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Viewpoint: Information will defeat this terror

Thursday, February 14, 2008

Not long ago the discovery of a body near the border meant only one thing: someone had been killed by the Provisional IRA on suspicion of informing. The shooting of Andrew Burns in Co Donegal, believed to have been a victim of republican dissidents, recalls those dark days when feuds among paramilitaries were common.

Whatever connections the dead man had with the dissidents, his killing was a barbaric act, which most republicans have put behind them. It is intended as retribution or a warning to others, but it only emphasises the negativity of violence as a means of trying to achieve political change - something the Provisionals learned long ago.

The murder confirms that the Real IRA, the leading dissident organisation, remain a clear and present threat, as the Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde said recently. Since a spokesman issued warnings about a resurgence of its campaign in an interview, the PSNI have mounted checkpoints and have generally stepped up security measures. Injuries to two policemen in November were the first inkling of the new danger, and arrests in Lithuania, after covert activity, were proof of attempts to re-arm.

Paramilitary spokesmen always exaggerate their capability, and the interview warned that attacks on the police were aimed at bringing soldiers back on the streets, to contradict government claims that Northern Ireland was peaceful. While there is no evidence that the Real IRA can do more than plan occasional incidents, they are a constant reminder of the Taliban tendencies in dissident republicanism.

They will never accept democracy, so they have to be fought, like the Provisional IRA was, by use of informers. This is never a popular strategy, and often involves giving protection to unsavoury characters, but it helped confound the IRA, as recent evidence is showing.

The outing of Roy McShane, a driver for Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, as an informer is only the latest in a series of surprise developments, which are a legacy of 35 years of the intelligence war. No-one may ever know, unless he tells us, what he heard and relayed to his handlers during the whole peace process, but it must have helped to create the conditions in which Stormont devolution was possible.

Similarly, Freddie Scappaticci and Denis Donaldson played key parts in reducing the IRA's effectiveness, even if former associates regard their actions as deplorable. All's fair, it can be argued, in matters of intelligence, and Mr Donaldson eventually paid for his involvement with his life, as others have done.

The more information can be gleaned on the dissidents the better, for they could disrupt the peace process with credible threats to tourism and US investment - soon to be trumpeted at a Belfast conference. They represent the past, refusing to face the fact that compromise works.

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