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Saturday, March 14, 2009

Lethal remnants of an old order

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DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

They may be merely the split ends of stray hairs of old schisms, but dissident republicans could not operate effectively in the North without some level of disaffection with the peace process

AFTER THE horror and bloodshed of recent days, another critical battle is now being waged in the North. This battle, in the republican heartlands, is between the people whom the Sinn Féin Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, calls "traitors" and the purist dissidents who see the only treachery as that of Adams and McGuinness. They say the collar-and-tie republicans sitting in Leinster House and Stormont are the turncoats, guilty of a long betrayal. And they find them galling.

What's happening at republican grassroots level after British soldiers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar and PSNI constable Stephen Carroll were so brutally cut down is diverse and complicated. The bulk of republican opinion is in favour of the strategy of Adams and McGuinness. They accept that peace and politics is the only show in town. But there are other views too.

They range from those whom the late Irish Times columnist, John Healy, described as the "sneaking regarders", those who wouldn't condone the killings but neither would they condemn, to those who could find a rationale for the killings, applying an old-school republican logic devoid of human empathy or compassion.

This group is out there. They're very much the republican minority, but you'll hear the same arguments in south Armagh, in nationalist parts of Portadown, in Derry and across all age groups.

Their arguments ensure that the Real IRA and Continuity IRA - the killers of the past seven days - have just about sufficient purchase in republican communities to be able to operate. It might be only pockets of support, but these people are schooled in secrecy - that's all they need, a little support is enough.

It's sufficient to make them dangerous, and Gerry Adams and the PSNI and the Garda and MI5 realise this.

The Sinn Féin view is that these so-called dissident republicans are operating as micro-groups - unco-ordinated, without strategy, without popular support, without an electoral mandate and without a visible leadership or a presence on the streets.

They are those who left the fold at various points over the years, unable to modernise, confront realities or adapt to new circumstances. They are the remnants of the schisms of old, the split ends of stray hairs.

Those dissidents who still accept physical-force republicanism understand completely why gunmen still target British soldiers, Catholic police officers and even Polish pizza-delivery men. They say such violence is born of a necessity forced upon the current generation by an historical imperative.

Sinn Féin, on the other hand, says it offers a slick, broad-based political machine which delivers results. It has a vision of an equal and united Ireland, and a strategy to get there. It has political clout, massed supporters, influence with heads of government and a sense of momentum and confidence.

IN SOUTH ARMAGH, "non-Sinn Féin" republicans deny the claims of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness to be the deliverers of an Ireland of equals. Adams and McGuinness, together with their local supporters, are "utterly cynical and manipulative", says one. "They are using the decision to support the police as cover, as a fig leaf, to hide the reality [of disaffection]."

He says the decision to support the PSNI and the Garda Síochána annoyed people, but was not the cause of dissent. "What really pissed them off was the tight micro-management, the inner circles, the cadres. In the old days at least there was a military structure, but what structure there is now is neither military nor democratic. Decisions are handed down from people with no Ra experience - and that makes them like Fianna Fáil."

That said, there is no automatic route from the stood-down ranks of the Provisionals to the tiny cells of the Real or the Continuity IRA, he adds. "There is a body of people in south Armagh who would never give up a rifle or blow a whistle. They have no real belief in either the Real or the Continuity - but they do have a 'keep it lit' mentality. They have a 'keep the structure' idea."

Sinn Féin does indeed have political clout, it is conceded. But in south Armagh the slick political presence is seen as more of a vehicle for clannishness and downright thuggery. The murder of Paul Quinn comes up for mention everywhere. Local Provos, it is claimed, lost the run of themselves and beat a young man to death.

There is also genuine bewilderment as to how partnership with the DUP and backing Sir Hugh Orde's police service and a few cross-Border bodies is meant to deliver the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation.

Jim McAllister, a former Sinn Féin councillor, sums up the attitude about his old party: "They are whatever-way-the-wind-blows republicans."

"Adams said the shooting of the soldiers was 'wrong and counter-productive'. That's a cold-hearted, analytical statement," McAllister says.

He believes that the killings may have been tactically designed in part to "draw out" Sinn Féin and to provoke the party to align itself ever more closely with the PSNI and with Peter Robinson - and that the tactic worked.

Referring to Martin McGuinness's allegation in the wake of the murders that dissident gunmen were "traitors" to the cause, McAllister adds: "Even the SDLP, or Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil, never called the IRA traitors. They called them fools, madmen, wrong, murderers, but never traitors. I think McGuinness made a serious mistake."

The whole peace process for years was conducted on a nod and a wink, he says. The leadership was able to lead the ranks of south Armagh republicans incrementally from one big policy switch to the next, losing a few people here and there as things progressed.

"Most of the 'serious operators' around Cullyhanna left long ago," he says. "The central ones, the best of them, are now doing nothing, totally left it behind and have no interest in it. But there are now young men - and girls too - who don't give a tuppenny f**k about the IRA or Sinn Féin and will tell them that. They are even beginning to take the piss out of the hard men."

Depending on where you are in south Armagh, there are a few in the Continuity (who left after the 1986 split) and a few "Reals" (who left after the ceasefires). They are on friendly enough terms, but are not really dealing with each other.

Asked if there is a body of ideology which drives these two groups, McAllister says: "Probably a little bit more in the Continuity. They have the same ideology that drove the Provos until the mid-1980s and, allegedly, for some time after until the leadership adopted a different mindset and took them to a different place."

Maybe it's the same with the "Reals", he adds, it's just that they are at a different stage.

Numbers are still very small, but they could be growing slightly because the catchment area is broadening. There was a time when former Provisionals might have been able to keep a lid on them, but that power is slipping. The new people are "clean and are probably under the radar".

"They are angry at Provo control, which is basically thug control, in this area, in Crossmaglen, down through Silverbridge - and a lot of their anger is aimed at the Provos."

Another old Border republican, speaking off the record, explains the current situation through the medium of the past. The son of an old Irish Volunteer who left the republican movement after 1986 when the decision was taken to take up seats in Dáil Éireann, he views the current Sinn Féin as having been "eaten up by the British establishment". There is nothing happening now that hasn't been reflected in the past. The history of Irish republicanism is cyclical. The murders of last week show how firm the establishment grip is on the Sinn Féin scruff, he says.

He believes enthusiasm for Sinn Féin in south Armagh is diminishing.

The house where we talk is as warm as the handshake and is decorated with the iconography of republicanism: the wooden harp, the scrolls as Gaeilge. No backing is offered for the shootings by the dissident groups, but this old republican's ideology is based on what is seen as an unshakeable truth: British involvement in other parts of the world has always ended in trouble. They will not leave Ireland, "their western flank", voluntarily.

DERRY, AS HAS always been the case, is different. Parts of the city and county, the area around Strabane in Co Tyrone and into Co Donegal, have seen a spate of what the PSNI calls "dissident activity". The rocketing stop-and-search statistics unveiled earlier this month by the police is due, in large measure, to the security situation in these parts.

Richard Walsh, born in the wake of the 1981 hunger strikes, has only the vaguest of memories of the worst of the conflict. Now a spokesman in the area for Republican Sinn Féin (RSF), the political wing of the movement that left after the 1986 split, he rejects any claim that he, or anyone else in his organisation, is a dissident.

"We are the true republicans," he says. "We stayed steadfast to the republican cause. The only dissidents are the Provisionals, who have left the path of republicanism."

Like the republican in south Armagh 50 years his senior, he adheres to the idea that going political in either state of a partitioned Ireland never works.

"They have gone down the Fianna Fáil route and there is simply no logic to that position of going into Leinster House, recognising Stormont and Westminster," he says.

Again, there is no advocating of physical-force republicanism. "However, as long as we have British involvement in Irish affairs, there is a right to resist that - and obviously that continues. We have always upheld the right of the Irish people to use any level of controlled and disciplined force, as we have called it."

Terminology is important in RSF. The Belfast Agreement is called the "Stormont agreement" and nationalists who support it are seen as "in essence, unionists themselves". The PSNI is really the RUC in another guise.

For Walsh, the agreement cannot promise the maintenance of the union to unionists and the chance to reunify Ireland to Sinn Féin at one and the same time.

RSF is no "micro-group" and its members have heard all the taunts from Sinn Féin about being strategy-free and directionless with no mandate. "These things were all said about the Provisionals in the past," Walsh says. "They were labelled dissidents and a micro-group with no mandate nor strategy. The reality is they never had popular support when they were involved in military activities against Britain. It's sheer hypocrisy for them to suggest otherwise."

What is so wrong about Sinn Féin, he alleges, is that they are not delivering republican politics either. "Derry has been recognised as a hotbed for dissidents generally, although I don't accept that terminology," he says. "Young republicans are fed up with the hypocrisy and the lies from the Provisionals. They said they would support the RUC to 'put manners on them', but young people see that hasn't happened."

Breandan Mac Cionnaith sits in the offices of the community business centre he helps run, overlooking the Garvaghy Road in Portadown, a short walk from Drumcree church. Orangemen have not marched past this spot in more than a decade now, thanks to the opposition offered by the Garvaghy Road residents with whom is involved.

It was in nearby Craigavon that PSNI constable Carroll lost his life on Monday night, shot in the head by a Continuity IRA sniper. The area still bears the scars of last summer's riots and more recent disturbances allegedly provoked by the PSNI response to Monday's murder.

Local republicans, including former Provisional Colin Duffy, have voiced a discontent felt by many young people alienated by poor social conditions, allegedly heavy-handed police tactics and a sense of disillusion with the way politics is going.

A former republican prisoner himself, Mac Cionnaith is a central figure with Eirigi, a republican and socialist movement founded in 2006. The organisation, he says, has attracted key Sinn Féin people from the Republic - a factor which helps explain the poor showing by the party in the last Dáil election.

No great fan of the Belfast Agreement, he recognises its appeal through its promise of some form of peace. He does not fault people for voting for a yearned-for end to conflict, but castigates both the agreement and Sinn Féin for the failure to bring about social change for ordinary people, especially those who live on Garvaghy Road.

"Sinn Féin is in a powerful position," he says. "But its activism is all geared towards elections. It is not overthrowing the state, it is helping to run the state."

He says the party has disregarded social and economic conditions, "which have not changed in 11 years", and are therefore guilty of departing from Connolly's maxim that the causes of Ireland and of labour are inextricably linked. For him, Sinn Féin is now just another of the "establishment parties" in the mould of any of the main parties North or South.

"The Stormont Executive has been told to live within the UK budget," Mac Cionnaith says. "Why is no-one shouting about that? Stormont is a surrogate, it administers British rule. So they [Sinn Féin] are surrogates for British rule in Ireland. This arrangement is not a stepping-stone to anywhere."

Eirigi, he says, is the only "real and radical" alternative, but Mac Cionnaith is prepared to allow plenty of time to build it. New members go through a six-month probationary membership before they are fully admitted. It is a test of their commitment to revolutionary politics. But in the meantime there is acceptance that young men and women throughout Portadown and across Craigavon may well still be attracted by the dark glamour of armed action. "It's a sort of fatal attraction."

West Belfast, the epicentre of modern-day Sinn Féin, is contested ground. A range of dissident groups - Óglaigh na hÉireann, the INLA and both the Continuity (the "Contos") and the Real IRA - stand opposed to the colossus headed by Gerry Adams. Sinn Féin says many of these groups are simply cover names for criminal gangs involved in everything from drugs to protection rackets.

"Their actions are not about furthering republican goals," Adams alleges. "On the contrary, they tarnish the name of Irish republicanism and seek only to further the self-interest of those involved. This behaviour is intolerable and it must end."

The Sinn Féin president says he and other high-profile members of the party have been warned by the PSNI that the dissidents are a threat to their personal security.

"I would appeal to anyone who is genuinely committed to republican aims and objectives, and who values the legacy of all those who gave their lives during many years of struggle, to reject these groups," he says. He accepts the rights of anyone "to dissent from the mainstream republican position and to oppose Sinn Féin strategy", but says there can be "no political tolerance for the actions I have highlighted".

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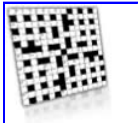
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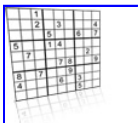
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