

# A Campaign Without End?

## ‘Dissident’ Republican Violence in Northern Ireland



Picture Credit: © Reuters/  
Cathal Mcnaughton

The greatest threat to stability in Northern Ireland comes from dissident republicans opposed to the peace process. But are these rejectionists a dying gasp or another phase of a centuries-old struggle against British rule in Ireland? [Jon Tonge](#) investigates.

**N**orthern Ireland's peace has been imperfect. Violence over the constitutional question has been accompanied by continuing sectarianism, including riots over flags and parades. But these ongoing

discontents have been accompanied by political stability since 2007. In the 2006 St Andrews Agreement, the DUP and Sinn Féin agreed to share power at the head of the Northern Ireland Executive at Stormont. These leading forces of British

unionism and Irish nationalism have cooperated reasonably well (with hiccups) on a pragmatic basis, securing the political institutions in a seemingly irreversible political process. Dissident republicans, however, remain determined to reject any form of 'British rule' in Northern Ireland.

### Dissident Violence

Violent 'dissident' Irish republicanism has been evident since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Since then

republicans opposed to that deal have killed more than 50 people, including 29 in Northern Ireland's worst atrocity, the Omagh bombing, within months of the pact. Since 2006, republicans have been responsible for more than 600 shooting and bombing incidents and killed British Army soldiers, Police Service of Northern Ireland officers and a Prison Officer, along with several civilians. The official security threat level in Northern Ireland has been 'severe' since 2007. There are nearly 50 prisoners on paramilitary wings in Northern Ireland and 237 individuals have been charged with terrorist offences since 2006. Overall, conflict-related deaths in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement now number over 150 (Hayes and McAllister 2013). 'Spoiler' groups are common in peace processes. Northern Ireland is no exception.

In 2010, the then Head of MI5, Jonathan Evans acknowledged that there had been a persistent rise in terrorist activity and ambition' in Northern Ireland and that the security services had given *insufficient weight to the pattern of history over the last hundred years, which shows that whenever the main body of Irish republicanism has reached a political accommodation and rejoined constitutional politics, a hardliner rejectionist group would fragment and continue with the so-called armed struggle.* The question begged is whether these rejectionists represent the last grasp of physical force republicanism bereft of utility or traction, or constitute another phase of a fluctuating, centuries-old struggle against British rule in Ireland. Dissidents have struggled to sustain their campaign, yet they have produced significant violence, even if its severity, in terms of death or serious injury, is way down on that experienced during 1970-98 'Troubles' (see Figure 1, above and Figure 2 page 16).

Dissident republicans have, overwhelmingly, been the perpetrators of violence between 2006 and 2012. The rate of shootings and bombings over that period runs at 12 per cent of the ceasefire-free period of the 1980s. Post-Good Friday Agreement (i.e. 1999-2012) shootings and bombings are at around 30 per cent of the level of the 1990s. This is a huge reduction – although the Agreement was

Figure 1: Main Dissident killings 1998-2013



sold as something better than a situation in which nearly one third of shootings and bombings would continue. Meanwhile, at a post-Agreement average of 132 annually, compared to 421 in the pre-Good Friday Agreement 1990s, the numbers of persons being charged with terrorist offences is also running at around 30 per cent of the old rate.

Despite the greatly reduced violence in Northern Ireland, dissidents are seen as a 'major threat' by a sizeable section of the population. A majority of Protestants see them as such, although communal asymmetry is evident, as only 17 per cent of Catholics think likewise (Evans and Tonge 2012). Violent activity has been considerable in some areas, such as Derry, Lurgan and Strabane, but much weaker in others such as West Belfast, where Sinn Féin continues to dominate the local state.

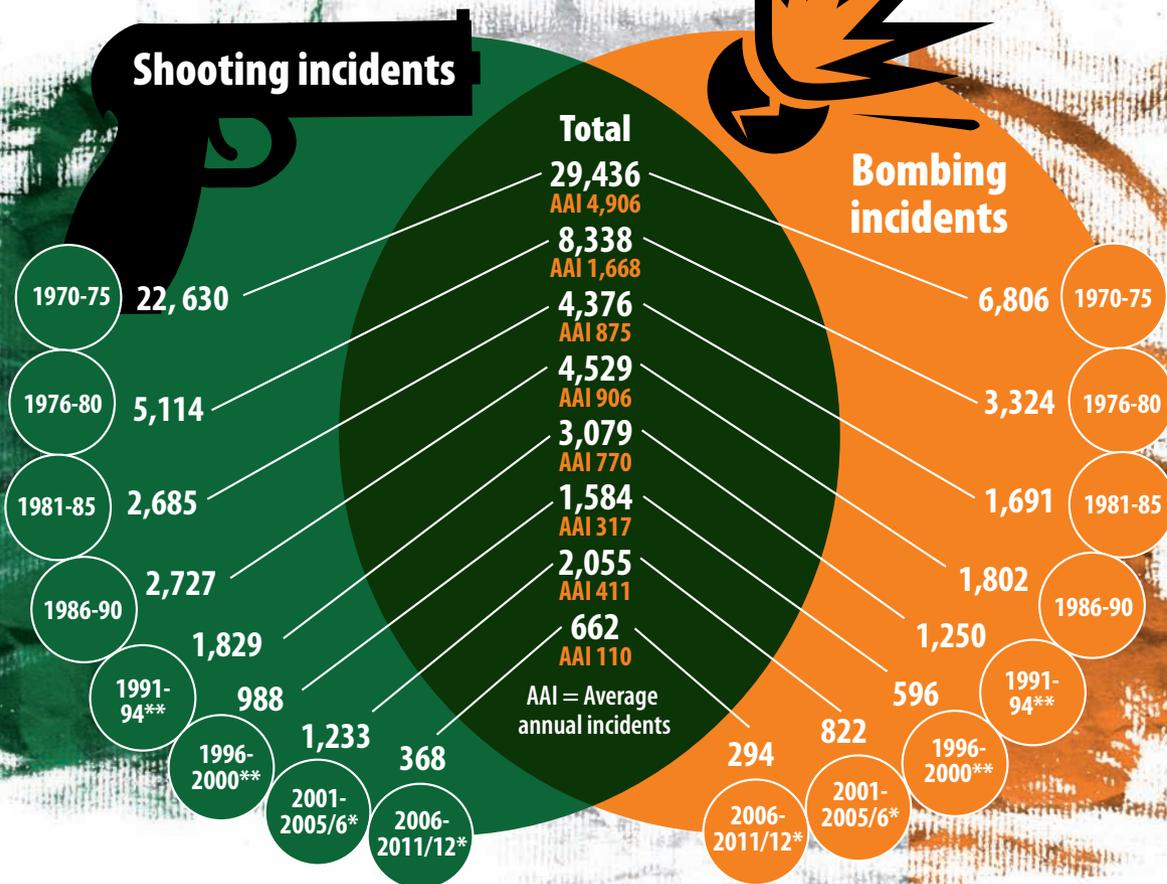
### Who are the 'Dissidents'?

The term dissident republican is unsatisfactory. It is an umbrella label, designed to cover a wide range of organisations and individuals who object to the Westminster government's claim to

sovereignty over Northern Ireland (see box page 17). They dissent against the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which preserved that claim for so long as the people of Northern Ireland desire the territory's inclusion within the United Kingdom.

The term 'dissident republican' is often used to denote difference from 'mainstream republicans'. Yet Irish republicanism has taken many forms and no single organisation can claim monopoly. Fianna Fáil, the dominant party in Irish politics for much of the last century, emerged from the 'dissident' IRA forces opposed to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty which confirmed the partition of Ireland. The Provisional IRA which emerged in 1970 was the 'dissident' republican organisation of its time, rejecting constitutional politics, insisting that 'armed struggle' was necessary against British rule in the north of Ireland and condemning Fianna Fáil for abandoning republicanism. As the Provisional IRA's armed campaign was eventually displaced by Sinn Féin's constitutional politics, so the 'dissidents' of the 1970s were duly condemned as 'sell-outs' by modern-day 'dissidents'.

Figure 2: Conflict-related violence in Northern Ireland



Sources: Police Service of Northern Ireland (2012); Conflict Archive Information Network (2006).  
 \* Figures are now recorded from 1 April to 31 March e.g. 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012.  
 \*\* The Provisional IRA was on ceasefire from 31 August 1994 to 8 February 1996 and again from 19 July 1997. The main Loyalist paramilitaries called a ceasefire on 13 October 1994. These ceasefires were 'imperfect'.

### Irish republicanism

There has never been an agreed definition of what constitutes Irish republicanism. It is a product of a fusion of ideology, historical interpretation and contemporary circumstances. Most republicans in Northern Ireland support Sinn Féin, which has grown in size, attracting support from new voters and from those who always supported constitutional, non-violent methods and thus earlier backed the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Significant, if heterogeneous, opposition to Sinn Féin has nonetheless emerged. Disparate republican groupings and individuals, lumped together under the 'dissident' label whilst claiming to be 'true' republicans, have attempted to challenge the dominant Sinn Féin narrative on what constitutes republicanism.

Much support for the Provisional IRA's armed campaign was sustained, not by

widespread resentment at British rule, but rather by British-administered structural inequalities in Northern Ireland (Bean 2007). Accordingly, the eradication of those inequalities diminished support for militant republicanism. Dissidents appear politically isolated and struggle to sustain momentum. Sinn Féin's continuing electoral success and condemnation of dissident activity has increased the marginalisation of militants. Whilst eschewing contemporary violence, Sinn Féin has nonetheless maintained a strong connection with its previous armed 'tradition' in Northern Ireland through commemorative events celebrating the 1916-2005 IRAs in their various manifestations. Questions over when and why violence ceased to be a legitimate strand of Irish republicanism thus remain.

The Provisional IRA 'stood down' in 2005, insisting that there was a democratic way

forward to a united Ireland under the guidance of Sinn Féin. 'Dissident' violence increased when Sinn Féin's lingering connection with anti-state violence was finally severed via the party's declaration of support in 2007 for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. This allowed Sinn Féin to re-enter government, but led to some defections, as from thereon republicans would be required to cooperate with the police, including 'informing' on those still committed to the 'old ways'. By 2009, Sinn Féin's Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, had travelled such distance from those previous methods that he denounced the Real IRA's killing of two British soldiers as an act perpetrated by 'traitors to Ireland'.

Some dissidents question why violence has been repudiated short of the ultimate ambition of a united Ireland. On this reading, what was morally and politically justified by Sinn Féin from partition until the close of the 20th century, should not be rejected pending fulfilment of republican goals. Yet internal friction amongst dissidents has led to scorn from mainstream



## Militant Republican Organisations

**REAL IRA:** Emerged in 1997 in opposition to movement by Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA towards the eventual peace deal that fell short of traditional republican goals. Merged with Republican Action Against Drugs to form the 'New IRA' in 2012.

**32 COUNTY SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT:** Political 'associates' of the Real IRA, emphasising the need for Irish self-determination.

**REPUBLICAN SINN FÉIN:** Formed after a 1986 split in Sinn Féin over whether to recognise the Irish Parliament, it rejects the Irish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly as 'partitionist' legislatures. Republican Sinn Féin advocates 'Eire Nua' – a federal Ireland. A small faction in Limerick broke away in 2010 to set up 'Real Sinn Féin'.

**CONTINUITY IRA:** Formed soon after its political 'associates' in Republican Sinn Féin, but has carried out few attacks.

**1916 SOCIETIES:** Mainly northern republicans pressing the case for Irish national self-determination via an all-Ireland referendum on a united Ireland.

**ÓGLAIGH NA HÉIREANN:** Militarist IRA which emerged in 2005.

**REPUBLICAN NETWORK FOR UNITY:** Political grouping formed in 2007 in opposition to Sinn Féin's support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

**ÉIRIGÍ:** Socialist political group campaigning on economic and constitutional issues.

**IRISH REPUBLICAN SOCIALIST PARTY:** Emphasises socialism and does not endorse 'armed struggle' as the conditions for it to be effective do not exist.

**IRISH REPUBLICAN VOICE:** Left-wing, mainly Dublin-based grouping, attempting to link national and social issues.

'Dissident' groups tend to claim a 'mandate' emanating from history (i.e. from the dead rather than the living). They have struggled to gain the community legitimacy or electoral support enjoyed by Sinn Féin. The level of backing for 'dissident' republicans is very small, but not entirely negligible. The ESRC 2010 Northern Ireland 2010 General Election survey suggested that up to 14 per cent of nationalist identifiers offer some sympathy (Evans and Tonge 2012) and several hundred votes have been recorded for 'dissident' candidates in council elections, against a broader backdrop of electoral irrelevance.

republicans. Dissident republicanism embraces an eclectic, heterogeneous collection of personnel, ranging from anti-violence intellectuals to fundamentalist violent diehards. Ideologically and tactically, dissident groups have been diverse. They are also amorphous, beset by fluctuating memberships, defections and splits, existing amid a perpetual fear of 'informers'. The panel opposite provides a guide to non-mainstream republican groups, but it should not be regarded as definitive, given the fluidity of membership, propensity to fracture and the tendency for new groups to emerge (Whiting 2014).

### Conclusion

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. In that respect, Sinn Féin's chutzpah in condemning violence from the militant space they once occupied might be seen as considerable. As Bernadette Sands-McKevitt, sister of Bobby Sands, the first republican to die in the 1981 hunger strikes declared witheringly of the Good Friday Agreement, 'my brother did not die for cross-border bodies with executive powers'. The Provisional IRA's campaign was not about achieving nationalist equality within Northern Ireland, but was intended to end that state(let)'s existence.

Yet, the failure of that campaign highlights how the 'state-of-play' for dissident republicans appears bleak, notwithstanding that militant republicanism endured similar difficulties of lack of support and military incapability for much of the 20th century. The difference in this century is that some of the context has changed. The pursuit

of Irish unity is neither a constitutional imperative nor even part of political rhetoric in the Irish Republic. Nationalists now have a political stake in Northern Ireland. The entity of Northern Ireland still has significant weaknesses. Few people identify as 'Northern Irish' and it remains a polity beset by sectarianism. Nonetheless it has endured for nearly a century and the flaws of the northern state appear less than the weaknesses of dissident republicanism.

Aspirations among Irish nationalists for a united Ireland remain and it is true that this option has never been put before an all-island electorate. Co-determination of the island's future, not Irish self-determination, underpinned the Good Friday Agreement. However, there is less equivocation and more condemnation of violence as the means of attainment of Irish unity than previously. There is also cognisance amongst nationalists of the seeming impossibility of imposing Irish unity upon reluctant unionists without consent within Northern Ireland. An episodic republican armed campaign limps on uncertainly, as a mainly minor footnote, a violent sideshow alongside nationalist participation in the northern state.

■ **Jon Tonge is Professor of Politics at the University of Liverpool and Principal Investigator of the ESRC project, 'A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment of the Membership, Strategies and Tactics of Dissident Irish Republican Organisations', working with Drs Kevin Bean (Liverpool) and Marisa McGlinchey (Coventry) and Professors Jim McAuley (Huddersfield) and Tom Hennessey (Canterbury Christchurch). The project involves interviews with more than 90 'dissident' republicans.**

### Selected reading

- Bean, K. (2007) *The New Politics of Sinn Féin*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Cochrane, F. (2013) *Northern Ireland; The Reluctant Peace*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Currie, P. and Taylor, M. (eds) (2011) *Dissident Irish Republicanism*, London: Continuum.
- Evans, J. and Tonge, J. (2012) Menace without mandate? Is there any sympathy for dissident Irish republicanism in Northern Ireland? *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2012, 24, 1-18.
- Hayes, B. and McAllister, I. (2013) *Conflict to Peace: Politics and Society in Northern Ireland over half a century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Horgan, J. (2013) *Divided We Stand: The Strategy and Psychology of Ireland's Dissident Terrorists*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Whiting, S. (2014) *Spoiling the Peace? Dissident Irish Republicanism since 1986*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.