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The unfinished revolution of ‘dissident’ Irish republicans: divergent views in a fragmented base

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ABSTRACT

In April 2019, a so-called ‘dissident’ republican New IRA gun-man killed journalist Lyra McKee, whilst firing at police during a riot in Derry in the North of Ireland. The New and Continuity IRAs remain wedded to an armed campaign for Irish sovereignty, drawing legitimacy from partition and the ongoing British ‘presence’ in Northern Ireland – and rejecting the significance of altered conditions within the state. Conversely, independent ‘dissident’ republicans, formerly in the Provisional IRA, criticise the ongoing campaign by the groups as futile. This article examines key areas of debate *within* the ‘dissident’/radical republican base, on armed actions at present – drawing on unpublished qualitative interviews with independents, the RSF Movement, and *Saoradh*, – the organisation believed to be the political wing of the New IRA. This article assesses the nature of the campaign waged by the Continuity and New IRAs and examines whether it represents a continuation of the Provisional IRA campaign, or a new departure.

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KEYWORDS Continuity IRA (CIRA); dissident republicanism; Lyra McKee; New IRA; Óglaigh na hÉireann; Provisional IRA (PIRA); Real IRA (RIRA); Republican Sinn Féin (RSF); Saoradh; 32-County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM)

Lenin the old Bolshevik used to say never play with armed insurrection. You can’t afford to play with it because it’s too serious, it’s too crucial. It’s too dangerous to play with armed insurrection because if you’re not able to deliver, or if you don’t have a reasonable prospect of delivering, then you’re playing with it.

-Tommy McKearney, Interview with the author, Monaghan

First and foremost [our aim] is to destabilise. But the aim of the Movement would be to rebuild. We’ve been in situations where there’s been sporadic attacks; and the same things that was levelled against the volunteers back then- you know asking is it worth it? Is it going to achieve anything? And the Movement has come out and shown that it can rebuild and it can come out as a fighting force.

-RSF Movement, Interview with the author, North Armagh

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Introduction

On 18 April 2019, a New IRA gun-man killed 29 year-old journalist Lyra McKee in Derry, when firing at the PSNI¹ during a riot. The New IRA sent a statement to the *Irish News* which read 'In the course of attacking the enemy Lyra McKee was tragically killed while standing beside enemy forces. The IRA offer our full and sincere apologies to the partner, family and friends of Lyra McKee for her death'.² Lyra McKee's killing provoked widespread condemnation locally and internationally, as well as across the political spectrum within the North of Ireland. Notably, condemnation also came from *within* the so-called 'dissident' republican base, including from Gary Donnelly, a former spokesperson for the 32-County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM)³ who is now an independent Councillor in Derry, having topped the poll in May 2019.⁴ Commenting on the killing, Donnelly said 'an innocent woman is dead because of a reckless act . . . I would plead with those behind this attack to desist from any further attacks and seriously consider the consequences of their actions'.⁵

The New IRA is the most recently formed (and believed to be the most active) armed 'dissident' republican group who are continuing with their campaign for Irish sovereignty. The other active armed group (and the oldest) within the 'dissident' base is the Continuity IRA (CIRA). It is widely believed that Saoradh is the political wing of the New IRA and Republican Sinn Féin (RSF) is the political wing of the Continuity IRA, although the organisations deny this. 'Dissident' (or radical) republicanism refers collectively to republican organisations and individuals who are critical of Sinn Féin and the Provisional Movement, and of the political process in which they are engaged; and many so-called 'dissidents' are former members of Sinn Féin or the Provisional IRA (PIRA).

'Dissident' breakaway groups, from the Provisional Movement (or Sinn Féin), represent the latest divisions in Irish republicanism. Since the 1920s republicanism has endured several major splits, leading Brendan Behan to famously quip that for republican organisations the first item on the agenda is the split. The 1969 split resulted in the formation of the Provisional IRA, which broke away from the Official IRA. Between the 1920s and 1986 major splits occurred over recognition of the southern state (which resulted from partition), as well as the use of armed struggle.⁶ Post '86 splits from the Provisional Movement, resulting in the so-called 'dissident' organisations, occurred over issues such as acceptance of the consent principle a central tenet of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement or legitimacy of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Support for 'dissident' groups has been marginal compared to the majority of nationalist/republican support commanded by Sinn Féin.

Gary Donnelly's comments on McKee's killing are reflective of the fact that the 'dissident'/radical republican base contains a spectrum of opinion.⁷ The

'dissident' base does not contain any central organisation or structure, but rather exists in the form of a number of organisations and individuals (independents). Contrary to mainstream portrayal of the 'dissident' base as synonymous with violence, it comprises a spectrum of opinion on current armed actions, from unequivocal support to condemnation. The level of fragmentation within 'dissident' republicanism, and the number of organisations, is reflective of the various points at which different groups broke away from Sinn Féin or the Provisional Movement and formed another organisation.⁸ Within the 'dissident' constituency, attitudes to current armed actions exist broadly within two camps.

The *first camp* expresses outright support for current armed actions, emphasising the fact that political and socio-economic contexts do not impact the campaign for Irish sovereignty. It argues that altered structural conditions within Northern Ireland do not impact the legitimacy of the campaign; it then concludes that no distinction should be made between the legitimacy of the PIRA campaign and that of the New and Continuity IRAs. Public support does not signify in relation to the campaign, as previous generations did not have mass support for their campaigns and were no less legitimate. The first camp argues that the Provisional IRA leadership failed, not the *methods*, and it maintains a fidelity to the right to engage in armed actions to attain the sovereignty of Ireland, as expressed in the 1916 Proclamation. This position is mainly occupied by Republican Sinn Féin, the 32CSM and Saoradh.

The *second camp* argues that the PIRA campaign was justified, but the campaigns waged by the armed groups today are not justified due to altered structural and socio-economic conditions within Northern Ireland. It stresses the need for public support and points to a lack of support for a current campaign; without public support, the camp argues, the campaign has no chance of succeeding, and lacks any moral basis. Republicans may have a *right* to engage in armed activity, but *tactical* decisions must be made regarding when that right should be exercised. This position is mainly occupied by independent republicans who are former members of the PIRA and who argue that it was right to end the PIRA campaign. They remain critical of the direction in which Sinn Féin has moved, simultaneously condemning the campaign of the Continuity and New IRAs.

Widespread condemnation (in the mainstream) of republican armed actions is unlikely to impact the armed groups; however, more notice may be taken of criticism from *within* the so-called 'dissident' base. This article will examine whether the killing of Lyra McKee marked a defining moment within 'dissident' republicanism and will provide an assessment of divergent attitudes within that constituency towards a current campaign. There is not a readily available archive of IRA material on which to draw; as illustrated by Bowyer Bell who, when writing about the IRA in 1990, stated that 'the

problem for the inquisitive is that a secret army in the midst of an armed campaign prefers to remain secret. Thus, even more than in the years before the present troubles, the only reliable sources are people . . . there appears to be no other approach to a secretive army'.⁹ In this context, qualitative interviews prove an invaluable source in providing insight into the ideology and strategy of those involved, – from which we can draw causal explanations. Key studies on republicanism, to date, have made valuable use of interviews, including Richard English's *Armed Struggle*, J. Bowyer Bell's *The Secret Army: The IRA 1916–1979*, Robert W. White's *Out of the Ashes: An oral history of the Provisional Irish Republican Movement*, Ed Moloney's *A Secret History of the IRA*, Ruán O'Donnell's *Special Category: The IRA in English prisons* (volumes 1 and 2) and Brendan O'Brien's *The Long War: The IRA & Sinn Féin*.

Based on a similar premise, this article draws on previously unpublished in-depth qualitative interviews conducted by the author in October 2020 with key players in 'dissident'/radical republicanism, including independents Anthony McIntyre and Tommy McKearney¹⁰ who are former members of the PIRA; a spokesperson for the wider RSF Movement in North Armagh who is a former CIRA prisoner¹¹; and Damien (Dee) Fennell, who is a former prisoner in Maghaberry,¹² and a founder member of Saoradh (formed 2016) and Ard Chomhairle member (ruling Executive) 2016–2021.¹³ Saoradh is believed to be the political wing of the New IRA. However, they strongly deny this. Fennell's interview is the first time that a member of the Saoradh leadership has discussed in-depth the killing of Lyra McKee and its aftermath, providing unprecedented insight into the organisation's views on the killing and its impact on Saoradh.

The killing of Lyra McKee shone a spotlight back onto the campaign of the Continuity and New IRAs and provided for a reassessment of continuing armed actions. The qualitative interviews contained in this article provide an in-depth examination of the key areas of debate within that base, between those who advocate continued armed struggle and those who oppose it. Essentially, this article examines why Lyra McKee was tragically (though unintentionally) killed on 18 April 2019, and the opposing views, on armed struggle, within the base in its aftermath.

'Dissident' actions in an altered landscape

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement was seen as heralding a new era in the politics of Northern Ireland, relegating large-scale violent conflict to the past. In 1997, the Provisional IRA (PIRA) declared a permanent cessation of activities. Then, in 2005, it decommissioned its weapons signalling that any *tactical* return to armed struggle was no longer considered an option. On the 28 July 2005 a statement from 'the leadership of Óglaigh na hÉireann'¹⁴ formally ordered an end to the armed campaign, stating that all IRA units

had been ordered to dump arms. The statement, signed P. O'Neill read 'all Volunteers have been instructed to assist the development of purely political and democratic programmes through exclusively peaceful means'.¹⁵ The message was clear; the Provisional IRA's war was over and efforts would be directed into the peace process and the political strategy of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin spokespersons have emphasised that, if there was another way forward, they would take it; for them the Good Friday Agreement, and consent principle contained within it, presented a viable alternative through which they could pursue their political aims.

The PIRA statement also read 'We reiterate our view that the armed struggle was entirely legitimate'.¹⁶ Whilst the Provisional leadership continued to assert the legitimacy of the Provisional campaign, in equal measure it denounced as illegitimate, the campaign waged by so-called 'dissident' groups, with Sinn Féin spokespersons often calling on those organisations to vacate the stage. Sinn Féin has labelled 'dissident' armed activity as attacks on the peace process and has argued that those responsible have nothing to offer the community. For the Provisional Movement, altered conditions within the Northern Ireland state has removed the justification for an armed campaign. In response, 'dissident' groups have criticised Sinn Féin as abandoning the traditional republican position and have dubbed them constitutional nationalists.

Against a backdrop of PIRA decommissioning, armed actions persisted from the Continuity IRA (CIRA), formed in 1986, as its political wing Republican Sinn Féin (RSF) carried CIRA messages and statements online and in their monthly newspaper *Saoirse*. Armed activity also continued from Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH),¹⁷ formed in 2009, who were seen as sharing a position with Republican Network for Unity (RNU).¹⁸ The Real IRA (RIRA), formed in 1997, also continued with their campaign as their message was carried by their political counterpart the 32-County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM),¹⁹ though the organisation has remained relatively inactive since 2010. This is partly a consequence of the fact that in 2012 a significant portion of the RIRA merged with Republican action against drugs (RAAD) and independent republicans to form the New IRA, which simply refers to itself as 'the IRA'.

In contrast to the intense campaign waged by the Provisional IRA, the campaign fought by armed 'dissident' groups has been low-level and sporadic in nature with occasional attacks aimed predominantly at police and the prison service. As noted by Whiting, incidents such as the killing of police and prison staff, and the Omagh bombing in 1998 which killed 29 people, are exceptions within the overall pattern of low-level activity.²⁰ Please see [Table 1](#) for a brief timeline of some key armed activity from 'dissident' groups between 1998 and 2016 which resulted in fatalities or serious injury.

Other activities during this period, and since, include punishment beatings and shootings directed at drug-dealers, mortar bombs, petrol bombs, letter

bombs, and the use of hoax devices to lure the PSNI to a scene where an attack is then launched. As demonstrated in [Table 1](#), attacks may be low-level and occasional, but they are consistently potentially fatal. Consequently, the official threat level for 'Northern Ireland-related terrorism' has remained severe since 2009 meaning that an attack is highly likely. PSNI security situation statistics show that between 1 April 2019 and the 31 March 2020 there were 21 bombing incidents, 40 shooting incidents, 30 firearms seized and 774 rounds of ammunition found.²¹ Geographical pockets of 'dissident' armed activity exist in Belfast, Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh and North Armagh. Whilst armed attacks from 'dissident' groups predominantly take place in the North of Ireland, membership also exists in the South. Planning, organisational, and training activities have taken place in the South as evidenced by the number of prisoners in Portlaoise prison, which is approximately 26. Overall, there are approximately 60 republican prisoners in prisons in Ireland, the majority of whom are affiliated with Saoradh or the New IRA, the organisation which has been deemed the most active and capable.²²

Continuation of struggle or something new?

The killing of McKee brought into sharp focus the strongly opposing views that already existed within the 'dissident' base on armed actions at present. Independent republicans such as Anthony McIntyre and Tommy McKearney have openly criticised the armed campaigns waged by the groups and have previously articulated their views on *The Pensive Quill*, *Socialist Voice*, the *Blanket* and *Fourthwrite* amongst other platforms.²³ A majority of independents are former members of Sinn Féin or the PIRA and their attitudes to current armed actions are influenced by their views on the origins and ending of the PIRA campaign.²⁴

Collectively, 'dissident' republicans generally agree on the right to armed action, but they disagree on when that right should be exercised. It is unlikely that moral arguments, made against armed actions, such as those articulated by mainstream political actors, will have any resonance with 'dissident' groups. But the views of McIntyre and McKearney provide a valuable analysis, from within the 'dissident' family, of why armed actions should stop. As individuals who fought in the Provisional IRA campaign, their arguments are grounded in factors beyond the ethics or morality of armed struggle. By juxtaposing the opposing positions within 'dissident' republicanism on a current armed campaign, this article provides an insight into the ongoing key areas of debate in that base.

McIntyre and McKearney have argued that the PIRA campaign was justified but that the campaign waged by the Continuity and New IRAs is not justified due to changed conditions in the North of Ireland. Similar to the Sinn Féin position, independent republicans have argued that changed structural

conditions within the Northern Ireland state, including the end of discrimination against Catholics in housing and jobs, removed the moral justification for an armed campaign. Conversely, RSF and Saoradh have argued that the IRA campaign was fought for Irish sovereignty (and nothing less) and therefore altered structural conditions within Northern Ireland do not affect traditional republican ideology. In fact, the 'dissident'/radical republican narrative argues that it was Sinn Féin's constitutionalism that delivered 'civil rights' rather than sovereignty; an argument neatly summed up in the often-quoted speech by Bobby Sand's sister Bernadette Sands-McKevitt²⁵ when she stated that 'Bobby did not die for cross-border bodies with executive powers. He did not die for nationalists to be equal British citizens within the Northern Ireland state'.²⁶

Tonge has argued that (in 1998) 'What had been seen as an unacceptable "unionist veto" by different strands of republicanism was now accepted as a legitimate requirement for unionist consent for unity. The history of the Provisional IRA's "war" was rewritten somewhat, as one waged against an orange state (a war arguably won in 1972) and designed to achieve equality for Northern nationalists (structural imbalances had largely disappeared by the end of the 1990s)'.²⁷ The removal of the discriminatory regime in March 1972 was a victory; but it did not fulfil the ultimate objective of the PIRA of Irish sovereignty, – an argument advanced by Tonge. Rather, it was a stepping stone *on the way* to Irish unity. 'Dissident' republicans have continued to argue that the war was fought for sovereignty and nothing less; and those advocating its continuance do so on the basis that sovereignty has not yet been achieved.²⁸

Within the radical republican base contested narratives exist on whether current armed actions can be located as the latest phase in the one long campaign; or more specifically as a continuation of the campaign waged by the PIRA. Tonge has argued 'despite claims to the contrary from "mainstream" republicans, the so-called "dissidents" do represent historical continuity, a strand of irreconcilable republicanism impervious to hostility or isolation'.²⁹ The New IRA styles itself simply the IRA, pointedly rejecting implications that it is something new. Similarly, the CIRA has emphasised the continuity of the one long campaign. The Continuity and New IRAs view the current period as simply a lull in republican activity similar to previous periods of low-level IRA activity, as demonstrated by an RSF spokesperson in North Armagh:

From a republican perspective we have to acknowledge that there is no large-scale campaign at the moment. But for the Republican Movement, we've been here before. We would contrast this with the 40s and 50s where there wasn't a large-scale campaign. We are coming on the back of the treachery that was inflicted upon the Movement and it's the job of republicans now to rebuild that Movement'.³⁰

As Frampton argues 'there is a part of the collective republican psyche which holds that, regardless of circumstance or present adversity, the movement will always return and, ultimately triumph'.³¹ Whilst the CIRA was not involved in the killing of Lyra McKee, when asked about it, a spokesperson for the RSF Movement commented:

From the Movement's point of view we would always say that armed action is legitimate, provided that it is controlled and disciplined. So yes we all have to acknowledge that the killing of Lyra McKee was damaging for the Movement the same way the La Mon bombing in Belfast was damaging for the Movement, Enniskillen was damaging for the Movement; and we have to take stock of where we're at and to again caution those that, whether it be publicly or not, are willing to engage in armed actions- that they have a moral responsibility as well to ensure that any armed action is controlled and disciplined.³²

The location of McKee's tragic killing within the spectrum of incidents undertaken by the PIRA, such as the Enniskillen bombing in 1987³³ or the La Mon bombing in 1978,³⁴ further demonstrates the CIRA's conceptualisation that current armed actions are a continuation of the one long republican campaign. There is a deliberate reference to La Mon and Enniskillen in an attempt to point out that the PIRA also undertook armed actions that unintentionally resulted in the loss of civilian life, what has been referred to by republicans as unintended casualties of war.

Independent republicans such as McIntyre and McKearney have rejected the groups' assertions that they are the latest phase of one long republican campaign. Rather, they have emphasised that the PIRA campaign, in which they took part, arose from a specific set of circumstances within the state of Northern Ireland (whilst drawing on republican tradition).³⁵ For McIntyre and McKearney conditions within the state were key to the formation of the Provisional Movement. Both have cited the attacks on Bombay Street in 1969, the raids for IRA weapons on the Falls Road in 1970, the Falls Curfew in 1970, internment in 1971 and Bloody Sunday in January 1972 as key events in the creation of the PIRA,³⁶ with McIntyre stating that 'Once we'd Bloody Sunday the die was cast . . . So they were key events in shaping the Provos which don't exist today . . . I think that the Provos were time specific but drew on republican tradition'.³⁷ Similarly, Bean has suggested that 'Provisionalism was not a mere reproduction of tradition. Its military and political practice reflected the harsher urban tones and contemporary experiences of the 'war zone''.³⁸ When asked if the New IRA's campaign is the same as the PIRA's McIntyre commented:

No they are not the same campaign as the Provisionals. The Provisionals, you can argue, were a powerful social protest movement. The real conditions for the insurrection, the energy that went into the Provisional's, had nothing to do with the border; it had to do with the conditions in the North and the way that the nationalist community and Catholics were treated in the North. The Provos

represented an insurrectional energy that doesn't exist. The Provos were not a political cult. They were a political movement.³⁹

McIntyre argues that the Provisionals were a product of the circumstances in which they were born, – as defenders of Catholic areas against communal violence. He refers to them as a social protest movement due to that wider context and energy. McIntyre argues that, in contrast, 'dissident' armed groups do not possess the same insurrectionary energy; nor do they reflect social trends in society, in a way that the Provisionals did. Rather, he has criticised them as removed from wider political realities and has argued that they are simply repeating old republican mantras, – hence like political cults.

Regarding the prevailing narrative 'that the Provisionals arose like the Phoenix "Out of the ashes"', White has cautioned that 'Certainly young people flocked to the IRA after August 1969, and many of them ended up in the Provisionals. But teenagers in Belfast, defending their neighbourhoods, did not create the Provisional IRA or the Sinn Féin Caretaker Executive.'⁴⁰ White quotes Gerard Magee, a pre '69 IRA volunteer, who in *Tyrone Struggle* said 'I didn't need to be struck over the head by an RUC baton to become an active republican'.⁴¹ Like Magee, other founders of the PIRA, such as Billy McKee in Belfast were active in the IRA prior to 1969. 'Dissident' republicans who were involved in the PIRA campaign have almost universally argued that their driving force was Irish sovereignty.⁴² The *raison d'être* of the PIRA campaign, which emerged in 1969, remains an area of contestation and impacts views on a campaign at present. As English aptly stated 'the most persuasive analysis of the IRA will concentrate less on whether their war was justified than in careful explanation of why it happened'.⁴³

There is some symmetry between the position of independents and Sinn Féin regarding the PIRA's *raison d'être*. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many independents within the radical republican base were supportive of the PIRA ceasefires in the 1990s, including Anthony McIntyre, Gerard Hodgins, Richard O'Rawe, and Tommy McKearney who has stated 'The IRA ceasefire came at a time when I thought it was the rational option to take; that little could be achieved by continuing with armed campaign at that stage'.⁴⁴ Independents have argued that it is perfectly compatible to be supportive of the PIRA ceasefires whilst being critical of Sinn Féin. McKearney has explained 'By the beginning of the '80s I had noticed that the Sinn Féin party was starting to use the term nationalist to appeal to the nationalist population which I found worrying and concerning because it brings us back into an older position of Redmondism, nationalism or ethnic identity as distinct from the common identity of citizenship'.⁴⁵ He continued that Sinn Féin was 'determined to pursue parliamentary policy' and referenced Sinn Féin's decision to end its policy of abstentionism, stating 'I believed that it was going to end up in a helpless hopeless reformist

position and I left the Provisional IRA at that stage and that was the reason. I have little reason to change my mind since'.⁴⁶

Anthony McIntyre was also supportive of the PIRA ceasefire stating that he came to the conclusion that 'it can't continue because we are not capable of changing any more'.⁴⁷ His criticism of the Provisional Movement is directed at the message they have put out since, stating 'let's not pretend that we are substituting one strategy for a better one. We are not. We are giving up and I said I don't mind us having to surrender. Patrick Pearse surrendered. But let's see what the terms of surrender are. There's no united Ireland on this agenda. Sure it's all ring fenced in by the consent principle. That's what's being discussed'.⁴⁸ For many across the radical republican base their opposition to the principle of consent⁴⁹ is more fundamental than the PIRA ceasefires. McIntyre continued:

The Good Friday Agreement marked the failure of the Provisional IRA campaign. So I mean they didn't achieve anything that they fought for and they got all the things that they fought against so in a sense the way it turned out it would have made more sense being the military wing of the SDLP because the SDLP's objectives were all achieved.⁵⁰

The reasons behind McIntyre and McKearney's support for the PIRA ceasefires in the 1990s give some insight into why they reject armed actions by the Continuity and New IRAs at present. They argue that changed structural conditions within Northern Ireland removed justification for continuing with armed actions; and point to the fact that justification for the PIRA's campaign, which started in 1969, was underpinned by the conditions in which it emerged.

Republicanism has traditionally encompassed a broad church of varying positions on the pillars of socialism and nationalism, as well as a spectrum of opinion on armed struggle. It is therefore unsurprising that in the contemporary period, what is known as 'dissident' republicanism, is a highly fractured base. The way in which the word 'dissident' is commonly used in the mainstream, has resulted in some from within that base challenging the word, asserting that 1) republicans have always been dissidents by nature, 2) they have not changed their position and 3) many were active in republicanism prior to the formation of the Provisional Movement in 1969. The Honorary President of the 32CSM Phil O'Donoghue in Kilkenny was active on the Brookeborough raid with Sean South in 1957,⁵¹ Billy McKee of Belfast was imprisoned for his republican activity in every decade between the 1930s and 1970s and Ricard Behal in Killarney was active in the Republican Movement from around 1956. Peig King who was the patron of RSF, from 2015 until her death in 2019, first marched in Cumann na mBan⁵² uniform in 1947. Significantly, not only has the word dissident been contested, but debate has developed within radical republicanism around the very definition of republicanism and the place that armed struggle occupies within that.

In the mainstream, the word dissident has become synonymous with the armed groups leading Tommy McKearney to argue:

The use of force is very much a political option but if republicanism is equated just simply with the use of force then it makes it a fetish. It's not a philosophy, it's a fetish and this is what has brought down those breakaway groups from the Provisional IRA because they have defined republicanism purely through the use of force. They have not looked beyond the use of force. So instead of a philosophy what they have is a fetish which has rewarded them richly with no support and massive infiltration.⁵³

McKearney continued 'This thing that there is such a thing as physical force republicanism. It doesn't make sense. Republicanism is about establishing a Republic and then the question becomes how do we define the Republic that we want and that's why I say that I'm in support of a Worker's Republic and then let's talk about that'.⁵⁴ Unlike many others within the radical republican base, McKearney includes Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil within the republican spectrum and has stated about Sinn Féin 'If they're not monarchists then they're republican but I'll be attempting to establish the Republic that I want and they are not. That's where I draw the line. Is their Republic my Republic? and I'm saying it's not'.⁵⁵

Mandate and popular support

The contemporary Sinn Féin message emphasises its electoral support and mandate, both North and South, and a dominant criticism levelled at so-called 'dissident' groups is that they do not possess a mandate; and therefore, nor does the associated armed campaign. With the exception of RSF Councillor Tomás Ó Curraoin in Galway, RSF, the 32CSM nor Saoradh possess an electoral mandate; however, nor do they seek one. For many radical republicans the dreaded road to constitutional nationalism and 'sell out' is paved with *tactical* decisions, particularly in relation to elections. The base is ever vigilant of tactical changes which compromise traditional republican ideology. Historically, Irish republicanism has not taken its legitimacy from the electoral process and the 'dissident'/radical republican narrative has pointed to previous generations and asked where was the electoral mandate for 1916, Tom Williams in the 1940s or the 1956–62 border campaign?⁵⁶ A distinction is drawn between electoral support and legitimacy and radical republicans reject conflation of the two by the mainstream. As stated by Tonge 'For those whose 'war' has still not ended, the supposed 'mandate' comes from the necessity of resistance to 'foreign occupation' and from history, via the supposed popular will of the Irish people when last expressed as a single unit in 1918'.⁵⁷

RSF do not contest local elections in the North due to the test oath, a declaration against terrorism.⁵⁸ In section 4.5 of the Saoradh constitution, the following objective is stated: 'through the contesting of elections where the contesting of such elections is deemed to advance our national objectives'. However, Saoradh have not as yet contested elections and in fact in 2016 the party asked the electorate to vote with their feet by staying at home and argued that voting in elections to the partitionist institutions conferred a legitimacy on Stormont that it does not possess.⁵⁹ Dee Fennell has explained the Saoradh position on elections:

We have a position where we will fight elections where we believe it's strategically beneficial to the party and to the Republican struggle. People sometimes conflate electoralism and electoral mandate with legitimacy which I think is a fallacy. If you're not elected it doesn't mean that you don't have legitimacy. It doesn't mean you don't have support. It can mean a multitude of things. It can mean you're keeping your powder dry for another day.⁶⁰

Fennell has also answered where the party takes its legitimacy from, if not from the polls:

It takes its legitimacy from the historical right of the Irish people to resist Britain's occupation, to resist partition and to resist all the manifestations of either partition or occupation. So we derive our legitimacy ultimately from the will of the Irish people that has been expressed various times. I mean the vast majority of political parties in Ireland and the vast majority of people that vote in Ireland want to see a united Ireland in the first instance, so on that I think we are right. People might disagree with our methods.⁶¹

'Dissident'/radical republicans argue that self-determination can only be exercised by the people of Ireland, in the 32 counties, acting as one unit. Saoradh and RSF point to the 1918 election as the last time when the 32 counties of Ireland voted as a whole, where Sinn Féin won 73 out of 105 seats, resulting in the formation of the First Dáil. Radical republicans universally reject partition and the 'partitionist' institutions of Stormont and Leinster House⁶²; and whilst the constitutions of RSF and Saoradh permit members to stand for election to either institution, it is on an abstentionist basis. The non-mainstream/radical republican narrative echoes the traditional republican position that legitimacy is not conferred through the electoral process. However, the fact that 'dissident'/radical republican groups are not partaking in elections has ensured that they remain on the political fringes with arguably minimal impact.

The lack of public support for armed republicanism was a key criticism levelled at the groups in the aftermath of Lyrá McKee's killing. One month after the killing, Tommy McKearney described it as 'a needless tragedy inflicted on a young woman by thoughtless stooges' and wrote that:

The Derry shooters have no water in which to swim. Whatever wider assessments may be made of the Provisionals, it is undeniable that they received very considerable support from within the North's nationalist community. By no stretch of the imagination can any similar claim be made today for tiny, isolated groups promoting armed conflict in the six counties. That fact alone condemns them to certain and total failure.⁶³

RSF and Saoradh have argued that public support for them is deliberately understated. There is a belief among 'dissident' republicans that when an organisation aims to overthrow the system, that system will never accurately or adequately reflect the actual level of support which exists. An RSF spokesperson in North Armagh has stated: 'The difficulty that we have is at times people are afraid to publicly show that support but privately they will assist the Movement. They will help the Movement. They will take papers [*Saoirse*] from [Republican] Sinn Fein and we've [Republican] Sinn Féin activists on the ground on a day and daily basis engaging with people on their doorstep so we know that there is a significant level of support there'.⁶⁴

It is difficult to gauge with any accuracy the support that 'dissident' armed organisations possess. However, it is reasonable to deduce that support is minimal, particularly in comparison to support commanded by Sinn Féin. Traditionally, survey data has understated the actual level of support for the IRA, failing to capture the 'sneaking regards'; levels of support that existed for the PIRA's campaign remain contested today. As stated by Tonge 'a mandate from the living has always eluded armed republicans and modern dissidents seek comfort in historical determinism'.⁶⁵ Further, Horgan notes that 'they (modern dissidents) claim not only to not need support but actively shun it, priding themselves on their pariah status'.⁶⁶ Indicative of trends among social movements that challenge the status quo, 'dissident' republican groups often present their isolated status as further evidence that they 'are doing something right'.

Central to 'dissident' campaigns is the highlighting of prisoners, strip searching in the prisons, stop and searches, and republicans being held on remand (without charges) which they describe as internment. Anti-PSNI campaigns form a central element of the 'dissident' message and violent clashes between 'dissident' groups and the PSNI often take place at commemorations. When analysing the mechanisms that sustain 'clandestine political violence' Donatella Della Porta has identified 'escalating policing' as the first apparent mechanism and has stated that 'repression created subcultures sympathetic to violence . . . In fact, repression produced transformative events'.⁶⁷ In the context of 'dissident' republicanism Morrison has argued 'it is this message of prisoner victimization which may prove to be the most powerful tool they have'.⁶⁸

In August 2020 Saoradh prisoners (approximately 58) along with other republican prisoners started a two-week Hunger Strike in solidarity with 62-

year-old Palestinian Dr Issam Bassalat (also known as Issam Hijjawi) who was arrested along with nine Saoradh members as part of operation Arbacia.⁶⁹ After being outside the prison for medical treatment, upon return to Maghaberry, Dr Bassalat was held in isolation due to Covid restrictions, which Saoradh protested as a deliberate and malicious act.⁷⁰ Hundreds of people partook in demonstrations in support of Dr Bassalat and the prisoners on Hunger Strike; which included a solidarity camp outside Maghaberry prison. When asked what the Hunger strike and demonstrations had achieved Dee Fennell stated that they reminded the state of how emotive prison struggle is for the wider republican base and that people took part in the protests 'who may not necessarily agree with why a republican is in jail, with a campaign in which they might have taken part, or they are alleged to have taken part'.⁷¹ Fennell commented 'It also demonstrated that the IRPWA⁷² and Saoradh have the potential still at this stage to mobilise large groups of people in Belfast and elsewhere, Derry, Lurgan, Strabane, Newry, Dublin, Cork, Kerry and other areas ... and it sort of put the myth to bed that Saoradh or the IRPWA or the Republican Movement was in any way finished in those areas.'⁷³

Saoradh will have taken comfort in the mobilisation of hundreds of people at the protests, regardless of whether or not they are Saoradh members or supporters. However, reflecting on the demonstrations, Tommy McKearney has argued:

Now you can talk about a rally on the Falls road and I tell you there wasn't 20,000 or 30,000 at it. There is more support than you would get maybe under other circumstances but that's an extraordinary circumstance. In '78, before the first Hunger Strike began there was a parade from Coalisland to Dungannon focusing on prison conditions; there was 20,000 people who marched. There was 100,000 at Bobby Sands' funeral.⁷⁴

For independent republicans, public support is not exclusively about mandate and deriving legitimacy, it is also of practical significance to an armed campaign, as without support it will inevitably fail. Tommy McKearney, who was in the PIRA and was on the Blanket protest and 1980 Hunger strike, has argued: 'Now the reason the Provisional IRA survived for 20 odd years in an armed campaign with one of the world's great powers was because they had support. They had massive logistical support. Its people willing to provide houses, cars, to give intelligence, to support, to feed, to provide the manpower, all that is what I'm talking about. That doesn't exist at the moment so therefore launching any type of an armed campaign is actually propaganda by the deed'.⁷⁵ In the Sinn Féin (and independent republican) analysis, popular support has to matter. Further, a war-weariness was evident in the 1990s amongst the population in the North of Ireland, as noted by Bowyer-Bell, McKearney and Leahy. There was an evident glass ceiling on support for Sinn Féin whilst the PIRA campaign continued.⁷⁶

In an interview with the *Irish News* in 2014 Sinn Féin's Sean (Spike) Murray suggested that 'as the 1990s dawned war weariness on both sides meant some break in the cycle of violence was inevitable'.⁷⁷ Amidst military stalemate and changing political dynamics (including the election of a Labour government in 1997) the leadership of the Provisional Movement saw another way forward. As noted by English 'To republicans, the new circumstances offered challenge and opportunity'.⁷⁸ Critics of 'dissident' groups argue that war-weariness amongst the population must be a consideration. Danny Morrison has also argued that support for the ceasefires existed within the republican base, stating 'I know for a fact, because I was in jail, that 80 plus per cent of the former prisoners support the change and what a minority are saying is you don't have a right, you're sell-out bastards'.⁷⁹

The Sinn Féin/Provisional position is that the IRA cashed in the political chips of the campaign which had ended in stalemate; and maintains that it was leverage from the IRA campaign which brought about significant political developments.⁸⁰ By contrast, 'dissident' republican groups today do not possess significant strength which could be used as leverage to bargain with if they did declare a ceasefire. Interestingly, the Saoradh and RSF spokespersons putting forward an understanding of why the Continuity and New IRAs engage in armed activity are both in their 30s. The independents (McIntyre and McKearney) who are consigning armed actions to the past, and who fought in the PIRA campaign, are in their 60s. It may be the case that there is a generational influence; although this by no means is a neat characterisation of the base in general, as age is not always indicative of views on armed struggle.

What campaign?

A narrative has emerged from independent republicans critiquing the campaign waged by armed groups on the basis that 1) there is no prospect of success, 2) there is an absence of favourable conditions to sustain a campaign, including public support and 3) there isn't a 'campaign'. There has been a focus on the New IRA given the high level of activity from the organisation since January 2019 which included a car bomb outside the court house in Derry in January, parcel bombs sent to British Army personnel in England and Scotland in March and the killing of Lyra McKee in April. Commenting on New IRA activity McIntyre has asked 'How could you support a campaign that's waged on what often would seem nihilistic violence? They killed Lyra McKee and in pursuit of what- isolated events? I mean, what right does those behind a campaign have to take the life of Lyra McKee when the campaign can achieve absolutely nothing?'⁸¹ McIntyre has argued 'They are not a political social protest movement. They are a political cult; a political

cult grounded in what they say is the Irish tradition which many of them have abandoned anyway and shafted'.⁸²

McIntyre has criticised current armed actions through a rights based framework stating 'the central question that I would put to them is if the Irish people have the right to be free from British rule do they not have an equal right to be free from your violence to achieve the end of that road? Particularly given that your violence is so useless. It's embarrassing that you would actually call this a war'.⁸³ The absence of any notable campaign, beyond sporadic incidents, is a common criticism levelled at the armed groups. Within the republican base the issue has been raised that republicans are going to prison (on weapons or membership charges), often for activity that is not happening. Saoradh and RSF have rejected the argument that there isn't a campaign and have argued that many incidents go unreported. Dee Fennell has argued 'If republicanism isn't a threat, if the IRA's campaign isn't viable, if Saoradh is futile, if republicanism is currently in a valley and not on a peak then why does the British government have to invest so much infrastructure, personnel, logistics, technology, so much money to combat it? I mean it was disclosed recently there's over 700 MI5 operatives in Belfast alone'.⁸⁴

A central consideration for armed republican groups is: what can be achieved by current sporadic actions? Anthony McIntyre has asked 'If the big IRA couldn't win the war against the British how's a wee tiny ineffective IRA going to do anything?'⁸⁵ McIntyre's comment is reflective of mainstream criticism which asks why current armed groups feel they can succeed where the PIRA did not, even at the height of its campaign? When asked what the CIRA's campaign to date has achieved an RSF spokesperson answered:

It has sent a clear message out to the world, to the British government that the Irish question isn't settled and that it will not be settled any time soon and it will not be settled through Stormont and Leinster House. So it has put central focus on, that the Irish question cannot be settled by compromise, by entering Stormont or Leinster House. There will always be those that will engage in armed struggle.⁸⁶

Saoradh, the New IRA, Republican Sinn Féin and the Continuity IRA continue to emphasise the right (which republicans possess) to engage in an armed campaign against occupation. The 1916 Easter Proclamation asserted the right of the Irish people to national freedom and sovereignty; and proclaimed the Irish Republic as a sovereign independent state. The Proclamation is universally cited by radical republicans, to assert the fundamental *right* to engage in armed struggle; however division exists over *when* that right should be exercised. Within the radical republican/'dissident' world, opposition to (or support for) current armed actions is inevitably influenced by views on why the PIRA campaign failed to achieve its ultimate objectives. Therein

lies part of the rationale for a current campaign, which states that the methods did not fail but rather the leadership failed, or at worst was compromised.⁸⁷ Criticism of the Provisional leadership has formed a significant element of the radical republican message, along with the declaration that radical republicans won't 'compromise' or 'sell-out', therefore they will succeed where the PIRA failed.

A British military presence: they haven't gone away

The killing of Lyra McKee in April 2019 took place against a backdrop of political instability caused by the continued suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly since its collapse in 2017.⁸⁸ Consequently, a mainstream narrative emerged which suggested that the ongoing suspension of Stormont had created a vacuum in which 'dissident' actions were thriving. However, armed 'dissident' organisations have proven more active during periods of political stability when Stormont is functioning; a point highlighted by Frampton in 2011 when he argued that the "vitality of dissident republicanism has ... not been determined by the waxing and waning of the institutions in Northern Ireland, so much as it has been circumscribed by an intra-republican dynamic".⁸⁹ For radical republicans who seek to challenge the status quo, the collapse of Stormont was simply presented as further evidence that Northern Ireland is a failed political entity.

Since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, normalisation and demilitarisation have been key features of the political landscape; and a key aim of the 'dissident' republican campaign has been to disrupt the normalisation process. Demilitarisation included the dismantling of a number of British Army barracks and the departure of British Army foot patrols in 2007, which saw the end of Operation Banner. Subsequently, in 2010 policing and justice were devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Despite this process of demilitarisation, the radical republican narrative has centred on the continuing British military presence and 'continuing occupation' in the North.⁹⁰ Dee Fennell has stated:

Well I would say, looking in at armed republicanism, that British Army foot patrols haven't went away. They're maybe not in uniform and are not in armoured jeeps but British soldiers are on the streets in Belfast and Derry every day. Various regiments are stationed in Palace barracks and Thiepval and other barracks in the six counties. There's thousands of them. It's important to remember that its Britain that is at war with us, and by us I mean the Irish people, through their military installations, through their personnel, through their activities and if the British presence was removed from Ireland, armed republicans wouldn't have a British presence to fight with.⁹¹

The ongoing presence of British soldiers has been presented by the New and Continuity IRAs as justification for continuing their campaign; and British

soldiers are viewed as a 'key target', as well as the PSNI who they argue are the first line of defence of the British in Ireland. As noted by Whiting, the character of armed republicanism is 'sporadic and infrequent yet precise and calculated in its targets'.⁹² Whilst armed 'dissident' groups recognise that their campaign isn't likely to achieve a united Ireland in the near future, they seek to prevent the normalisation of policing and to demonstrate their capability to launch an attack. They aim to prevent the PSNI and prison staff from feeling secure in their roles and they strive to provide a constant reminder that the PSNI are not operating in a normal society.

When asked who armed republicans are at war with, Fennell has answered: 'From the outside looking in at armed republicans it's quite clear who they are at war with. I mean they are not at war with civilians. Republicans have never been at war with civilians. So, it's clear to me if you look at the reports of who they've targeted since 2012 and previous to that – It's been British soldiers, members of the British police in Ireland and prison officers'.⁹³ Fennell's comment echoes that of a CIRA spokesperson in North Armagh in 2014 who described 'legitimate targets' as 'Police, British soldiers, prison warders. Commercial targets. In some circumstances British Ministers. But security forces would be the main target'.⁹⁴ McIntyre has commented on the targeting of PSNI:

Well, you see I have a problem with that because they are driving around on bikes. They're not a key target. They are a key imaginary target. You've people going to jail for stuff that will never happen so if the police are a key target they're not getting targeted. Even when the police are a key target it shows you how it has become normalised anyway. I mean the New IRA is never going to be able to mount the type of campaign to bring the British Army back onto the streets. The cops are treating them with contempt, just calling them criminals. Everybody just shrugs their shoulders. Houses are being raided and people walk on by and will say well you brought it on yourself.⁹⁵

Questions have arisen around the morality of a sporadic campaign which is unlikely to achieve its ultimate objective of Irish unity; and whose key aim appears to be the disruption of normalisation. When asked about the morality of occasional attacks, a spokesperson for the RSF Movement in North Armagh stated: 'Yes armed action is morally sound. As we have said before there have been occasions where in the past we have seen that there's been lulls in it but we don't count our morality on a body count, that's not how we count our morality. Whether there's hundreds being killed or if one soldier is being killed its morally justified from the Republican perspective'.⁹⁶ When asked if the armed campaign is working to achieve Irish unity Dee Fennell answered:

Well nothing else has worked. So I'm not saying it's morally right. I'm not saying it's effective. I'm not saying it's going to work because if you say any of those

things you could end up on charges. But what I will say is what else has achieved Irish unity? They're basically all sitting and waiting on a sectarian headcount ... I think it's a question that can be asked of every political party of a nationalist republican persuasion right across Ireland- is what you're doing achieving Irish unity? And I don't think any of them could give a positive answer'.⁹⁷

The RSF spokesperson from North Armagh, who was sentenced to nine years for possession of explosives in the 2000s, and went on to serve a sentence in Maghaberry prison, has stated 'The bottom line is whilst there is British political and military interference in Ireland there will always be those that will oppose it. We've seen time after time unfortunately when the Movement has been in the position to show the Brits what they were – it's been our own republican leaders that have let us down. There's been treachery after treachery and luckily enough for us there's those that's been willing to stay the course and fight for what's right'.⁹⁸

Operation Arbacia and the infiltration of republicanism

Despite the outpouring of condemnation locally, nationally and internationally over the killing of Lyra McKee, an examination of the wider 'dissident'/ radical republican base concludes that the killing was not a defining moment in terms of individuals or organisations altering their positions on armed actions at present. When asked if Lyra McKee's killing by the New IRA had changed anything for Saoradh Dee Fennell stated:

I think it's important to point out that Lyra McKee's death was wrong and shouldn't have happened. To answer your question, and it sounds harsh, but no it didn't change Saoradh's strategy. We didn't lose a single member over it. Our recruitment levels have went up and I think that was because the republican base were able to differentiate between who was responsible and who wasn't. Saoradh played no part in Lyra McKee's death or the aftermath.⁹⁹

For those already opposed to current armed actions, the killing emphasised the futility of the current campaign, as demonstrated by Tommy McKearney: 'It underlined the absolute dead end that that was in. It's an accident that was waiting to happen'.¹⁰⁰ Whilst neither side of the divide has altered their position, the killing has entrenched the line between those who continue to advocate armed actions and those who are opposed. For independents like McKearney the question of armed struggle has been settled, the campaign is over. The more relevant question is 'Having broken the old Orange state and replaced it with an administration that not only includes members of the Catholic population but also former senior members of the IRA, the question must now be asked whether republicanism has reached the limit of its radical potential in Ireland'.¹⁰¹

What has proven more of a defining moment for 'dissident' armed republicanism was Operation Arbacia in August 2020 when nine members of Saoradh and Palestinian Dr Issam Hijjawi-Bassalat were arrested as part of an operation directed against the New IRA. The operation used an alleged MI5 agent who had infiltrated the organisation. Historically, the use of informers and agents by the security services, to infiltrate republican organisations, has been widespread and has impacted the ability of those organisations to function and recruit. The extent to which infiltration impacted the PIRA's ability to operate and continue its campaign remains contested.¹⁰²

The Provisional Movement has rejected any suggestion that it was defeated, or that it could not continue with its campaign; rather it has emphasised that a military stalemate was reached. However, debate continues around the impact of informers on the Republican Movement as illustrated by Hopkins: 'The extent to which the use of informers contributed to the strategic containment of the republican movement, if not the defeat of the IRA campaign as such, has become a key component of the post-conflict contestation within what might be broadly understood as the 'republican family'.¹⁰³ Revelations of agents operating at a senior level within Sinn Féin, such as Denis Donaldson,¹⁰⁴ have fuelled suspicions regarding policy and strategy.¹⁰⁵ However, Leahy has argued that infiltration actually had a limited impact on PIRA operations due to the elusive nature of many rural units, the cell structure of the organisation and the isolation of the IRA leadership from the rest of the Movement,¹⁰⁶ points that are often understated in the prevailing narrative on the effectiveness of informers.¹⁰⁷ Leahy has also rejected the argument that 'agents of influence' within Sinn Féin, such as Donaldson, had a significant impact on the Movement's decision to end its campaign and has stated 'Donaldson and other Sinn Féin informers seem to have had extremely limited access to the IRA'.¹⁰⁸ Significantly, for independents such as McIntyre and McKearney, the fact that the PIRA and Sinn Féin was infiltrated (possibly with 'agents of influence') does not impact their belief that the ending of the PIRA campaign in the 1990s was correct.

Undoubtedly, the exposure of numerous informers and agents within the PIRA had an impact beyond the operational level. Revelations of infiltration had an impact on organisational morale, contributing to an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust, which has carried over into the 'dissident' groups. Whilst historically republicanism has remained ever vigilant of the threat of infiltration, the so-called 'dissident' world appears to be preoccupied with the threat to an unprecedented level, where the label of agent or informer is readily applied as 'dissident' groups are fiercely determined to not fall victim to infiltration which seeks to disrupt military operations and steer the political direction of the Movement; something they believe happened in the past with the PIRA. The relevant question regarding the 'dissident' armed groups

becomes- to what extent is this mind-set provoking inertia regarding their activities and strategy?

Brexit: a shot in the arm for republicanism

Brexit-related instability has put a renewed focus on the border in Ireland and subsequently on the campaign waged by armed republican groups, amidst speculation over where border checks will take place. Whilst there is no consensus around the extent of the threat posed by 'dissident' groups there is general acknowledgment that Brexit has proven a destabilising force on the political landscape, the consequences of which have still to be felt.¹⁰⁹ The peace process, and the political process underpinning it, have been predicated on the principle of consent and parity of esteem, with emphasis drawn away from the physical border. Brexit has catapulted the issue of the border back into mainstream debate and has altered the relationship between the UK and Ireland, ushering in a new political environment which is significantly different from the one in which the Good Friday Agreement was conceived.¹¹⁰ Indeed, for many, Brexit has reawakened the constitutional question and 'has raised the prospect of a united Ireland in its most serious form in decades'.¹¹¹

Radical republicans have been keen to emphasise that Brexit doesn't actually alter anything for traditional republicanism which is opposed to any border in Ireland regardless of what form it takes, as stated by an RSF spokesperson in North Armagh: 'It doesn't matter whether it's a soft border, a hard border, it's still the British imposed border there'.¹¹² However, republicans will always seize upon any opportunity to advance their political agenda and Brexit is seen as a significant opportunity to be exploited.¹¹³ Dee Fennell has criticised, what he sees as, Sinn Féin's failure to capitalise on the opportunity presented by Brexit:

It provides opportunities for republicans and the big question should be- like I don't know why more journalists and academics aren't asking- if Brexit brings a United Ireland closer why did Sinn Fein campaign against it? They could have said listen we'll support Ireland being in the EU but we want you to tactically vote for Brexit in the six counties so that it can bring reunification closer.¹¹⁴

Sinn Féin and independent 'dissident'/radical republicans (such as McIntyre and McKearney) offer a similar criticism of the campaign waged by the Continuity and New IRAs, emphasising the lack of support amongst a war-weary population and the inability to achieve success. It is this similarity in position towards the armed struggle that causes members of the 'dissident' groups to accuse critics of the campaign as 'sell-outs' or to accusingly state that they are going down the same path as the Provisional Movement. In March 2021 RSF Ard Chomhairle member, and former President, Des

Dalton¹¹⁵ resigned from the organisation after being suspended for comments he made (in a personal capacity) during an interview for Liverpool University's Civic space project stating that conditions at present are not right for an armed campaign.

In an article in *The Observer* about the interview, Dalton argued that 'the suspension of "armed struggle" will create better conditions for all Ireland dialogue about reunification to take place in the post-Brexit era'.¹¹⁶ The RSF Ard Chomhairle called an emergency online meeting at which Dalton was suspended for the comments – after which he resigned from the organisation. Within weeks, the RSF Movement had reaffirmed its support for continuing armed actions in its Easter Statement: 'In every decade armed struggle has been used, not as a principle, not as a tactic, but as a reality of opposition to British Crown Forces. When a sustained campaign cannot be mounted, it is a duty to at least harass the enemy'.¹¹⁷ Similarly, the New IRA's Easter statement reaffirmed its commitment to continuing armed actions.

Conclusion

The altered political landscape in the North of Ireland since 1998 has removed much of the impetus behind an armed campaign. As this article has sought to show, political and ideological debate on the use of armed action has continued within radical republicanism in Ireland. Much of this debate has centred on traditional republican ideas and conceptions in a changing political context, taking note of the emergence of Brexit with all its implications for the long-term viability of the Northern Irish state. There are two IRA groupings actively operating in Ireland – the New IRA and the Continuity IRA. Beyond these, there are other 'dissident'/radical republican organisations, as well as independents; and it appears unlikely that the base will unite under any unified structure. The enduring fragmentation has resulted in the absence of a unified leadership or message, and no collective strength is drawn from the base.

Many of the first recruits to the PIRA joined after the burning of Bombay Street in 1969, the Falls Curfew in 1970, internment in 1971, the Ballymurphy Massacre in 1971, Bloody Sunday in 1972; followed later by the Hunger Strikes in 1980 and 1981, as well as in response to aggressive house raids and British military and police activity directed at the nationalist and republican population. As Leahy has pointed out, British military operations served, on occasion, as a catalyst for this recruitment: 'Alongside major security force operations that proved controversial such as Bloody Sunday, certain intelligence operations such as the "shoot-to-kill" incidents appeared to sustain rather than contain or degrade IRA activity'.¹¹⁸ McKearney concluded that the Provisional's demand for an end to British rule and partition, was as much

a demand for the end of misrule and the denial of rights, as a traditional aspiration for Irish unity, commenting: 'When the Provisional IRA insisted in the post-Bloody Sunday period that only an end to British rule would satisfy its members, it was at least as much a condemnation of London mismanagement as an expression of the desire for self-determination'.¹¹⁹

Since 1998 there has not been another Bloody Sunday or Ballymurphy Massacre and for most of the population internment has been relegated to the past. Independent 'dissident' republicans (former members of Sinn Féin or the PIRA) are critical of armed actions waged by the Continuity and New IRAs – arguing that conditions today do not justify a campaign. Independents disagree with the politics behind the peace process and the direction in which Sinn Féin has moved in the years since; however, they agree with Sinn Féin and the Provisional Movement that it was correct to end the PIRA campaign in the 1990s given general war-weariness.

Gerry Bradley, a North Belfast republican who operated in the PIRA for 23 years, stated in his memoir *Insider* that he agreed with ending the PIRA campaign; however, he criticised the PIRA leadership for the way in which it ended. He accused the leadership of deliberately winding the campaign down, a criticism also commonly levelled from 'dissident' republicans – which is strongly denied by the Provisional Movement. Bradley was simultaneously critical of the armed campaign waged by 'dissident' groups. Bradley,¹²⁰ McIntyre and McKearney are representative of a constituency within republicanism which feels that the Provisional leadership settled for less than it should have, but that ending the campaign was correct.

By contrast, the 'dissident'/radical republican groups – namely, Republican Sinn Féin (RSF), the Continuity IRA, Saoradh, and the New IRA – continue to argue that the IRA campaign was fought for sovereignty, and nothing less, and therefore altered conditions within Northern Ireland do not affect the campaign or the justification behind it. They also argue that internment by remand continues today. A significant portion of the message from RSF and *Saoradh* highlights current republican prisoners and police activity against their members or supporters, such as stop and searches, house raids, or arrests. However, their message has not gained significant traction amongst the wider nationalist/republican population, North or South. Support for the groups remains minimal in comparison to the strong electoral mandate possessed by Sinn Féin; although 'dissident' republican groups do not take legitimacy from popular support, nor do they seek an electoral mandate. Rather, their mandate comes from the continuing 'occupation' and partition of Ireland.

The location of current armed actions (by the Continuity and the New IRA) as the *latest phase* in one long republican campaign remains contested within the wider radical republican base. Debates continue around the

futility of sporadic actions, the capability to wage a campaign, the importance of popular support and the morality of occasional attacks which aim to 'keep the flame burning', disrupt normalisation and demonstrate capability.¹²¹ Those continuing to advocate armed actions (or more commonly say that they understand the motivations behind them)¹²² remain wedded to the old mantra that as long as there is a British presence in Ireland there will be those willing to resist it in arms. As Horgan has stated 'it is about people for whom there will never be a peace process, never a negotiated settlement, and who will never be satisfied by politics or appeased by mainstream opinion'.¹²³

Sinn Féin's condemnation of the campaign waged by the 'dissident' groups has been unequivocal. Most notably in 2009, after the killing of two British soldiers by the RIRA, and two days later the killing of PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll by the CIRA, Martin McGuinness stood outside Stormont alongside then Chief Constable Hugh Orde and First Minister Peter Robinson and denounced those responsible for the killing as 'traitors to the island of Ireland'. McGuinness's remarks provoked a strong response from the 32CSM who argued 'the British Strategy has now reached its pinnacle with a Provisional Sinn Féin leader standing at Stormont, under the British flag, as a minister of the British crown, calling IRA volunteers "traitors" for continuing to resist British occupation'.¹²⁴ The bitter divide between the Provisional and 'dissident' worlds further entrenched as each condemned the path taken by the other as treacherous. 'Dissident' republicans have frequently quoted Martin McGuinness's 1982 BBC interview when he said, 'We don't believe that winning elections and winning any amount of votes will bring freedom in to Ireland. At the end of the day, it will be the cutting edge of the IRA which will bring freedom'.¹²⁵

The Provisional leadership continues to navigate its way through maintaining a connection to its past whilst emphasising a definitive departure from armed struggle. The provisional and 'dissident' worlds are engaged in a battle over memory and ownership of the past as each seeks to emphasise continuity and to deny the other legitimacy. Commemorations play an important role in both the Provisional and 'dissident' worlds in emphasising connection with the past, as 'fallen comrades' are remembered. As noted by Hopkins 'in the sphere of revolutionary political and ideological movements, nostalgia could more accurately be characterised by its potential to be used as a weapon of struggle'.¹²⁶ Sinn Féin continues to hold commemorations for fallen IRA volunteers and highlights the legitimacy of the PIRA campaign in contrast to the illegitimacy of the 'dissident' campaign.

Seamus Mallon, former Deputy first Minister¹²⁷ of Northern Ireland and Deputy Leader of the SDLP, described the Good Friday Agreement as Sunningdale for slow learners, arguing that what was achieved could

have been realised in the early 1970s without the PIRA's thirty-year campaign. Sinn Féin reject this narrative and point to key differences, including the Patten report which changed the RUC to the PSNI. Similar to Mallon's analysis 'dissident' republicans argue that yes, we could have had what the Provisional leadership 'settled for' many years previously and without an armed campaign; however, the thrust of the 'dissident' argument is that the fault lies with the Provisional leadership who, in their opinion, 'settled' for too little in return for ending the armed campaign. In this respect, those wedded to armed republican methods argue that the campaign did not fail, rather the leadership failed. White has stated 'From the perspective of those who left the Provisionals for rival organizations, the war is not over. The Provisionals did not win and anything they might have gained does not make up for what was lost through their betrayal'.¹²⁸

As the low-level campaigns of the Continuity and New IRAs continue, for many, attention is only drawn to these groups when the media highlights an incident. The issue of republican armed struggle has been largely relegated to the past. Despite this, in 2018, in his first press conference as the new Commissioner of An Garda Síochána (the Police Service of the Republic of Ireland), Drew Harris stated that 'dissident' republicanism remains 'the biggest threat on the island of Ireland'.¹²⁹ Further, in its October 2020 report to the House of Commons, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament stated 'the number of attacks in 2019 demonstrates that the main DR groups are resilient, and retain both the intent and capability to cause serious damage'.¹³⁰

British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan was once asked by a young reporter what the most troubling problem during his Prime Ministership was, to which he famously replied '*events, dear boy, events.*' The message conveyed is clear, that the political landscape can be dramatically and rapidly transformed by unforeseen events. It is arguable that those advocating militant republicanism are being overtaken by wider events, courtesy of Brexit via demographic change in the North of Ireland. A border poll on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland is now viewed as a real possibility in the medium term. In the context of Brexit and calls for a second Scottish independence referendum, there is a sense that the constitutional sands may be shifting. Regarding a referendum on Irish unity, Brendan O'Leary has commented, 'This prospect is arriving faster than most expected' and 'Not to prepare is to take the ostrich as the paragon of political virtue'.¹³¹ The general nationalist population in the North of Ireland, for whom militant 'dissident' republicanism was already a minority taste, is likely to ask what place a low-level sporadic campaign, without a clear strategy, could possibly have within the contemporary context and these new realities.

Notes

1. Police Service of Northern Ireland.
2. Young, "New IRA Admits Murder."
3. Formed in 1997 the 32CSM began as a lobby group within Sinn Féin in opposition to the Mitchell principles.
4. Clements, "Ex-Speaker for Dissident Republican."
5. Mullan, "Desist, An Innocent Woman."
6. See Hanley, *The IRA 1926–1936*; Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*; Bowyer-Bell, *The Secret Army*; and Hopkinson, *Green Against Green*.
7. Throughout this article, the author uses 'dissident' and radical republican interchangeably to refer to the base in its entirety. So-called 'dissident' republicans have not departed from the traditional republican message or position; however, the term 'dissident' has entered common usage. 'Dissident' republicans seek radical change and reject reforms from within the system.
8. Major points of departure include Sinn Féin's ending of abstentionism towards Leinster House (parliament of the Republic of Ireland) in 1986, the PIRA cease-fires in 1994 and 1997, acceptance of the Mitchell Principles in 1997, the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, PIRA decommissioning in 2005, and acceptance of the PSNI in 2007. See Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*; Whiting, *Spoiling the peace*; and McGlinchey, *Unfinished Business*.
9. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army*, 464–5.
10. McIntyre and McKearney are active in the Independent Workers Union.
11. Imprisoned on charges of possession of explosives.
12. In 2015 Fennell was charged with glorifying, encouraging and instigating terrorism, encouraging support for the IRA and addressing a meeting designed to encourage support for the IRA. He was remanded in Maghaberry prison for 2 months before being released with a ban on public speaking or posting online. Fennell was acquitted in December 2017.
13. Since his interview in October 2020, due to personal reasons, Dee Fennell has taken a step back from Saoradh and is no longer on the Ard Chomhairle; however he has stated that he remains actively involved in the Republican Movement, including the IRPWA.
14. The name Óglaigh na hÉireann has been used by all organisations calling themselves the IRA, including the Provisional IRA. It is also the official name of the Army of the Republic of Ireland.
15. (Provisional) IRA Statement on the Ending of the Armed Campaign, July 28, 2005.
16. Ibid.
17. In 2018 ONH ended their armed campaign through a statement to the *Irish News* in which they said 'At this time the environment is not right for armed conflict'. See A. Morris, "ÓNH Announces Immediate Ceasefire."
18. Republican Network for Unity (RNU), formed in 2007, was viewed as the political wing of ONH. RNU was an attempt to unite non-mainstream republicans under one structure, however it developed as a distinct organisation with its own identity.
19. Similar to RSF and Saoradh denying that they are the political wings of the CIRA and New IRA respectively, the 32CSM denies being the political wing of the

- RIRA. Rather, the 32CSM emphasises that it shares an ideology and position with the Real IRA.
20. Whiting, *Spoiling the Peace*, 143.
 21. PSNI. "Police Recorded Security Situation."
 22. Intelligence report presented to the House of Commons, October 2020.
 23. For an assessment of 'dissident' media activism since 1998 see Hoey, *Shiners, Dissos and Dissenters*.
 24. A body of literature has emerged from independent republicans including McIntyre, *Good Friday: The Death*; McKearney, *The Provisional IRA*; and O'Rawe, *Blanketmen and Afterlives*.
 25. Bernadette Sands-McKevitt was a founding member of the 32CSM.
 26. Breen, "Sister of Hunger-striker."
 27. Tonge, "No One Likes Us," 222.
 28. The Sinn Féin position states that the attainment of civil rights and equality was a stepping stone in the overall journey to a united Ireland; refuting that the Good Friday Agreement was a *settlement*.
 29. Tonge, "A Campaign without an End," 17.
 30. RSF, Interview with the author.
 31. Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, 267.
 32. RSF, Interview with the author.
 33. In 1987, a PIRA bomb exploded during a Remembrance Day service in Enniskillen, killing eleven people, ten civilians and one police officer.
 34. In 1978 a PIRA bomb exploded at the La Mon Hotel near Belfast, killing twelve people.
 35. McKearney, *The Provisional IRA*; and Bean, *The New politics*.
 36. Also see English, *Armed Struggle*.
 37. McIntyre, Interview with the author.
 38. Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Féin*, 56. Also see White, *Out of the ashes* and English, *Armed struggle*.
 39. McIntyre, Interview with the author.
 40. White, *Out of the Ashes*, 68.
 41. Ibid.
 42. See McGlinchey, *Unfinished Business*.
 43. English, *Armed Struggle*, 375.
 44. McKearney, Interview with the author.
 45. Ibid.
 46. Ibid.
 47. McIntyre, Interview with the author.
 48. Ibid.
 49. The principle of consent states that 'it is for the people of the island alone' to decide their constitutional future 'subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland'. Article 1 of the Good Friday Agreement, 1998.
 50. McIntyre, Interview with the author. Also See McIntyre, *Good Friday: The Death*.
 51. This occurred during the IRA's 1956–62 campaign, commonly referred to as the border campaign.
 52. Women's republican organisation, formed 1914.
 53. McKearney, Interview with the author.
 54. Ibid.
 55. Ibid.

56. McGlinchey, *Unfinished Business*, 185; and Tonge, "No-one Likes Us."
57. Tonge, "Menace without Mandate," 75.
58. The test oath is part of the Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland Act 1989).
59. McGlinchey, "The New IRA's Actions."
60. Fennell, Interview with the author.
61. Ibid.
62. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Parliament of the Republic of Ireland, respectively.
63. McKearney, "Reckless Isolated Groups Should."
64. RSF Spokesperson, Interview with the author.
65. Tonge, "No One Likes Us," 219.
66. Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, 150.
67. Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, 284.
68. Morrison, *The Origins and Rise*, 196.
69. Lally, "New IRA 'Top-tier'."
70. O'Neill, "New IRA Investigation' and 'Palestinian Doctor Arrested.'"
71. Fennell, Interview with the author.
72. The IRPWA is the Irish Republican Prisoners Welfare Association, representative of Saoradh and New IRA prisoners.
73. Fennell, Interview with the author.
74. McKearney, Interview with the author.
75. Ibid.
76. See English, *Armed Struggle*; Leahy, *The Intelligence War Against*; McKearney, *The Provisional IRA*; and Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army*.
77. Manley, "War Weariness Made an End."
78. English, *Armed Struggle*, 295.
79. Morrison, Interview with the author.
80. See English, *Armed Struggle*, 361.
81. McIntyre, Interview with the author.
82. Ibid. McIntyre has referred to the fact that some in the New IRA or Saoradh stayed in Sinn Féin or the Provisional Movement through IRA decommissioning in 2005. He has therefore criticised those who remained with the Provisionals whilst IRA weapons were decommissioned, but then went on to join the New IRA or Saoradh years later and advocate a current campaign.
83. Ibid.
84. Fennell, Interview with the author.
85. McIntyre, Interview with the author.
86. RSF, Interview with the author.
87. Moloney, *Voices from the Grave*; "Brendan Hughes"; McGlinchey, *Unfinished Business*.
88. The Northern Ireland Assembly collapsed in January 2017 when Martin McGuinness resigned as Deputy first Minister, thus collapsing the Assembly. A key issue for Sinn Féin was the DUP's handling of the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme.
89. See Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard*, 286.
90. During the Hume-Adams dialogue (1988–1992) Hume argued that the British presence in Ireland is in fact the unionist people and argued that it is the *people* who need to be united, not territory. This was Hume's idea of consent, which was latterly accepted by Sinn Féin and is a central tenet of the Good Friday

Agreement. Sinn Féin's acceptance of consent in 1997 led to formation of the 32-County Sovereignty Movement and the Real IRA.

91. Fennell, Interview with the author.
92. Whiting, *Spoiling the Peace*, 149.
93. Fennell, Interview with the author.
94. McGlinchey, *Unfinished Business*, 131.
95. McIntyre, Interview with the author.
96. RSF, Interview with the author.
97. Fennell, Interview with the author.
98. RSF, Interview with the author.
99. Fennell, Interview with the author.
100. McKearney, Interview with the author.
101. McKearney, *The Provisional IRA*, 206.
102. See Bew and Frampton, *Talking to Terrorists*, 246. They argue that heavy infiltration of the PIRA led to successful containment of the organisation, resulting in the IRA coming to the British seeking negotiations, not vice versa.
103. Hopkins, "The "Informer" and the Political and Organisational Culture of the Irish Republican Movement," 3.
104. Denis Donaldson was a senior member of Sinn Féin and was in the PIRA. Post 1998 he was Sinn Féin's senior administrator at Stormont. In 2005, it was revealed that he had been an agent for British intelligence since he was recruited by the RUC in the 1980s.
105. The influence of agents on political strategy remains contested. For a discussion of agents and informers, see Hopkins, "The "Informer" and the Political and Organisational Culture of the Irish Republican Movement"; Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*; and Leahy, "The Influence of Informers."
106. Leahy, *The Intelligence War against IRA*, 5.
107. Ibid.
108. Ibid, 230. Also see Ó Dochartaigh, "The Longest Negotiation."
109. Hayward, "Recent No Deal Threats."
110. Phinnemore and Hayward, "Meeting with the Oireachtas."
111. Hanley, "From Baginbun to Brexit," 51.
112. RSF, Interview with the author.
113. O'Neill, "Dissident Group Saoradh in Pledge."
114. Fennell, Interview with the author.
115. Des Dalton was a member of RSF between 1989 and 2021. He succeeded Ruairí Ó Brádaigh as President of RSF in 2009 until 2018.
116. McDonald, "Irish Republican Says Violence."
117. "RSF, Easter Statement from the leadership."
118. Leahy, *The Intelligence War Against IRA*, 242.
119. McKearney, *The Provisional IRA*, 201.
120. Bradley died in 2010.
121. Similar debates took place within the republican Movement in 1962 leading to the end of the 1956–62 IRA campaign.
122. Edwards, "Saoradh Leader Says Continuation."
123. Horgan, *Divided We Stand*, xi.
124. Bowcott, "Hardliners Vent Their Fury."
125. See footage at www.YouTube.com/watch?v=nzvpMIHulrs.
126. Hopkins, "Irish Republicanisms."

127. The f in Deputy first Minister is not capitalised to denote the official equal status of First and Deputy first Ministers.
128. White, *Out of the Ashes*, 345.
129. BBC, "Drew Harris."
130. "Northern Ireland-related Terrorism."
131. O'Leary, "A Referendum on Irish Unity."

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Appendix A.

Table 1. 'Dissident' armed actions resulting in fatalities or serious injury 1998-2016

Year	Armed Activity	Organisation responsible
1998	Omagh Bombing which killed 29 people	Real IRA
2009	British Soldiers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar shot dead outside Massereene Barracks in Antrim	Real IRA
2009	PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll shot dead in Craigavon	Continuity IRA
2010	PSNI Officer Peadar Heffron seriously injured in a bomb attack under his car near Randalstown whilst on his way to work in Belfast	ONH
2011	PSNI Officer Ronan Kerr killed by a car bomb in Omagh, County Tyrone	Believed to be a faction of the RIRA, who later went into the New IRA.
2012	Prison Officer David Black shot dead whilst on his way to work in Maghaberry prison	New IRA
2013	Kevin Kearney shot dead in North Belfast for alleged drug-dealing	New IRA
2016	Prison Officer Adrian Ismay died of a heart attack following a bomb attack under his van in East Belfast	New IRA