this important case of persistent terrorism in ways which are analytically illuminating and also practically constructive, since it will be suggested that only by recognising the fundamentally familiar and politically explicable elements of this blood-stained phenomenon that relevant states and societal actors can respond to it in ways that will minimise human suffering.

Key words: terrorism, counter-terrorism, Northern Ireland, dissident Irish republicanism

I

Who are Ireland's contemporary dissident republicans? Not all Irish republicans who dissent from Sinn Fein's contemporary peace-process orthodoxy have endorsed the use of violence, but the focus of this chapter will be upon those who have done so, and the term dissident republican will be used to refer to these people. According to the UK Security Service (MI5), violent republican dissidents have represented the most sustainedly serious ongoing terrorist danger to the United Kingdom in the recent period. At the time of writing, MI5 assessed the threat to the UK from international terrorism as 'substantial' ('a strong possibility'), while the threat from Northern Ireland-related (principally dissident republican) terrorism in Northern Ireland itself was judged to be 'severe' ('a terrorist attack is highly likely').² The fissiparous terrorist community which has generated this severe threat emerged out of militant

² UK Security Service web site, accessed on 31 July 2014. In descending order, MI5's UK threat levels are: Critical, Severe, Substantial, Moderate, Low. Even if other forms of terrorist threat are judged over time to grow, the broad point remains true: that dissident Irish republican violence in Northern Ireland has been assessed by the UK authorities over recent years as their most sustainedly serious terrorist challenge.

Irish republican disaffection from a peace process politics in Northern Ireland which they considered to be politically unacceptable. Some dissidents have been ex-PIRA members, providing experience, expertise, leadership, commitment, continuity, legitimacy, and also some practical materials. In the words of the then Deputy Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Judith Gillespie, in 2011: ‘There seems to be a slow seepage from old hands, old experienced hands from PIRA, either going back to dissident activity or at least lending some support from time to time, in terms of technical expertise, bomb-making expertise, advice.’³ But this is a process with deep roots and (as so often in the long history of terrorism) there has been a jagged sequence of changes in allegiance, rather than any neatly single fault line in historical development. In 1986 a small group broke away from the Provisionals in reaction to the latter’s decision to end their abstentionist policy towards the Republic of Ireland’s Dublin parliament; the Continuity IRA (CIRA) and its associated political party, Republican Sinn Fein (RSF), were the result. Another rupture came in 1997, when the Provisionals decided officially to endorse non-violent politics; here the Real IRA (RIRA) and its associated political organisation, the 32-County Sovereignty Committee (later Movement, or 32CSM), emerged.

In addition to seasoned ex-Provos there have also been younger, newer recruits to dissident republican ranks (what might be called peace process terrorists: people too young to have been involved in PIRA violence, and who might well have been born after one or both of the Provisionals’ ceasefires of 1994 and 1997). Various groups have emerged in addition to the CIRA and RIRA, including rival groupings adopting

³ Judith Gillespie, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 15 April 2011.

the long-deployed republican name Óglaigh na hÉireann ('Volunteers of Ireland': the Irish-language title long claimed by those seeing themselves as the legitimate IRA) and, more significantly, in 2012 a body styling itself 'The IRA' and bringing together various dissident republican actors.

In comparison with the sustained, high-level violence of the PIRA in its post-1969 campaign, dissident republican violence has been limited. But the violent threat from those Irish republicans who consider physical force to be justified and necessary against British rule in any part of Ireland has now endured for years, after history's most enduring bearers of that flame – the Provisional IRA – eventually changed their mind about armed struggle. Dissident violence baffles many, and generates understandable condemnation. On Tuesday 29 July 2014 in Derry, a dissident gun attack on a PSNI land rover did not manage to kill anybody, but did prompt Ulster Unionist member of the Policing Board Ross Hussey to condemn the those behind he attack as 'fascists'.⁴ Similar denunciations have occurred many times, with dissidents being branded merely criminal, or psychopaths, or gangsters without political support.

By contrast, my argument here is that it is only by situating Ireland's contemporary dissident republicans within the framework of a very recognisable nationalist politics that we can explain them and their persistence.

⁴ *Irish News* 31 July 2014.

II

This requires that we clearly define what we mean by nationalism, and why we consider it to have proved such a uniquely powerful force in shaping the modern world. There are difficulties enough with defining the words ‘nation’ (a body of people considering themselves a distinct group characterized by shared descent, history and culture), ‘national’ (something distinctively characteristic of a nation), and ‘nationality’ (the fact of belonging to a nation, or the identity or feeling related to it); defining ‘nationalism’ is an even more complex process. My thesis is that the true definition and explanation of nationalism lie in the interweaving of the politics of nationalist community, struggle, and power.⁵ Crucial here is the apparent fact that the nationalist idea of community resonates with many of humanity’s deepest instincts and needs: towards security, survival, safety, and protection; towards the fulfilment of economic and other practical needs; towards membership of meaningful, stably coherent, lastingly special, and distinctive groups.

For this process of meaningful group-belonging to work, people require shared means of communication: mechanisms for durable agreement, coherence, and trusting interaction. These can be of various kinds, often being both practical and also emotionally, psychologically valuable and attractive. They include *territory* (an

⁵ For a fuller exposition of my argument about nationalism, see R. English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London, Macmillan, 2006).

attachment to our own special place, to a land which we work, on whose resources we rely, and from whose distinctive features we derive emotional and practical sustenance); practically and emotionally fulfilling alignment with a body of particular *people*; relatedly, notions of communal *descent* (with the partially persuasive claim that, as members of the same nation, we are linked to each other by blood); *culture* (another means of communication and another explanation of why nationalist community so appeals, whether through a distinctively shared language or religion or music or sport or diet or some combination of these kinds of cultural phenomena); perceivedly shared *history* (one's group being seen as enduring, purposeful through time, and rich in past achievements and legacies and potential); an *ethical* dimension (with one's national group not merely typical in what it embodies, but rather characterized by superior moral values, claims, purposes, and obligations); and finally the rather darker feature of nationalist community, that of *exclusiveness* - what your nation specially is, implies and requires a category of what it is not (again, a potentially appealing colour in this picture, in telling a tale of good-versus-evil, in providing comfort and moral certainty and definitive clarity at the same time).

National communities need not possess all of these features (shared attachments to territory, people, descent, culture, history, ethics, and exclusivism). But they do require some of them, and the practical as well as emotional appeal and strength inherent within each of these features helps to explain the existence, durability, and pervasiveness of such communal, national groups.

Nationalism also involves more than membership of such self-conscious community, since it requires struggle: collective activity, mobilization, and even a programmatic striving for goals. Those goals might and do vary, including sovereign independence (of persistent relevance historically in our Irish republican case study here), secession from a larger political unit, the survival or rebirth of national culture, the realisation of economic benefit for the national group, or the recasting of the social order. Again, and tellingly, overlapping motivations can be detected here. Nationalist struggle can simultaneously fulfil an urge towards self-preservation, a very practical pursuit of material interests, a longing for individual and collective dignity, a response to actual or perceived threats, and an urge to avenge past wrongs suffered by one's group. Such nationalist struggle repeatedly evinces a sense of putting right what is wrong in the present. And the dual allure of nationalist struggle should also be noted: there is the instrumental appeal (struggle moving you from undesirable point A to desirable and necessary point B), but there is also the attraction inherent within struggle itself (with its psychological rewards, and its conferring upon both individual and group of the very qualities so prized and cherished by the nationalist movement).

Finally, nationalism is not merely about community in struggle, but also about questions of power. As in our Irish case here, power is what is frequently sought by nationalists (still very often in the form of a state coextensive with the preferred nation); but also the deployment of power in pursuit of nationalist objectives defines and helps to explain nationalist activity. In many historical cases, nationalism has centrally been a politics of legitimizing power: the nation is assumed to be the appropriate source of political authority, and the legitimacy of national power involves the attractive prospect of those in power over your community being like

yourself, coming from your own national group, and strongly representing your own interests and values. Again and again, much of the appeal of nationalism lies in this idea of the national community possessing full sovereignty over itself as a free, independent unit (the *leitmotif* of so much Irish republican politics over many years). Everybody within the nation shares equally in the sovereign power which rules over the group, so any law derives ultimately from one's own equally shared authority. As individuals within the national community we have an equal share in the sovereignty through which decisions are made for us; as such (if one agrees with this nationalist argument), we are supposedly liberated.

This is why state power and self-determination lie so close to the heart of nationalist histories and politics around the world (not least in Ireland itself). And power also lies at the heart of what it is that nationalists actually do, and why nationalism so appeals. Power is deployed by nationalist individuals and organisations and communities in their pursuit of their objectives; power is used as the key leverage in nationalist campaigns for the righting of wrongs, and can be wielded in violent, propagandist, intimidatory, administrative, verbal, literary, and many other forms of persuasion and coercion. This involves mobilisation rather than merely individual action; and the attraction of wielding such power helps to explain the durable appeal of nationalism as part of one's way of life.

So community, struggle, and power offer the interwoven definition and explanation of nationalism and its extraordinary dominance in politics and history. It is not that we cannot find other means of identifying and belonging, or of pursuing change and

acquiring power. But the point is this: the particular interweaving of community, struggle, and power in the form of nationalism, have seemed to many people to offer far grander opportunities than do these other means.

III

If community, struggle, and power do between them define and explain nationalism and its appeal, can this help more deeply to account for the persistence of violent Irish dissident republicanism into the twenty-first century? My argument here is that it can significantly help us to do so, and I want to interrogate a range of primary as well as academic sources in order to explore this.

Attachment to communal territory has been doubly involved. At local level, much dissident motivation has grown from the belonging to and defence of one's particular area against (unionist or loyalist) neighbours and intruders. More broadly, dissidents have been committed to the idea that the problems in Irish society (whether in the north or the south) derive from partition, and they remain wedded to the ideal of an emancipated island territory: a united Ireland free of all British rule.⁶ Territorial

⁶ M. Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard: Dissident Irish Republicanism* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2011), p. 280; J. Horgan, *Divided We Stand: The Strategy and Psychology of Ireland's Dissident Terrorists* (Oxford, OUP, 2013), p. 106.

integrity has been at the core of their politics: as one RSF figure put it in 2008, republicans would ‘continue the struggle until the Brits are gone from our shores’.⁷

Complementing communal territory has been the attachment to particular people (some of them people from small communities of shared descent groups), a fact reinforced by the extremely localised nature of dissident resistance, which has often taken the form of small-scale networks of attachment and activity.⁸ As in previous Irish republican militancy, ideological commitment has been reinforced (and at times dominated) by personal loyalties and associations.⁹ The Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC - set up by the UK and Irish governments to monitor paramilitary activity) commented clearly in 2006 that ‘one feature of dissident republican groups is a tendency for things sometimes to be personality-driven or dependent on family or local allegiances, rather than on ideology’.¹⁰

⁷ Michael McManus, quoted in Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, p. 76.

⁸ Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, pp. 247-8, 262; Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, p. 71, 96-8, 150.

⁹ R. English, *Radicals and the Republic: Socialist Republicanism in the Irish Free State 1925-1937* (Oxford, OUP, 1994), pp. 222-3; for recent dissident republicanism, see J. Morrison, *The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism: The Role and Impact of Organisational Splits* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 139; J. Morrison, ‘Why Do People Become Dissident Irish Republicans?’ in P. M. Currie and M. Taylor (eds), *Dissident Irish Republicanism* (London, Continuum, 2011), p. 25; Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Eighth Report of the IMC (1 February 2006), p. 13.

The role of communal culture has been conspicuous (with an advocacy, for example, of the advancement of Gaelic culture).¹¹ So too has the important attitude towards history. Dissident republicans have remained strong adherents to the idea of an inherited, militant tradition, seeing themselves as flag-bearers for the Irish republican community through time, and as mandated by an historical tradition of armed struggle against English or British rule in Ireland. RSF's paper *Saoirse* exemplified this well in reporting the group's commemoration of the 200th anniversary of rebel Robert Emmet's 1803 execution. The orator at the Dublin event (Sean O Bradaigh) resonantly testified to the martyr's inspiring quality, and also explicitly identified RSF with what he saw as a tradition encompassing a line of famous Irish republican rebels, including 1790s republican Theobald Wolfe Tone and 1916 rebel leaders Patrick Pearse and James Connolly:

There is something special about Robert Emmet, something exceptional and even lovable ... He has inspired scores of biographies and hundreds of songs ... It was on this very day, September 20 1803, at this very spot in front of St Catherine's Church [in Thomas Street, Dublin] and at this very hour that young Emmet died for Ireland on England's gallows tree. Emmet deserves our respect, our admiration, and our gratitude. Were it not for him, and countless other patriots, the Irish nation would long ago have faded away and disappeared in the mists of history. ... We of Republican Sinn Fein, who have

¹¹ R. W. White, *Ruairi O Bradaigh: The Life and Politics of an Irish Revolutionary* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 321.

gathered here today, hold true to Tone's and Emmet's teaching and purpose – to break the connection with England and establish an independent Irish Republic. ... Tone and Emmet, Pearse and Connolly, saw Ireland as one nation of thirty-two counties. They regarded English rule in Ireland as an illegality. Now, two hundred years later, Republican Sinn Fein adheres to the same judgment.¹²

The celebration of anniversaries, the commemoration of heroes and heroic episodes from the Irish past, reinforces dissidents' committed identity, and strengthens their sense that Irish history mandates a certain form of purist politics in the present.¹³ Certainly, key dissident figures have drawn on a very long historical root to their struggle: 'Irish resistance to English aggression ... goes back over 800 years to the

¹² *Saoirse* October 2003. The academic literature on Emmet, Tone, Pearse, and Connolly is now vast and varied. But most historians would be wary of transplanting political programmes as directly as did Mr O Bradaigh from 1798 (the year of Tone's death), 1803, or 1916 into the twenty-first century, preferring instead to stress the historical, synchronic specificity of what motivated these significant rebels. See M. Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989); T. Bartlett, *Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Dundalk, Dundalgan Press, 1997); M. Elliott, *Robert Emmet: The Making of a Legend* (London, Profile Books, 2003); P. M. Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet: A Life* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 2002); C. Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London, Penguin, 2005); F. McGarry, *The Rising. Ireland: Easter 1916* (Oxford, OUP, 2010).

¹³ Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, pp. 190-1.

original Anglo-Norman invasion and colonisation of Ireland’;¹⁴ ‘The Brits – they’re the problem, and will be. They have been since 1169, and will be until such time as they leave.’¹⁵

There is a powerful sense of ethical duty and superiority involved here, with dissident invocations of the famous dead carrying with them a sense of historically conditioned moral obligation to reject compromises of the kind that (for example) Provisional Sinn Fein have made in recent years. To engage in corrupting, partitionist Irish parliaments, to share in the administration of a UK Northern Ireland establishment, to endorse the PSNI, to accept (however reluctantly) the principle of northern consent as necessary to Irish unity, even (in the famous case of Sinn Fein’s Deputy First Minister, and former Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA, Martin McGuinness) to meet amiably with Queen Elizabeth II¹⁶ - all of this is seen by dissidents as transgressing a principled ethical code of republican tradition. So dissidents have been emphatic and repeated in their condemnation of Sinn Fein apostasy within the transformed north. Former IRA member Marian Price (who became involved with the 32CSM) put it to me this way, regarding Sinn Fein and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement: ‘They’ve tried to sell a defeat as a victory’; republican support for peace process politics, according to this view, represented an immoral betrayal of those who had fought the Provisional republican war: ‘To suggest that a war was fought for what

¹⁴ R. O Bradaigh, *Dilseacht: The Story of Comdt General Tom Maguire and the Second (All-Ireland) Dail* (Dublin, Elo press, 1997), p. 1.

¹⁵ George Harrison, interviewed by the author, New York, 30 October 2000.

¹⁶ *Belfast Telegraph* 28 June 2012.

they have today, it diminishes anybody who partook in that war, anybody who died for it, and went out and sacrificed their lives and their liberty.’¹⁷ Rejecting Sinn Fein’s unethical compromise, and sustaining principled resistance, therefore represented a necessary maintenance of the struggle, a keeping of the flame alive.¹⁸ Thus Sinn Fein become added to the list of villains in this political tale: the UK government, the unionist political class and its supporters, and now also treacherous republicans all constitute the excluded outgroup against which authentic and justified dissidents can righteously wage their Manichean campaign.

For the dissident community is also a community very much in struggle. The latter is judged necessary as a means of securing national rights, with dissidents aiming ultimately for an independent and united Ireland, and convinced of the need for armed struggle to bring it about.¹⁹ On this, they are the ones who have remained consistent. Ruairi O Bradaigh, long the dominant figure in RSF, had joined the IRA in the 1950s and he retained a largely consistent form of militant republican purism until his death

¹⁷ Marian Price, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 28 February 2002.

¹⁸ S. A. Whiting, “‘The Discourse of Defence’: “Dissident” Irish Republican Newspapers and the “Propaganda War””, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24/3 (2012); Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, p. 181; Morrison, *Origins and Rise*, pp. 183-5; Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, p. 5.

¹⁹ H. Patterson, ‘Beyond the “Micro Group”: The Dissident Republican Challenge’ in Currie and Taylor (eds), *Dissident Irish Republicanism*, p. 81; Morrison, *Origins and Rise*, pp. 1, 159.

in 2013: ‘I haven’t changed, I am still saying the things that I was saying down the years.’²⁰ Leading figures from another group (the RIRA splinter-organisation Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH)) made clear in 2010 that, ‘An Óglaigh na hÉireann capable of having a sustained campaign will take time to develop. It will take time to develop the structures, personnel, finance and weaponry’; but they retained confidence in future violent achievement: ‘We think a war can create the conditions where republicans can create dialogue that will fulfil republican objectives. A 32-county democratic socialist republic.’²¹

But dissident struggle also appeals because of the inherent rewards that it offers as such. It is the argument of this chapter that we cannot account satisfactorily for dissident republican persistence unless we situate it within nationalist politics; but nationalist politics can involve within it, for some, a variety of types of reward and a complex and overlapping set of motivations. For republican dissidents there have been some financial and criminal benefits at times;²² there are the immediate rewards of comradeship, purpose, kudos, excitement, and adventure;²³ there is the satisfying catharsis of pursuing personal rivalries, individual enmities, and localised

²⁰ Ruairi O Bradaigh, quoted in White, *Ruairi O Bradaigh*, p. 326.

²¹ ONH leaders, interviewed by Brian Rowan, *Belfast Telegraph* 3 November 2010.

²² Morrison, *Origins and Rise*, pp. 193-5.

²³ Morrison, ‘Why Do People Become Dissident Irish Republicans?’, p. 33.

resentments, feuds, and hostilities; and there is the attraction offered by an unyieldingly simple, absolutist form of uncompromised struggle.²⁴

Dissident republican nationalism has also been very much about power. In terms of their ultimate goal, republican dissidents are motivated by the need to undo what they consider the UK's illegitimate rule over the six counties of Northern Ireland. Theirs is a classic self-determination argument about sovereignty, embodying a nationalistic commitment to a free, independent, and united Ireland. In the 32CSM's firm view: 'We reject Britain's right to occupy any part of our country ... Partition perpetuates the British government's denial of the Irish people's right to self-determination.'²⁵ The appeal of fellow Irish nationalists ruling the whole of the island, rather than the north being shaped partly to suit unionist political preferences and agendas, seems clear enough in itself; and it partly explains the potency and durability of militant Irish republicanism, even now.

There seems no imminent prospect of their violence bringing about this sought-after united Ireland. But dissenting from the unacceptable and illegitimate *status quo* is seen as worthwhile in itself, as sustaining a long struggle towards the achievement eventually of legitimate arrangements of power across the whole of Ireland. Those who oppose Sinn Fein's compromises – like the 32CSM's Gary Donnelly – have

²⁴ R. W. White, *Ruairi O Bradaigh: The Life and Politics of an Irish Revolutionary* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 290.

²⁵ Quoted in Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, p. 102.

sometimes shifted from initial enthusiasm for the peace process towards growing disaffection, on the basis that they consider central Irish nationalist rights to power not to have been properly addressed:

I embraced the IRA ceasefire in 1994. I thought, there's movement here, the conflict is over, the issues are going to be addressed. Twenty years on, that's not the reality. The root cause was not dealt with twenty years ago. And if you don't deal with the core issue, the causes of conflict are still there ... it's about violation of national sovereignty.²⁶

The short-term goal has more to do with undermining, thwarting, spoiling, and rendering uncomfortable the existing peace process settlement, than it has about the immediate achievement of a united Ireland. But damaging their mainstream republican rivals in Sinn Fein and preventing a sustained normalisation of peace-process politics would represent a significant denial of what they see as wrongful power. Leading Sinn Feiners have sharp-sightedly noted this aspect of the dissident republican challenge:

In broad societal terms, those who hold to those views – those oppositional, rejectionist views - are an incredibly small minority. ... So in wider societal terms, they are not making an impact. [But] their activities undermine the capacity for Irish republicanism to place itself as a champion of political

²⁶ Gary Donnelly, quoted in the *Irish Times* 30 August 2014.

change across the island. That's the difficulty that they pose for Irish republicanism: that they can actually fray the capacity and the coherence of Irish republicanism to become a truly popular, island-wide political alternative.²⁷

As so often with previous republican violence, therefore, the intra-nationalist dynamics of tension and competition have been hugely important.

Power has been important and appealing also as a means of expression, with local fiefdoms and influence repeatedly evident, and with the violent maintenance of intra-communal power being one which has clearly appealed to dissident groups and individuals.²⁸

The key points about all this are: first, that it is a familiar pattern the world over when nationalist movements emerge and survive; second, that there is nothing inherently insane or irrational about these attachments, albeit that they focus on an unobtainable goal (but then so too do many non-violent political movements). My argument is that it is indeed only by recognising the ways in which dissident zealotry fits the pattern of wider, serious nationalism the world over that we can understand the phenomenon

²⁷ Sinn Fein's Declan Kearney, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 28 July 2011.

²⁸ J. Tonge, 'An Enduring Tradition or the Last Gasp of Physical Force Republicanism? "Dissident" Republican Violence in Northern Ireland' in Currie and Taylor (eds), *Dissident Irish Republicanism*, p. 105.

properly. Respecting the seriousness of the issues involved in this nationalism in no way means that its demands should be ceded. But understanding republican dissidents within this normalising framework of explanation does, I believe, help explain why increasing numbers of people see this commitment as part of a sane and serious ideology, and as one which can be presented as being in tune with previous Irish politics. Like other political actors, dissident republicans display complex motivation,²⁹ and the widespread hostility people feel towards their violent politics should not blind us to this vital fact. To recognize the complicated, explicable nationalism which accounts for the phenomenon will facilitate a more effective response to it than will casual, misleading dismissals and denunciations.

IV

Given that dissident republicans do resemble so many nationalist irredentists across the world and throughout history (including, of course, their Provisional IRA predecessors in Ulster), could dissidents bring about the kind of conflict that endured in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s with much higher levels of violence? The evidence suggests not. There is not the combination now that there was then of Irish nationalist anger and millenarian expectation, of a perceived need for vigilante defence groups to protect Catholics from Protestant attack, of nationalist exclusion from Northern Irish power structures and the northern state, of unionist outrage

²⁹ White, *Ruairi O Bradaigh*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

coupled with unionist power, of heavy-handed state (especially military) clumsiness of response to instability, and of a widespread belief that constitutional politics would fail but that violence might yield victory. This last point is crucial, since even many disaffected members of the northern nationalist minority recognise that if the much stronger PIRA could not bomb their way to a united Ireland, there exists minimal hope of the much weaker forces of republican dissidents proving successful.

So what exists (and what is likely to persist) is a violent threat which is enduring, fissiparous,³⁰ episodically energetic, and occasionally lethal, but far less extensive than the terrorist threats endured in the late twentieth century in Northern Ireland. The IMC reported that between 1 March 2003 and 28 February 2010 dissident republicans had killed 10 people,³¹ compared with the far higher levels of fatal violence practised by the PIRA.³² This should not lead us to assume a static situation. John Horgan's analysis of the period 31 August 1994 to 8 July 2011 suggests a notable rise during the phase from 2009 onwards³³ But this has to be set in long-term context. In April 2011 the PSNI's then Deputy Chief Constable (Judith Gillespie) sharply recognised the growing seriousness of the dissident challenge, but also its limitations when compared to militant republicanism in the past: 'Is the threat

³⁰ Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, pp. 176-7, 180; Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, p. 35.

³¹ Twenty-Third Report of the IMC (26 May 2010), p. 21.

³² R. English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, 3rd edn (London, Macmillan, 2012), p. 379.

³³ Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, pp. 49, 62-3, 71.

growing? Yes. Even since it was assessed in February 2009 as severe, I believe it's got worse.' DCC Gillespie noted that, in early 2011, dissident activity was occurring with 'greater frequency, greater range, greater geographical spread, greater degree of targeting of police officers (on and off duty), greater degree of intelligence gathering, recruitment'. But she added an important note of perspective and proportion too: 'Is the threat level at the same level as it was at the height of the PIRA campaign in the '80s and '90s? No.'³⁴

It is true that a sectarianisation of Ulster violence could change this, were Protestant loyalist paramilitaries to be provoked into retaliatory action against Catholics, and were we therefore to witness sustained, intense inter-communal violence. At present, despite occasional flare-ups, loyalist groups are comparatively quiescent and locally fragmented, and their remnants tend to be criminally- or intra-communally oriented rather than leaning towards a sectarian conflict (despite the deep and ongoing sectarian division in Northern Ireland, and the effective erosion in recent years of a strong political middle ground there). But, were dissidents to try to provoke a loyalist backlash, then political violence might indeed increase. This is calmly reflected in the striking assessment of one ex-UDA leader (Jackie McDonald) in interview: 'If they really wanted to get into it, they would kill a loyalist, a senior loyalist. So they're

³⁴ Judith Gillespie, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 15 April 2011.

only playing at it, really. The dissidents – the dizzies, as I call them – are more of a nuisance to Sinn Fein than they are to loyalism.’³⁵

My argument about nationalist framework suggests that dissident republicanism is likely to represent a long-term phenomenon. As with IRA figures of previous generations,³⁶ so too contemporary dissidents do not consider a strong, popular mandate to be necessary in order to justify their violent struggle.³⁷ But the lack of popular support for that struggle means that it will almost certainly fail in its central, irredentist goal. It is worth noting here the emphatically repeated majorities that exist within Northern Ireland in favour of continued membership of the UK (and the comparatively limited levels even of Catholic nationalist support for the goal of a united Ireland).³⁸

It is also true that dissidents’ capacity to gain ground is limited by the success of Sinn Féin in bringing the bulk of the northern republican community with them in their peace-process politics, and indeed of expanding their support base to become the dominant nationalist party in Northern Ireland. There is no more effective constraint upon dissident vibrancy than an ex-revolutionary, republican movement, now in

³⁵ Jackie McDonald, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 31 January 2012.

³⁶ R. English, *Ernie O’Malley: IRA Intellectual* (Oxford, OUP, 1998), pp. 76-85.

³⁷ J. Tonge, “‘No-one Likes Us; We Don’t Care’: “Dissident” Irish Republicans and Mandates’, *Political Quarterly*, 83/2 (2012).

³⁸ English, *Armed Struggle*, p. 399.

government, and vehemently opposed to dissidents' violent politics. Here, the key predictor of dissident weakness is not necessarily a normalised politics in the north, but rather Sinn Féin strength as seen by the republican community. Reflecting on dissident republicanism and on whether it might grow stronger, Sinn Féin politician Conor Murphy observed tellingly in interview that, 'It's marginal at the moment; that's not to say it couldn't become more serious. The strength of its seriousness very much depends on our ability to do things.'³⁹

Relatedly, political expressions of popular support for dissidents have remained low. In the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections of 2007, the six RSF candidates averaged a minuscule 420 votes each, embodying only 0.4% of those who had voted; in the 2009 Republic of Ireland local government elections, RSF won only 0.01% of the total votes cast;⁴⁰ and one recent estimate had it that a mere 3% of the Northern Irish community offered support for politically violent republican methods.⁴¹

Taken together, all of this evidence suggests that dissident republicanism should not be taken to imply that we are going back to the Troubles; instead, it might be read as

³⁹ Conor Murphy, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 16 December 2010.

⁴⁰ M. Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard: Dissident Irish Republicanism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), pp. 70, 79.

⁴¹ R. Frenett and M.L.R. Smith, 'IRA 2.0: Continuing the Long War – Analyzing the Factors Behind Anti-GFA Violence', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24/3 (2012), p. 387.

indicating that we have not yet entirely escaped them either.⁴² If it is a terrorist illusion on dissidents' part that their violence will bring them victory, it would also be a counter-terrorist illusion for the UK state to assume that republican dissidence is something that is likely to evaporate into non-existence.

V

But terrorism and counter-terrorism tend to exist in a mutually-shaping relationship with one another. What can and should the state do in order to ensure that the ending of the Provisional IRA era is not followed by a growth in serious post-PIRA terrorism? If dissident republican terrorism is indeed best read through the lens of wider patterns of explicable nationalist allegiance, then how should the state respond to it? I have argued elsewhere that the historical experience of terrorism and counter-terrorism suggests a seven-point framework for the most effective response to non-state terrorist violence,⁴³ and I want now to situate our reflections on how best to react

⁴² English, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 402-3; Frenett and Smith, 'IRA 2.0', pp. 391-2; A. Edwards, 'When Terrorism as Strategy Fails: Dissident Irish Republicans and the Threat to British Security', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34/4 (2011), p. 319.

⁴³ R. English, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (Oxford, OUP, 2009), pp. 118-43.

to violent, dissident nationalist politics within that argument, and considering dissidents to be explicable, violent nationalists.

The first point it surely that we have to learn to live with this phenomenon. In the heady wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland there were some who anticipated the complete ending of violence in the region and the establishment of entirely peaceful political processes. But, as we assess the possible futures for new generations of organisation calling themselves the IRA, we should humbly remember how long a sequence of organisational reinventions have occurred in the past during the very long history of militant Irish republican nationalism. It would be naïve to suggest that the history of the IRA has come to an end; and Irish history does not compel us to expect an utterly harmonious relationship between Irish nationalism and a British state which claims and exerts sovereignty over part of Ireland.⁴⁴ To establish the goal of removing all dissident terrorism from the north of Ireland is likely to prove an unrealisable, self-defeating, and rather pointless process. A better ambition would be to manage, contain, and minimise such militancy and disaffection, so that it is as marginal and minor a problem as possible. In doing so, we should recognise both how great an achievement the reduction of republican violence in recent decades has actually been, and also how resilient and durable states and societies can prove in the face of terrorist challenges. Terrorist campaigns tend to end without groups having secured their central goals⁴⁵ - a pattern echoed in the experience of the PIRA, whose

⁴⁴ English, *Irish Freedom*.

⁴⁵ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*; M. Abrahms, 'Why Terrorism Does Not Work', *International Security*, 31/2 (2006).

campaign was aimed at the destruction of the Northern Ireland state, but who ended it on the basis of sharing the administration of that very state;⁴⁶ and even such durably violent terrorist campaigns have seen the state adjust, cope, and endure.

The second point is to bear in mind that, where possible, states should address the underlying root problems and causes behind the violent campaign. Serious terrorism (such as that evident in republican Irish history) tends to be a symptom of profound political difficulties and disaffection. Now the 1998 deal in Northern Ireland (later modified at St Andrews in 2006 and Hillsborough in 2010) has so carefully responded to Irish nationalist grievance regarding the North as to dry up the vast majority of support for ongoing violence. As noted, the central dissident republican demand (for Irish unity) is almost certainly undeliverable at present, given widespread public opinion against it. So it is not the case that we should look at ongoing dissident violence and conclude that, therefore, we should give them what they demand. But the ongoing process of entrenching the broadly popular settlement in Northern Ireland does have implications for the containment of republican violence in future. As in previous episodes of Irish republican history (with the Fianna Fail party in the 1930s and 1940s, for example),⁴⁷ the most credible people to undermine ongoing IRA violence after a settlement tend to be *former* IRA and republican zealots who have now opted for more constitutional politics and who can condemn and oppose dissenting IRAs with greater ease and credibility within their own community than can any British state on its own. This is not to say that, for example, Sinn Feiners

⁴⁶ English, *Armed Struggle*.

⁴⁷ English, *Ernie O'Malley*, pp. 30-2; English, *Radicals and the Republic*.

Martin McGuinness and Conor Murphy are in exactly the same position in which republicans Eamon de Valera and Frank Aiken found themselves in the 1930s. But it is to say that, now as then, people with republican pasts are a key resource in dealing with dissident violence, since they can delegitimise dissidents from the position of strong credentials and credibility within the nationalist community, and also because they are more deeply hostile to their republican rivals than anyone else and are, in practice, now on the state's side.

Here, the role of mainstream republicans is probably of greater advantage to Ulster unionists than most of the latter recognise or admit. What many unionists understandably resent – namely, Sinn Fein political strength and momentum – perhaps remains a necessary insulation against a worse experience of Irish republican militancy in Northern Ireland, since it offers a way of undercutting and limiting and delegitimising dissident campaigns of violence. Contrary to the arguments of some, therefore,⁴⁸ the Northern Ireland case suggests that addressing root causes can lead to a settlement far short of what terrorist groups were killing people to achieve, but popular enough with their constituency to allow for the terrorism broadly to stop. Such endgames seem to point away from the efficacy and sustenance of terrorist violence, rather than towards them.

⁴⁸ Alan Dershowitz comes to mind: *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002).

Third, there remains a need to avoid an over-militarisation of response to dissident republican violence. It is now well-recognised that, in the early, crucible years of the Northern Ireland Troubles, certain clumsily implemented state initiatives helped to stimulate rather than to end PIRA terrorism.⁴⁹ In the current situation, dissident republican strength would also be enhanced were the state to over-react clumsily. This is something of which the UK authorities seem fully aware (hard-learned as it was during the 1970s and 1980s in the North). The police have been clear on the matter: ‘We – the PSNI, as an organization - have to be so careful not to over-react in any way’ to dissident activity and provocation;⁵⁰ even some former Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers with lengthy experience of combating previous IRA campaigns in quasi-military manner have, at times, shown admiration for the restrained state response to contemporary dissident violence.⁵¹ Relatedly, it has been recognised that restraint in the use of the military might well offer the best route forward in dealing with dissident terrorism. Dissidents themselves have been keen both to attack the British Army and also to draw them into a more prominent role in Northern Ireland.

From their own nationalist reading of the conflict, this makes sense. For dissident republicans, the struggle is at root between Ireland and Britain, and so the more that the battle lines can involve British forces other than Ulster-British ones, the better.

⁴⁹ English, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 136-55.

⁵⁰ Judith Gillespie, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 15 April 2011.

⁵¹ Former RUC Headquarters Mobile Support Unit Officer, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 7 June 2011.

Clearly, the British Army has played and still plays an important role in offering ultimate guarantees of order and security in Northern Ireland. But one sustainable lesson of the earlier Troubles is that police primacy makes best sense when dealing with various IRAs. Military action risks heavy-handed counter-productiveness and so military engagement should be kept to an absolute minimum, since there are risks of generating disaffection and of reinforcing dissident arguments that the issue in Northern Ireland is that of an occupying, foreign power. The broader literature on terrorism rather supports such a conclusion, since the perception that there exists a militarily occupying, alien power in one's territory has repeatedly become one of the major sources of recruitment and strength for terrorist groups.⁵²

Police primacy is emerging as a more widely accepted pattern for such crises across the world (including Afghanistan),⁵³ and it certainly makes clear sense in our current case in Northern Ireland. Not only is such a pattern likely to minimize collateral damage and the counter-productive effect of kinetic methods, but police are more often deeply rooted in the local context and community than an Army will generally be able to be. Intimacy of understanding and nuance can be vital resources in fighting terrorism, and this is as true now as in Ulster's violent past.

⁵² R. A. Pape, *Dying to Win: Why Suicide Terrorists Do It* (London, Gibson Square Books, 2006); R. A. Pape and J. K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁵³ S. G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, RAND, 2008).

The fourth point is to recognise that intelligence is the most vital element in successful counter-terrorism. There exists broad agreement in the terrorism literature, and among practitioners who have had experience on the ground, that accurate, extensive and well-interpreted intelligence is a vital resource in fighting terrorism;⁵⁴ this remains crucial in relation to contemporary dissident republicans. The range of questions addressed in such intelligence-gathering is wide. Who are the terrorists? What are they capable of doing, and when, and where? How much support do they have? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What would increase, and what would undermine, their support base? How much material and expertise do they have? On a day-to-day basis, what are they planning and how best can these attacks be prevented?

The fifth point is related, as it affects and defines the practical nature of the intelligence work discussed above: respect orthodox legal frameworks and adhere to the democratically established rule of law. When a terrorist atrocity occurs, there is an understandable instinct towards abandoning normal legal frameworks and restraints, in the desire to deal sharply with those behind such hideous violence. Internationally, this has been evident throughout the history of terrorism and counter-

⁵⁴ A. Roberts, 'The "War on Terror" in Historical Perspective', *Survival*, 47/2 (2005), p. 109; M. Howard, 'What's in a Name? How to Fight Terrorism', *Foreign Affairs*, 81/1 (2002), p. 9; M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 180.

terrorism, from French responses to Algerian violence, through Israeli reaction to Palestinian terrorism, UK responses to the PIRA and, more recently, US post-9/11 policy.

But there are problems with this response. The main one is the practical matter of whether such (sometimes Draconian) legal policies actually work. Frequently, they seem to have at best ambiguous effects. Indeed, restraint and calm professionalism within the context of the normal legal framework will often be the best response, even in the wake of a large-scale atrocity, when the temptation to extend legal powers dramatically will be strongest.⁵⁵ Positively, the key thing to recognise here is that imprisoning people for lengthy terms for terrorist offences is the vital achievement and that this can be done largely through orthodox legal means. With small groups (and dissident IRAs are much smaller than were PIRA) lengthy, key arrests and imprisonment achieved through proper process can seriously undermine capacity.⁵⁶ Moreover, adherence to proper legal procedures reduces the risk of grievance-generation; the PIRA gained considerable propagandist advantage from some of the

⁵⁵ This is the view of some of the most authoritative legal scholars (C. Gearty, *Liberty and Security* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013); L. K. Donohue, *The Cost of Counterterrorism: Power, Politics and Liberty* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008)); but it also fits with what some key anti-terrorist practitioners have argued (M. D. Silber, *The Al-Qaida Factor: Plots Against the West* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁵⁶ Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, pp. 141-4.

miscarriages of justice and transgressions of proper legal process that occurred during the lengthy Troubles period.⁵⁷

Throughout Irish nationalist history, it has been far easier to mobilise support for people wrongly imprisoned or badly treated by the British state, than it has been to gather backing for the activities of violent republican groups whose activities have prompted such imprisonment. This lesson must be remembered. Should there be, for example, another mass-casualty dissident republican attack (something which is a serious possibility), then it will be vital that the right people are imprisoned and through proper and robust legal process, rather than that there be mistakes, transgressions of proper procedures, or anything open to manipulation and propaganda by republican dissidents. To date, most dissident republican campaigns focusing on prisoners have failed to resonate very widely;⁵⁸ from the UK state's point of view, it is important to keep it that way.

Sixth, there is a need to coordinate security-related, financial, and technological preventative measures. The different wings of the UK state facing the dissident threat (the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Office, the British Army, the Security Service, and others) are much more harmoniously cooperative than had been initially the case when the earlier phase of modern republican terrorism arose. Relationships with the relevant actors in other states (especially the Republic of Ireland) have also grown

⁵⁷ English, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 167-71.

⁵⁸ Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, p. 72.

stronger. Nationally and internationally, one aspect of counter-terrorism which repeatedly hampers efforts to deal with terrorist violence is the tendency for different actors in the same counter-terrorist business to lack coordination of their various efforts in the process.⁵⁹ Equally important to note is the fact that many of the best successes the UK enjoyed against the PIRA occurred when inter-agency coordination was at its strongest.⁶⁰ All of the different aspects of counter-terrorist effort must be interwoven if the dissident threat is to be minimised; and a crucial part of this involves the building and sustaining of relevant personal relationships and trust.

Finally, there is a need to maintain strong credibility in counter-terrorist public argument. Credibility is a vital resource in counter-terrorism, and it is more easily lost than regained. It is of value in relation to the potentially disaffected groups who might or might not support dissident violence; and it is of value also in relation to the confidence and trust which the pro-state community in Northern Ireland has in the government and the authorities. For example, one crucial element in restraining loyalists from responding violently to dissident terrorism will be their confidence that

⁵⁹ D. Omand, *Securing the State* (London, Hurst, 2010), p. 175; G. F. Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 5, 56.

⁶⁰ Former RUC Headquarters Mobile Support Unit Officer, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 7 June 2011; C. Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorised History of MI5* (London, Penguin, 2009), pp. 784-5.

the state is effectively and robustly identifying and dealing with the dissident challenge.

States can very often rely on an honest depiction of realities in countering terrorist argument, rather than a series of tempting distortions; so it is a mistake to resort to caricature or falsifiable claims in trying to exaggerate the gap between the state and the terrorists. In relation to contemporary dissident violence, the UK government's basic case is such a strong one that it requires no exaggeration: dissidents offer no viable alternative to the existing arrangements in Northern Ireland, and their left-wing politics often tends towards the impossibilistic;⁶¹ neither side in the North can expect to win through violence, given the balance of communal forces involved; terrorism causes appalling suffering for some and a worsening of life for very many; the economic wastage caused by dissident activity seriously damages education, health, and other welfare provision; if bombing was going to solve the Northern Ireland problem by bringing about a united Ireland then it would have done so years ago; and so on. This being so, there is therefore no need to resort to the caricaturing of dissidents with claims that they are merely criminals and gangsters, that they are psychopaths, that they are evil and insane, that they have no politics or principles, that they have no support. Most people in Northern Ireland will never support Dissidents anyway; those who might have some sympathy for them will have it reinforced if the government's depiction of dissidents lacks credibility.

⁶¹ Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, p. 239; Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, p. 121.

I have argued that violent republican dissidents will continue to form part of Northern Irish reality, despite the extraordinary (and in many ways very benevolent) changes to that society in recent decades. The argument has been that they are entirely explicable within the framework of nationalism, and that reading them in this way allows for a coherent response which will limit their capacity to undermine peaceful politics. Dissident republicans represent the latest link of a seemingly indefatigable militant tradition; as such, they will probably prove enduring in one form or other. But it is important to conclude by recognizing that, while Irish republican terrorism has not ended, nor does it carry the day with even most harder-edged republican enthusiasts. In the words of one (non-Sinn Fein, but also now emphatically non-violent) ex-IRA Volunteer's view of republican dissidents, 'Physical force republicanism has been totally put beyond the Pale, and the existence of groups which misguidedly adhere to this philosophy only play into the hands of the unionists and Sinn Fein, allowing them to claim the moral high ground.'⁶² Irish republican terrorism may not have died out; but its dynamics have so changed that it might now become enduringly marginal.

⁶² Ex-IRA Volunteer, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 26 November 2012.