

Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries
(Discussion 1)

**‘The Republican Movement divides:
December 1969 – January 1970’**

Guest Speaker

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compiled by

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Introduction

The Fellowship of Messines Association was formed in May 2002 by a diverse group of individuals from Loyalist, Republican and other backgrounds, united in their realisation of the need to confront sectarianism in our society as a necessary means to realistic peace-building.

In 2020 the Association launched its ‘Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries’ programme. This programme would comprise a series of discussions which were intended to create opportunities for participants, from various backgrounds and political viewpoints, to engage in discussion on some of the more significant historical events of 100 years and 50 years ago, the consequences of which all of us are still living with today.

The discussions would also afford an opportunity for those taking part to engage in the important process of challenging some of the myths and folklore associated with past events, by means of an open and respectful engagement with factual history. To assist this, participants would have access to the reflections of former protagonists, whose testimonies of lived experience would hopefully enable all participants, and especially those from the younger generation, to understand the importance of critical historical inquiry when conducting respectful discourses that can accept and respect different identities.

The theme for the first discussion was: *The Republican Movement divides, December 1969 – January 1970*. The main speaker was to be **Dr Brian Hanley**, author and historian. Other speakers were to be **Dr Pdraig Yeates** and **Joe Austin**. Those who expressed a willingness to participate in the general discussion represented a wide diversity of political backgrounds and allegiances, and some of them had been participants in the period under discussion.

Harry Donaghy, Project Manager, The Fellowship of Messines Association

Note: This first discussion was scheduled to take place in the ICTU [Irish Congress of Trade Unions] premises, Belfast. However, this had to be cancelled as a consequence of the Covid-19 ‘lock-down’, to the great disappointment of all those hoping to attend. However, it was decided to send Dr Hanley’s talk to participants via email, and invite feedback and reflections. It was from the material gathered in this way that this pamphlet has been compiled.

Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries

‘The Republican Movement divides, December 1969–January 1970’

Dr. Brian Hanley

I would like to thank the Messines Project for the opportunity to talk about this subject despite the unique situation we all find ourselves in!

In November 1975 the *Irish Times* called the ongoing feud between the Official and the Provisional IRA in Belfast the ‘bloodiest fighting between republicans since the Civil War.’ So when discussing the split of 1969/70, it is well to be aware that there were very real human consequences, which people are still living with, and consequent bitterness which also colours how people view both the split itself and the arguments and events which led to it. Indeed, many people who were not around at the time still have strong views on what occurred and this also ensures that the terminology associated with the split remains in use. I am going to try to give an overview of these events, but I understand that many who were actually present at that time may disagree with me. That the 1969 split was also followed by another within the Officials in 1974/75 (producing the IRSP and the INLA) further complicates the story. The violence and feuding that became a feature of the relationship between the Officials and the Provisionals, and of later splits, is not a necessary feature of previous Republican divisions.

In 1926, for example, many senior IRA figures joined with Eamon de Valera in establishing Fianna Fáil and though people were court-martialled and expelled and so on there was no violence, until mid-1930s at least, when it was a matter of a Fianna Fáil government beginning to clamp down on the IRA – which I think is different than two organisations fighting for dominance. During 1934 a significant number of IRA officers broke away to form the Republican Congress and though there were some physical clashes, people were not shot, even though Congress did briefly have an armed wing (a revived Irish Citizen Army). In 1946 the Clann na Poblachta party emerged, prepared, like Fianna Fáil, to take seats in Leinster House, but there was no armed element to Republican denunciation of their former comrades. There was no love lost in the 1950s between the IRA and groups like Saor Uladh or the Dublin breakaway led by Joe Christle, and threats and physical intimidation occurred, but again no serious violence or fatalities.

So the context for the 1969/70 split is important because it emerged as part of the

modern conflict and arguably is one of the causes of that conflict; certainly it was always likely to be intensely bitter because of the circumstances.

The existence of a split in the IRA became public knowledge on 28 December 1969, with a statement from a new 'Provisional Army Council'. This followed an IRA convention held in Co. Roscommon where a majority of delegates had endorsed new policy positions put forward by majority of the IRA leadership, including Cathal Goulding, the organization's leader, Seamus Costello, Mick Ryan, Sean Garland (who was not present at the convention as far as I am aware) and Tomas Mac Giolla, the Sinn Féin president. A motion that the Republican Movement endeavour to become part of a National Liberation Front with other radical organisations was passed. This was followed by a debate on abstentionism – on whether to take seats in Leinster House, Stormont and Westminster. The majority of delegates endorsed being prepared to take seats. These changes had been recommended by a special commission established following discussions on changes to policy during 1968. Because of the situation in Belfast, where the local organization had broken links with Dublin the previous September, there were no delegates from the city represented. The split had already happened in Belfast and people had already chosen sides elsewhere as well.

But at the convention IRA units from Armagh, Tyrone, Co. Derry, South Down and Derry city supported the leadership. So did the majority in Dublin, Wicklow, Waterford, south Kilkenny, Mayo, Cork and south Kerry. Sean Mac Stíofáin and Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, the two most prominent opponents of these motions, had the support of Louth/Meath and Longford/Roscommon. They also expected support from Limerick and Clare, but the promised transport for these delegates never arrived; and a large section of the IRA in north Kerry was already estranged from the leadership. They could also claim a majority of the Belfast organization. But outside of the convention delegates there were supporters and opponents of the leadership in most areas. The divide over these issues was not yet necessarily bitter. Eamon Mac Thomáis, who sided with MacStoifain and Ó Brádaigh, and became the first editor of the Provisional paper *An Phoblacht*, gave a number of Goulding supporters a lift back to Dublin, for example. But these debates were not taking place in a vacuum; August had seen the worst violence in Belfast since 1920, though the documents and analysis that discussed the pros and cons of abstentionism and so on, had been written before that occurred. The statement from the Provisional Army Council rejected these policy changes and restated a policy of non-recognition of 'partition parliaments'. Indeed, since August there had been frantic efforts to secure arms, gain control of dumps and arms-smuggling routes, raise money and so on.

The Sinn Féin Ard Fheis then took place on the weekend of 11–12 January 1970, with 295 delegates present, some of whom had also of course been at the IRA convention. The debate about the National Liberation Front went on for four hours and finally ended at 11 p.m. in a majority accepting the concept. The issue of entering parliaments was discussed all day Sunday, and when a vote was finally taken at 5.30 p.m. there were 257 present. The motion needed 172 votes to gain the necessary two-thirds majority but only received 153; abstentionism was safe for another year. Denis Cassin from Armagh then proposed a resolution pledging Sinn Féin's continued support for the IRA. Mac Stíofáin retorted that he owed allegiance to the Provisional Army Council, at which point he, Ó Brádaigh and a number of supporters began to walk out. The 1916 veteran Joe Clarke followed them and there were some scuffles as rival announcements were being made. The Provisionals went to a prearranged meeting where they announced the setting up of a 'caretaker' executive of Sinn Féin, with Ó Bradaigh as president; it was also public knowledge that Mac Stíofáin was chief of staff of the Provisionals. The formal split was complete. The Provisionals then publicly listed a series of reasons for the split: because the IRA leadership had supported recognition of foreign parliaments and adoption of the National Liberation Front policy and its co-operation with radical groups, the adoption of what was described as 'extreme socialism', undemocratic internal methods and the 'let down of the North', and the leadership's opposition to a call for the abolition of Stormont.

A lot of the immediate rhetoric was framed in language which reflected the historic roots of Anti-Treaty Republicanism, about acceptance of the Free State, betrayal of the Republic of 1916 and so on. Tom Maguire, the sole surviving member of a small group of TDs elected in 1921, who had refused to accept compromise with the southern state, gave his blessing to the Provisionals. Across most of the country there was a lot of confusion, with calls for talks to heal divisions as well as accusations about other reasons for the split. The split took quite a while to formalize in many areas and some who later became Provisionals did not leave until after Internment, or dropped out much later. There were also a significant number of new recruits since August 1969 who would not have been very familiar with some of the historical baggage, while many who had left the movement in the 1960s returned, mainly to the Provisionals.

Mac Giolla was initially conciliatory and conceded and suggested that many of those who had walked out felt 'very sincerely that abstentionism is the heart of republicanism'. For non-republicans this issue seemed fairly abstract. Firstly, Sinn Fein didn't have any seats to abstain from and they really didn't have much of an immediate prospect of winning any either. Between 1927 and 1957 there were no Sinn

Féin TDs – four (including Ó Brádaigh) were elected as abstentionists during the Border Campaign but all lost their seats in 1961. (Though to be fair the Mid-Ulster by-election of early 1969 had also provoked questions about how long abstentionism could be justified in the light of Civil Rights agitation.)

Another factor that soon loomed large was that of Communism. By 1971 the Provisionals declared that they would ‘never come to terms with the Goulding IRA which is now Marxist and Socialist’. In contrast their aim was a ‘free Ireland’ based on ‘Christian principles’. Belfast’s *Republican News* during 1970 blamed a ‘Marxist-dominated leadership’ for being ‘more concerned about Vietnam’ than about Belfast Nationalists. In the United States the Provisional-supporting organisation NORAIID was very clear that none of the money it raised would be for ‘leftists, be they Marxists or Maoists.’ In essence the Provisionals argued that in the mid-1960s the Republican Movement had been infiltrated by Communist intellectuals, notably a man named Roy Johnston, supported by Anthony Coughlan, who were former members of the Connolly Association in Britain and were variously Communists, Stalinists, or agents of Moscow, who sought to encourage the IRA towards a reformist strategy, at least partly under communist leadership. How this had happened under the watch of the IRA chief of staff Cathal Goulding was explained as the result of Goulding falling under the spell of the Soviet spy Klaus Fuchs while in Wakefield prison. Obviously interpretation of this theory varied from place to place and individual to individual. But the Provisionals also claimed to be socialists – their first statements committed them to the formula of the ‘Democratic Socialist Republic’ adopted as policy by Sinn Féin and the IRA in 1967. As the years progressed the anti-communist rhetoric began to look embarrassing (outside of America at least), and the idea of infiltration took second place to the failure of the Dublin leadership to defend Nationalists in Belfast in August 1969, and this is probably what most people would assume was at the heart of the split now.

In 1970 Mac Giolla and others accepted that some of those who supported the Provisionals had been active in various forms of social agitation. While some of those who supported the Officials would have accepted the label of ‘Marxist’, many would not have and Goulding was at pains during 1970 to stress that they were ‘not reds’ and that there was no external hand in their politics. Neither would the Officials have accepted that Nationalists were ‘let down’ in 1969. Since the winter of 1969 the IRA had been warning that elements in the Fianna Fáil government were trying to split the IRA, or at least buy off a section of its leadership. Some of this would form the backdrop to a crisis in the Irish government itself and the trial of Ministers in connection with

gun-running and so on during 1970. These accusations became louder as the years went on and ultimately became an article of faith. Hence the split was primarily the result of the machinations of Fianna Fáil and right-wing Nationalists. The IRA's own activities and policies in the 1960s were not referenced to any extent, and indeed the Provisional taunt that nationalists had been deliberately left undefended, was tacitly accepted by what became the Workers Party which tended to stress the Civil Rights movement and a peaceful effort to unite Protestant and Catholic as the key elements of 1960s Republican politics.

Soon various labels had been affixed to the two organizations, some they chose themselves, some that their enemies labeled them and some created by the media (Gardiner Place v. Kevin Street, etc.); and neither accepted the other was the IRA of course. Both organizations had contacts in the press and so on, and the coverage started to reflect this. So the split had several diverse elements and while it is probably true that the Republican movement might have divided anyway over abstentionism or the NLF strategy, the nature of that split was completely transformed by the crisis in the North, and the upsurge in Nationalist sentiment it created for a period in the South. It also occurred after a period where Republicans thought some of their strategies might be bearing fruit. At the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in December 1968 Mac Giolla asserted that the 'slumbering and despairing Irish nation has suddenly awakened' and was 'witnessing what we hope is the beginning of the disintegration of two old and corrupt parties in Belfast and Dublin.'

The roots of these strategies lay in re-think after the failure of the Border Campaign of 1956-62. That campaign was not quite the gentleman's war that it is sometimes presented as, but was obviously less bloody than what happened after 1970, or indeed between 1920-22. Many of the ideas then being discussed by Republicans carried echoes of the debates that took place during the 1930s but they occurred in a very new era. Ireland, north and south, was quite a different place during the 1960s than even a decade previously; international events and trends during the 1960s were clearly influential as well; hence Civil Rights and the National Liberation Front. There had been 16 years between the IRA dumping arms at the end of the Civil War and its first official armed campaign since then in 1939, and 11 years between the official end of that in 1945 and the beginning of the Border Campaign. There were only seven years between the end of that campaign and the split (which sometimes seems to escape people who wonder why the IRA took so long to organize another armed campaign).

In 1961 Fianna Fáil were returned to power in Dublin and Charles Haughey appointed Minister for Justice. He promised that he would 'use every means ...

including the army if necessary’ to bring the IRA’s ‘futile, evil campaign of violence to an end’. In November 1961 the Military Tribunals, used against the IRA during the war years, were revived by Haughey. The Department of Justice was in no doubt that Haughey’s move to establish the Military Tribunals played a major role in forcing the IRA to end the campaign. In the aftermath of the campaign most IRA prisoners were released fairly soon, the reasoning being that there was ‘no particular reason to fear’ the ‘organizing ability’ of these men of ‘limited education and poor personality’. The Department of Justice concluded that

It is probably true to say that at no time in the past forty years has the IRA had less hope of being backed by public opinion. They publicly admit it. A resort to arms in present circumstances and for some considerable time to come appears to be out of the question ... they have no funds: their external sources have dried up ... it is likely that quite a number will avail of the present situation to ease themselves out of the organization.

The northern authorities took a while longer, but they too had released most IRA prisoners by 1963 and a significant number did not resume activity.

There was some change at leadership level and some of those central to the IRA during the previous decade left; Goulding became Chief of Staff and Mac Giolla Sinn Féin president. It would be hard to discern much change in their rhetoric for a while, though there was an emphasis on the threat of the Common Market. The IRA’s 1963 Easter statement asserted that ‘the continued existence of the Irish people as a distinct national entity is endangered as never before by the proposed immersion of a weak, anglicised and foreign-occupied Ireland’ into a ‘Western European Superstate’. In 1964 the IRA stressed that ‘our native language and culture are being systematically obliterated ... our finance is being controlled by the Bank of England ... our land is being grabbed at an alarming rate [and] our industry and commerce is controlled by foreigners’.

An indication of some re-thinking is evident in the instructions given to IRA members in the movement’s (clandestine) journal *An t-Oglac*, which asked its readers in January 1965: ‘what kind of a man are you? Can you truthfully call yourself a Soldier? More important still can you truthfully call yourself a Revolutionary?’ and called for a ‘self-examination. ... remember *it is* 1965 ... having been out in the forties or fifties is not a good enough excuse for resting on your oars.’ Was it to be through a ‘fight in the North, kill and be killed – wrap the green flag round me – wave the banners – get the blood up and the Irish people will follow’? If that was the case then volunteers

were exhorted to ‘GET THIS TECHNICOLOUR FILM OUT OF YOUR MIND now, it is unrealistic, stupid, childish. Remember military campaigns have taken place before and were unsuccessful. It needs something more than a military campaign alone to win the majority of the people to our side.’

It was emphasised instead that an Irish ‘Republic without LIBERTY and EQUALITY would not be worth fighting for’ and hence the key task for volunteers was to begin ‘fighting injustice and inequality now, in your district. This is where you start the Revolution.’ But most of what else was being stressed, on the need for weapons training and so on, was not that different to earlier years. Until the mid-1960s you would still have had positive references to ‘the Irgun (who) belted the British out of Palestine’ as well as to Cyprus, Algeria and Cuba.

Part of the re-thinking was stimulated by a growing awareness of aspects of Republican history that had been forgotten or ignored since the 1930s.

Desmond Greaves’ biography of James Connolly, which made clear the influence of Marxism on the 1916 martyr, was published in 1961, and in 1963 Republican Congress veteran Peadar O’Donnell’s memoir *There Will Be Another Day* brought a left-wing analysis of the Civil War to a new generation. George Gilmore, another Republican Congress veteran, would advise Goulding and other members of the IRA leadership on the lessons of this venture. Goulding concluded that the great mistake of O’Donnell and his comrades had been to leave the movement. If the Socialists had stayed inside the organization, he later argued, they could have eventually won over the majority of the 1930s IRA. But even this was a sensitive area. In 1966 Mac Giolla was loath to identify with the legacy of the Congress, claiming that it had ‘became identified with communist movements abroad but no one can say today that we in Sinn Féin are identified with any communist parties either at home or abroad.’

Goulding used the bicentenary of the birth of Wolfe Tone, in 1963, to bring people together. Following discussions with Sean Cronin and others he started to assemble like-minded thinkers into the Wolfe Tone Directories, as ‘a launching point from which the doctrine of Republicanism could be taught anew’. Ultimately these developed into Wolfe Tone Societies, which were much broader than the IRA or Sinn Féin. It was a Wolfe Tone Society meeting in 1966 at Maghera, where a paper, written by Anthony Coughlan, was delivered which is often seen as the genesis of the Civil Rights strategy (though in fact the IRA in Belfast had suggested ‘one man, one vote’ committees some time previously). But it was also through these Societies that Roy Johnston became involved in the movement and was ultimately brought onto its leadership. Johnston, a Protestant, Trinity graduate, former member of both the Irish and British Communist

parties, became a lightning rod for opposition to the Goulding leadership. In June 1966 Johnston wrote a letter to the *United Irishman* (the monthly republican newspaper) criticizing the saying of the rosary at commemorations as sectarian. There was an immediate backlash and Sean Mac Stíofáin refused to have the paper sold in his command area, Cork, at the time, and this resulted in him being suspended from the IRA for a short period. (In later years it was sometimes stated that the IRA ceased the practice of saying the rosary after this, but that was not true. It was still discussing whether or not to replace the prayer with a minute's silence in 1969.) For many who believed that the IRA were infiltrated, then Johnston, who became Director of Education on the Army Council, was the key infiltrator. In early 1968 Gerry McCarthy, a critic of the leadership, compared Johnston to Mrs. Lindsay, an informer killed by the IRA during 1921, and urged that he and his supporters be 'kicked out' of the movement 'lock, stock and barrel'. Essentially, the retrospective view was that Johnston managed to commit the IRA to running down its military operations and embrace a form of Moscow-line Socialism, which in turn committed it to a 'reformist' programme. The problem is that while Johnston's ideas were certainly influential, the IRA continued doing and saying things that contradicted what both he and his detractors would allege about him.

In 1965 for instance, Goulding and Seamus Costello approached the Chinese government (through their Paris embassy) seeking funding and equipment; though this might not seem obvious now, a Moscow-line communist couldn't do this; China and the USSR were at loggerheads and in fact close to war with each other. The term 'socialism' itself was not adopted by the IRA until 1967 and then it was emphasized that this was not because of outside influences. As *An t-Oglach* argued during that year 'if Socialism were imposed on us from outside it would be as alien as the British Imperial Capitalism which has been imposed on us from the outside. The foreign Capitalist system can only be destroyed and replaced by a Native conception of Socialism. Hungary is a classic example of this. In short, nobody can appreciate being freed by the scruff of the neck.' At the 1968 Árd Fheis MacGiolla explained that 'Socialism has nothing to do with either Atheism or totalitarianism ... neither is it a philosophy which must be imported. It is part of the Republican tradition since the founding of the United Irishmen (and) was the driving force behind the 1916 Rebellion'. He was also adamant that he opposed 'the imperialism of Russia when she invades Czechoslovakia ... any big nation which tries to dominate and control a smaller nation is acting in an imperialist way'.

An tOglach was also keen to assert that there was no contradiction between social

agitation and military force. So at Easter 1968 it stressed that the IRA

must have men that are capable of leading the people in an armed struggle. For of this last let there be no doubt, there will be an armed struggle against the forces who are at present in control of this country. This is a time of preparation. This generation must work harder, longer, and be even more dedicated and more ruthless than past generations. We have had too many attempts and failures. For us the timeworn phrase “better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all” is out of date. For this generation, nothing less than success will do.

You could, of course, suggest that was rhetoric designed to keep people happy, but the armed actions that the IRA were carrying out did have some impact as I’ll argue. But certainly there was also plenty of dissension. This had emerged forcibly when Goulding made an attempt to raise the question of abstentionism at an extraordinary General Army Convention held in June 1965. Goulding addressed a special pre-convention message to all IRA volunteers, urging them to study the recommendations ‘without emotion or prejudice’. They should be aware that ‘some of our finest’ were in favour of taking parliamentary seats just as ‘some of our finest’ were opposed. He asked that they all give it their ‘maturest thought (and) give a reasoned and fair reply’. In particular Goulding urged that ‘should it happen that you are against the recommendation – you must not regard those who favour it as traitors; should it happen that you favour the recommendation you must not regard your opponents in the matter as either stupid or traditionalist. You will debate this question, as all others, with comrades and friends, not with enemies.’

He stressed to those unsure about change that ‘today we grapple with problems that are no longer clear-cut. To the youth, which must be attracted to our standards if we are to win, many of our attitudes are doctrinaire, to them we are bound in a tradition sanctified by time rather than reason.’ Goulding stressed that ‘without a solid and real basis in and among the people our efforts will again come to nothing. . . to those who doubt the value of this social work I can only urge the reading of any history of a modern revolutionary movement. Read of Cuba, of Algeria, of Cyprus. We depend on an armed people for success. But first we must arm the people to combat the foreign take-over, the foreign landlord.’ However, he reassured volunteers that he intended ‘that the next military campaign will be the final one. I work for that now. (But) our new and vital orientation in the fields of co-operation and land (are) laying the basis for our future effort in the North.’

But the proposal was heavily defeated, as it was at a Sinn Féin Ard Fheis soon after, and two years later Goulding lamented that the whole debate had ‘served to poison the movement, to cause grave differences and to place the leadership of the Army on the defensive within the movement, from which position it has not yet recovered.’ He also admitted that ‘it was probably a mistake on their part to allow the resolution on Leinster House to reach (the) convention.’ He also suggested that ‘those responsible for the present distrust of the leadership blamed the coming of some social revolutionaries into the Army for the resolution on Leinster House.’ This was a mistaken opinion, he said, ‘the resolution had come from men who had come through everything this movement had come through in the last 14 years.’

At this point, in August 1967, the IRA was in a poor state financially, and one of the issues which divided those present was how to rectify this, and was also low on modern equipment; ‘a statement was read out giving the stock of equipment in G.H.Q. dumps. It appears that the Army has enough ammo. for one good job (and) a very limited number of arms and explosives.’ Liam McMillen from Belfast has questioned the lack of equipment and reasserted that in his view ‘there was a need for an army to hit the British.’ But Seamus Costello argued that the political question was still the pressing one: Sinn Fein, he said, stood for a 32-county republic and nothing else. It was not enough, the movement did not give the people credit for possessing any common sense. On this point of sense, Costello introduced the question of abstention which he described as ‘not being a credible alternative, and something which could not be presented as such.’ (Sinn Fein had performed poorly in recent local elections, though Costello had been elected a councillor in Bray.) The only delegate who referenced political developments in the north was Johnston who argued that the ‘first law of guerilla warfare was the necessity for the support of the people’. He felt that there would be ‘no significant impact made by elements of suppressed radicalism in the north, especially among the Belfast workers, which might be rallied ... If the movement could succeed in adopting a social radical programme which would unite the workers of the north and of the south he felt that we would be then on our way. The provision of more arms was not the answer.’ Johnston’s views on this did inform Republican leadership thinking on Civil Rights and so on, and on the need to make contacts with elements in the Belfast labour movement, particularly communists. In 1965 he had argued that ‘the successful completion of the Irish National Revolution [is] going to depend on the movement building good relations with disaffected elements among the present supporters of unionism. This means basically the Belfast working class, many of whom support Labour.’ However, how exactly the IRA, or Sinn Féin, could do this

was the problem. One solution he said was to build links with people who had influence or at least experience in the Labour movement. This was one of the ideas behind the National Liberation Front strategy. But ironically shortly after this meeting the first Civil Rights march took place and following that events began to move rapidly across the north.

By that stage there had already been more fracturing south of the border. In 1966 a large section of the IRA and Sinn Féin in north Kerry had left, or been expelled, in a dispute formally about Republican policy towards the south's presidential election, though in reality reflecting unease about the political direction of the movement. A small group of mainly Dublin-based ex-IRA members had started carrying out armed robberies, which they claimed were in order to speed up rearmament for a new campaign; this group ultimately became known as Saor Éire. In 1968 the IRA decided to allow women to become volunteers. This occurred, however, after Cumann na mBan, the Republican women's organization, had publicly broken with the IRA. Tensions had come to a head at Bodenstown when Cumann na mBan members objected to the presence of Communists in the parade to Wolfe Tone's grave. Their contingent split over the issue, with the majority refusing to join the march. The organization was then stood down by the IRA leadership and refused use of Republican premises. Cumann na mBan would of course be one of the first organizations to endorse the Provisionals in 1970.

But despite the fairly glum prognosis of many IRA officers at the state of their movement in 1967, publicly Republicans were more prominent than they had been for some time. Now, since 1964 the IRA had already intervened in land disputes, strikes and housing agitation. But by 1968 they were doing so in a more structured way, particularly through groups like the Dublin Housing Action Campaign, the National Waters Restoration League and so on. Similarly Republicans were prominent in various ways in the Civil Rights movement.

The IRA also carried on with what Liam McMillen called a 'happy blend of political agitation and military activity'. In January 1968 the IRA bombed the Royal Ulster Rifles Territorial HQ on the Malone Road (there had a similar attack in Lisburn during 1967). During May they destroyed buses being used to ferry strikebreakers during a dispute at the E-I factory in Shannon. At Bodenstown a few weeks later Sean Garland made clear that the actions were 'no isolated incident ... the day is past when the homeless, the worker or the landless ... will be left unprotected'. Now physical force would be employed where necessary to 'defend people who are agitating for their rights'. The criticisms of 'mealy-mounted sentimentalists' would not be allowed to

stop the IRA becoming the 'Army of the People'. In July 1968 the IRA carried out a grenade attack on an RUC patrol in Cyprus Street in retaliation for Special Branch raids and led to the RUC nicknaming the area 'Nogoland'. In August a U.S.-owned lobster trawler, the *Mary Catherine*, was destroyed by the IRA at Rossaveal, Co. Galway. An IRA statement explained the action was a protest against 'exploitation by foreign interest' of Irish natural resources. During the winter, property belonging to landlords was burnt out in Dublin and in the spring of 1969 there were armed attacks on foreign-owned farms and estates in Meath and Kildare. This of course was not a new armed campaign, but it was also not an unarmed strategy; interestingly it contravened the IRA's General Order No. 8, which was supposed to rule out military activity in the 'Free State'. In the midst of all this the recommendations of another commission on Republican strategy were being debated; this was the Ireland Today document, drafted by Johnston.

This paper stressed that British Imperialism dominated Ireland, North and South. Ireland was changing, however, with the North 'shaken to the core' by the Civil Rights movement, resulting in the old Unionist power structure fragmenting. The achievement of Civil Rights demands would open the way 'for linking of economic demands to the national question'. The traditional institutions of the Catholic community, particularly the Nationalist Party were also in crisis; 'gombeen nationalism' was on its way out. In the long run Civil Rights could pave the way to a 32-county Republic. Across Ireland, and among Republicans abroad, this was supposed to be the basis for debate during early 1969. *Ireland Today* examined the historical objections to electoral participation and concluded that safeguards could be built into the process to ensure that corruption did not set in, commenting that 'the elements which were missing in the twenties and forties have now been developed sufficiently to enable the movement, if it had TDs, to instruct them specifically on all key issues'. Refusal to face up to electoral participation could mean that the 'negative tradition of glorious failures' would continue to be the lot of Irish Republicans. There were pragmatic and practical reasons for wanting an alliance with left-wing and communist groups, as well as ideological ones. The Irish communists, though small in number, had some Trade Union influence, while the Republican movement had very little.

Pressure was also mounting to make a decision because of events in the north. A Westminster by-election was due to take place in Mid-Ulster during April. Local Republicans nominated Kevin Agnew, a Republican and member of the Civil Rights executive, but he would have to be an absentionist. Civil Rights activists nominated

Bernadette Devlin. A number of Republicans in Tyrone had already resigned arguing that ‘the abstentionist policy bears no relation to conditions in 1969...an abstentionist candidate would ensure the return of a Unionist and would be a disaster for the civil rights movement.’ The Dublin Republican leadership decided to withdraw Agnew and support Devlin instead, despite the fact that she was committed to taking her seat if elected. Amidst the political discussions, the IRA also carried out the biggest armed robbery in the southern state until that date, at Dublin airport in May 1969, taking over £25,000 from a security van. This was not claimed or admitted, of course, and disappointingly for those concerned, most of the money was recovered.

The Republic held a general election in June. There were no Sinn Féin candidates and despite high hopes of a breakthrough for Labour, Fianna Fáil won a comfortable majority. While the north barely featured, a red scare aimed at Labour was a notable aspect of the contest. Fianna Fáil minister Neil Blaney denounced the ‘pseudo-intellectual Marxists, Maoists, Trotskyites and the like who have emerged ... like carrion birds to pick the flesh of the Irish people’. Minister for Justice Michael Moran attacked the ‘new left-wing political queers’ from Trinity College and RTÉ. Prior to the election Moran had asked Peter Berry of the Department of Justice to supply him with information on the left and on the Republican movement to be used during the campaign. Two comprehensive reports on the Republican movement reached the cabinet in the spring and summer of 1969. Berry began with the state of the IRA in 1962 and suggested that its leadership had become

very receptive to suggestions from left-wing sources for a change in policy. By 1965 a strong liaison had been established with a number of intellectuals with marked communist histories and these men were given positions of authority in the organisation which facilitated them in indoctrinating the rank and file with the conviction that any occasions of social unrest could be exploited to establish the IRA as a dynamic political force on whom workers and small farmers could alone depend for improved social conditions. Coincidental with this indoctrination, the IRA leadership saw that it would be necessary, in order to establish and stimulate the interest of young or new members, to hold meetings and parades of a military character and instructions in the use of arms. By 1967 the leadership were gauging public reaction by statements issued to the public press and on public platforms in which they were openly advocating the establishment of a ‘Workers Republic’ and an eventual resort to arms for that purpose.

The report noted that since May 1968 the IRA had carried out a number of ‘serious crimes’ involving ‘arson or the use of explosives’, and that the Gardaí estimated that the organization had perhaps 1,200 members. Of particular concern was the fact that IRA statements justifying their actions were carried without comment in the press. Most newspapers no longer used the official designation ‘illegal organisation’ to describe the IRA, and ‘a new and disturbing feature in recent times is the way in which the press in Ireland and the Television service in particular, lend themselves to publicising IRA and Communist spokesmen to whom they have given a new and false public image’. The report contended that public opinion was being influenced to a ‘disproportionate degree’ by a ‘small number’ of left-wingers in ‘key positions’ in the press and TV and radio. It was also alleged that several academics and journalists, in the press and television, were giving the IRA ‘active assistance’ and that ‘a number of the IRA have been trained by an RTÉ technician in the use of shortwave radio transmitters’. A further memorandum noted the ‘commando-style’ robbery at Dublin Airport and Republican influence in housing action, fish-ins and land campaigns. The Gardaí had prevented several attempted bank raids but the IRA was ‘very short of money’ and was likely to try again. The authorities were aware that there was unease within the IRA at its leftward direction and Berry urged that this be exploited by government (and perhaps clerical figures) so that the ‘result would be (as in the Republican Congress Movement) a split in the IRA organisation and the communist element would become discredited’.

In early August Taoiseach Jack Lynch met with the Director General and Deputy Head of News at RTE, along with the editors of several national newspapers to discuss with them what he called a ‘new phase’ in the activities of the IRA. Lynch told the media men that the IRA in the south had about 1,200 members and was now strongly influenced by socialism (though he mentioned there was some internal fragmentation because of this). The IRA had carried out several recent attacks on property during land and Labour disputes and the government expected more of these in the coming months. As a result his administration was preparing to take a ‘more active line’ against the organization and the purpose of the meeting was to seek the assistance of the media in doing this. Lynch asked that when reporting IRA actions the press avoid terms like ‘commando-type raid’ which he suggested tended to glamorize the organization’s activities. He also asserted that too much media coverage of the IRA could have a ‘bad effect’ on what he described as ‘immature minds.’ Even before the meeting the *Irish Press* was already suggesting that the IRA’s ‘burning of buses and other sinister incidents’ was the ‘kind of behaviour one associates with the last days of the Weimar

Republic.’ The paper warned that this ‘lawlessness’ could lead to internment. On August 7, just after the Lynch meeting, the Irish Independent’s editorial and a special feature piece dealt with the activities of what were termed the ‘violent few’ and warned of the consequences ‘if industrialists and factories are frightened away and tourists steer clear of us.’

By then the political divisions within the Republican movement had become public knowledge in dramatic style. It was during July 1969 the bodies of Peter Barnes and James McCormack, executed in England in 1940 for their part in the IRA’s bombing campaign, were released for return to Ireland. The coffins were met at Dublin Airport by Mac Giolla and several veterans of the 1940s, along with an IRA colour party. A thousand people marched behind the coffins along Dublin’s quays while another colour party in battledress led the cortège. On a sunny Sunday up to 10,000 people attended the ceremony outside Mullingar. There were large numbers present from across Ireland, including many who had dropped out or left the IRA and Sinn Féin over the previous few years. Mac Giolla and Cork veteran of the International Brigades Jim O’Regan spoke, before Jimmy Steele, of Belfast, a 1940s activist, gave the main oration. Steele’s address saw him denounce the adoption of what he called ‘foreign’ ideologies’ claiming that ‘one is now expected to be more conversant with the thoughts of Chairman Mao than those of our dead Patriots’ and he also poured scorn on ‘politicians’, ‘constitutionalists’ and ‘compromise.’ Steele, however, said nothing about the situation in Belfast or elsewhere in the north, nor the need for defense, which would later be recounted as the key reason for the split.

But within a month the whole course of modern Irish history would be transformed, with the Battle of the Bogside, followed by the pogroms in Belfast. There was a wave of emotional solidarity across the south, the Fianna Fáil government authorized funding for Defence Committees in Belfast and elsewhere; there were dozens of new recruits to the IRA, while many disgruntled or dissident ex-members returned to the movement. Rumours were soon in circulation about promises of arms and money if the IRA abandoned social agitation or changed its leadership. Recriminations were aired publicly about the lack of arms or lack of planning on the part of the IRA leadership for what had occurred. Amidst all this it is questionable why questions such as abstentionism needed to be the subject of major decisions but the IRA went ahead with these debates in the winter of 1969, which meant by 1970 there were now two rival IRAs and Sinn Féins.

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Dr Padraig Yeates I largely agree with Brian's analysis and subscribe to most of his conclusions. I think the following points need to be made:

1. The split was part of a process that had been going on ever since the rethink that followed the end of the Border campaign. The key figures in this process were largely southern-based and the focus was primarily on social and economic issues in the south. In Clann na hEireann we were encouraged to launch an emigrants' rights movement as part of this new strategy. If there was to be another campaign, we first needed to build a base.

2. None of these initiatives caught fire to anything like the same extent as the Civil Rights movement. The problem was that the Republican movement had not evolved, either ideologically or organisationally, to a point where it could develop a policy that could 'manage' the crisis that emerged, let alone control it. Yet the IRA 'army' mentality was to control and manage everything. For instance, as Brian points out, Cathal Goulding believed the Republican Congress leaders were wrong to leave the IRA in 1934 rather than continue fighting to gain control. Cathal came to equate control of the Army Council, the Executive, and the formal structures of the Army with control of the movement and the direction in which it could be taken. Anyone who broke away would suffer the same fate as other splinter groups.

In fairness to him, and everyone else, nobody managed to develop a coherent and successful policy to manage the crisis, certainly not the Unionists, the British Government or the Dublin Government. The flaws in the Northern Ireland state were systemic and embedded in its origins.

3. Guns were important, or rather the lack of them, but more as a weapon, if you'll pardon the pun, for the founders of the Provisional movement to use to beat their opponents with and justify the split. In fact, I would argue that it was the relative lack of guns in everybody's hands, except the British Army, that prevented the Balkanisation of the North. This also allowed tribal politicians on all sides to posture as much as they liked without having to worry about the consequences. At the same time, by deploying troops on the streets the British government gifted the Provisionals with a target that had been denied to the IRA for decades.

4. Looking back, this is my view of what happened.

a) A small group of IRA activists had an opportunity in prison to rethink and re-educate themselves. They came out and, in the space of less than seven years, transformed the movement sufficiently to intervene effectively in public life in the South and to an even greater extent in the North. But events developed far too quickly in the North to be managed by a small group of revolutionaries still working out their own basic policy positions. Their nascent organisation was overwhelmed by the course of events.

b) With more time and political experience, a split might have been avoided in 1969/70. As Brian points out, neither the National Liberation Front or Abstentionism should have been critical issues in the post-August 1969 situation. In the NICRA there was perhaps a possible vehicle already in existence that could become the NLF. Unfortunately, there was no time to learn and build, and some people, on both sides of the movement, wanted a split. A united republican movement might have had the social and political weight to direct the evolution of NICRA into something more.

Regarding how the split affected the republican movement in the rest of the country, and Britain, from my recollection there was very little support for the Provisional movement initially. For older, generally less-political members, the natural default position was to stick with what they regarded as the legitimate, tried and trusted leadership of the movement. Among the generally younger, usually more political membership there was active opposition to the Provisional movement, which was at odds with the new thinking on a wide range of issues, from women's rights to public ownership of natural resources. It was the Provisionals' military campaign that changed the political dynamics between 1970 and 1972. The Officials' ceasefire, which preceded and outlasted that of the Provisionals in the latter year, marked the end of that initial phase in the struggle for leadership of radical nationalism.

c) The Official republican movement would subsequently prove a victim of its own progressive instincts. It was ahead of its time and its message of working-class solidarity and tolerance of other traditions was indeed an alien ideology, that was lost on its existing base and had little appeal to working-class Unionists and socialists. It would lead to a further split with the IRSP-INLA which was almost a re-run of 1969-70 in some respects, but bloodier.

By contrast the Provisionals reflected a mixture of traditions that grew organically out of the working-class Catholic/nationalist community in Belfast and was broad enough to embrace quite progressive elements on the one hand, and other currents which were deeply sectarian and atavistic. Again, it was in the prisons, where thousands were incarcerated over decades, that a new form of 'republicanism' developed that could mobilise a broader populist base from which modern Sinn Féin emerged.

I would regard the party as very much in the radical nationalist tradition, although it would contain many socialists within its ranks. That this process required the deaths of over 3,500 people and caused serious injury to over 45,000 more was, to say the least, regrettable.

Sinn Féin may succeed in unifying the country, but whether it can unify the people who live in it is, I believe, deeply problematic.

d) A detailed study of the staging posts between 1969 and the present would be

needed to understand more fully this process and the evolution of the various ‘republican’, or militant nationalist groups that emerged from it. These discussions, facilitated by the Messines Fellowship, may perhaps help achieve this goal.

Jim McDermott I have had a quick read of Brian’s paper and found it both interesting and well researched. I would like to make a few quick comments, which are not criticisms of Brian’s work but an attempt to amplify debate on the 1970 split as I see it. For convenience, and to get ideas down in no particular order of importance, they are given here as bullet points:

- The fifties in Ireland both north and south had been artistically and creatively stultifying. Not only had the promise of the revolutionary years been left unfulfilled but government was dominated by survivors of those same revolutionary years who showed, for the most part, little inclination to change. The immigrant boat, rural and urban poverty, clerical domination and partisan political loyalties had seemingly fossilised into permanence.

- The failure of Operation Harvest was militarily a disaster but its failure was made worse by the lack of support from the Irish people themselves.

- The 1960s were universally revolutionary in terms of the economy and the outlook of younger generations in Europe and the USA. Even Fianna Fáil through Seán Lemass indicated a willingness to adopt new strategies. For some Republicans in Ireland not to want to not only move with the times but be in the vanguard of change given their recent reverses is very understandable. There was certainly room on the left and the Irish Labour Party were showing no great appetite for occupying it.

Had there been no outbreak of the Troubles in the North the history of the Official republican movement may well have been very different despite the many difficulties which they already faced before January 1970, as Brian’s paper shows. It was the atavistic response of so many Nationalists and Unionists in the North to the escalation of violence that led to a thirst, not for new thinking but old thinking, that was key to the split. The sheer emotional ferocity with which so many nationalists in the North had come to reject Unionist authority led to a groundswell of support for an old-style IRA by the same community who had not supported the military endeavours of the IRA less than ten years earlier.

- The argument has been made that the southern leadership of the IRA were unable to comprehend the mindset of many northern nationalists but in many senses that is an inversed patronisation. Whether Goulding and others were correct is a much better question, when we look at the scarring process that developed and they tried to avert.

Peter Bunting I found this paper quite interesting and thank Brian Hanley for writing

it. There are certain issues in the paper which I would disagree with, no doubt as expected, even by Brian, who writes that those in the Republican Movement then see the split through a prism of ‘colours’ depending on which side you ended up on. The paper also raises questions which result in further investigation.

I refer here to the Army Convention in Roscommon at which ‘no delegates’ from Belfast were in attendance. It would be worthwhile at some future discussion to explore, in some depth, how and why the IRA split in Belfast occurred.

The author also says that the bitterness and violence of the split ‘is not a necessary feature of previous Republican divisions’. During the early 1970s I had the opportunity to meet regularly with many people who had been members of the Republican Movement throughout Ireland. From their recollections it is quite evident that bitterness most certainly was a feature of differences between the then ‘Blueshirts’ and those of a Republican opinion. While such differences were not an everyday occurrence, they became very prominent during elections in ROI and fighting occurred at public meetings held by aspiring candidates. These divisions again developed between the Republican prisoners interned in the Curragh Camp in the 1940s. Indeed, after this episode many, many Republicans severed their links with the Movement.

I most definitely agree wholeheartedly with Brian that the split became ‘arguably one of the causes of that conflict’. As I had joined the Republican Movement in October 1969, prior to the split I can verify that the ‘failure to defend Belfast (was) at the heart of the Split’. This to me was clearly the main reason that myself and numerous other recent recruits went with the Provisional Movement. One other determinant which was a factor is that of where one was living in Belfast at that time.

However, when I arrived in Dublin in December 1970 and remained connected, being the first full-time employee in 2a Kevin Street, I encountered the cause for many Republicans leaving the Gardiner Row elements, and that was the Marxist link and the role of Roy Johnston.

To come back to the theory of the prolonging of the conflict, it is of course with hindsight that the ‘split’ was no doubt a feature impacting on the minds of the leadership through those years. How many other splits would have ensued were the leadership to halt the campaign earlier than 1994/1997? That is neither to endorse nor criticise those with the responsibilities.

One other striking feature of the paper is it properly outlines that the events of 1968/69 were unseen in how Northern Ireland quickly degenerated into a sectarian quagmire. For the Republican Movement of Goulding et al who were modernising the Republican Movement through radical political actions it also was a major shock and untimely insofar as the political action had not the sufficient time to become embedded as the main rationale for the Republican Movement.

One final point I wish to make is the issue of the ‘genesis’ for the Civil Rights strategy as mentioned by Brian as contained in a speech by Anthony Coughlan at Maghera in 1966. I have come across minutes and reference to the NIC-ICTU which references decisions on the promotion of Civil Rights issues in 1964.

Lastly, (typical TU) is that of the 50th Anniversary of the 1916 Rising which did or did not have any bearing on the Republican Movement during the time we are discussing.

Joe Austin This document presents a good basis of discussion around the events culminating in the split in the republican movement. It highlights the politics (and in some cases the lack of politics) from 1967-1970. These political differences were fundamental to the divisions within republicanism but were not solely responsible. Personality clashes and outside political forces, as well as spontaneous and unpredictable happenings, made the traditional divisions within the republican family. For many years what is referred to as the split was cloaked in secrecy, folklore and partisan analysis. These discussions allow us to break free from these shackles.

Anne Devlin Thank you for this paper which was extraordinarily lucid. I note that the old Cumann na mBan had been stood down in ’68 at the point at which the IRA allowed women to become volunteers and that in 1970 the Cumann na mBan supported the Provisionals. My question is: what was the fate of the new female IRA volunteers after the split?

Padraig Yeates Women were able to join the IRA from before the split rather than Cumann na mBan and that’s largely what happened in the South and Britain. As far as the North is concerned I think most women who stayed with the Official movement would have switched to the IRA.

Michael Hall First of all can I say that I thought Brian has presented an extremely well-researched piece of work. I would just like to complement his historical approach with some personal anecdotes.

To start with, I can readily concur with what Brian was saying about the ‘anti-red’ feeling which was prevalent at the time. I can best illustrate this by a couple of experiences of my own.

The first one occurred when People’s Democracy was organising a public event in St Mary’s Hall in Bank Street. Three of us were on the lower Falls Road putting up flyers. As we were pasting a flyer on an empty hoarding – belonging to Laing’s construction firm – a priest approached. ‘What are you boys up to?’ he demanded, ‘you’re defacing private property!’ ‘It’s only a small flyer,’ we responded, ‘and it’s not

as if it's on anyone's house.' The priest peered closely at the flyer, on which the word SOCIALISM was prominent. 'You're a bunch of communists! We don't want communists on this road!' Upon which he signalled to a group of five young men standing on the far side of the road. As they came over to us, the priest said to them: 'Get these boyos off the road – they're communists.' The five men moved menacingly towards us: 'You heard the father – piss off now!' I then noticed that two of them were wearing the metal Connolly badges which the Stickies had recently produced, and so I felt sure we would receive a supportive hearing. 'We're not doing anything wrong; the priest here just doesn't like socialists.' 'Nor do we! So fuck away off right now!' 'But you two are wearing Connolly badges! Connolly was a socialist.' 'Fucking sure he wasn't! He was a good nationalist! Now fuck off!' And so, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, we 'fucked off', having learnt – not for the first or last time – that not everything is as it seems in this country.

The second incident also took place in the Falls Road area. Again I was with a small group of PD members; we were all drinking in a pub. (I cannot recall which pub it was; born and bred in Protestant working-class East Belfast, the Falls then was unfamiliar territory to me.)

Our table was in one corner of the room, while in another corner sat a larger crowd of Celtic supporters, most in their twenties. And as well as being noisily drunk, the songs they were singing were blatantly sectarian. After we got tired of hearing all these demented shouts of 'Fuck Rangers! Fuck the Prods!' we decided to respond by singing *The Internationale*. For a while the other crowd just looked over at us, bewildered, then it must have dawned on some of them what we were singing, and a number of them stormed over to our table. 'Fuckin' Commie bastards! We don't need the fuckin' likes of you around here!' When none of the PD crowd moved, within seconds fists began to fly from a couple of the Celtic supporters.

As the fighting erupted a number of women began to scream, chairs crashed to the floor and there was pandemonium throughout the room. At that very moment I happened to be up at the bar waiting to buy a drink, and found the route back to our table blocked by people attempting to flee the melee. A number of older women were frantically trying to escape out through a door but it had jammed against one of the tables. As I was close to the door I began to pull at it, endeavouring to free it. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the Celtic supporters head aggressively towards me, realising that not only was I a member of the PD group, but that I was now isolated from my comrades. I gave the door one last frantic heave... and to my astonishment the bloody door partly came away from one of its hinges! My advancing would-be assailant looked as amazed as I was and, presumably having second thoughts, proceeded no further! When we all eventually got to the safety of the street the Celtic

supporters continued to hurl insults at us but thankfully no further fighting ensued.

Brian also talked about how the pre-Troubles focus of the IRA – under Goulding, Johnston and others – had been on community-based activism, but that this had been quickly swept aside by those who wanted a return to the traditional ‘armed force’ strategy. I also had an experience which clearly highlighted that new reality.

In the early years of the Troubles I once found myself, along with two friends, amongst a large crowd of people at a makeshift barricade in West Belfast. On the far side of the barricade stood a line of British soldiers. The officer in charge was clearly uneasy, for he paced agitatedly up and down.

But it was the composition of the crowd which took up most of my attention. There were males and females, young and old, and I walked around listening to snippets of different conversations. One group of people was talking about getting local teenagers engaged in constructive tasks, believing that otherwise they would get into mischief. In another group of people someone wanted to approach the Protestant community and offer to organise joint patrols in an attempt to prevent further inter-communal conflict. Others were talking about ensuring that the elderly had sufficient provisions – such as milk, bread and coal – because many senior citizens were afraid to leave their houses with all that had been going on. It was a veritable hive of disparate discussions, and the buzz of energy being generated within the crowd was palpable. Indeed, at the time I even let myself imagine that it was akin to what the French students must have experienced in the Sorbonne during the ‘May Events’ in Paris in 1968.

And then something began to intrude upon all these earnest discussions, and with an urgent persistence an ‘instruction’ was passed around the crowd: ‘Clear the street – “the boys” are coming out!’ As I surveyed the crowd I could see that this instruction was not universally welcomed. Admittedly, some young people seemed excited by the prospect, but many older people had looks of consternation and apprehension on their faces. These feelings were matched by the comments voiced.

‘They don’t bloody need to come out! Sure we control the street!’

‘I think it’s a risky move – God knows what could happen afterwards.’

‘Well, we’re unlikely to be able to stop them, so we’d better get offside.’

And slowly the street emptied of people. One man, discovering that we were strangers to the area, suggested we accompany him to his house, where we went into his front room to observe what was to transpire. As I looked over at the line of soldiers it was clear that they too had been taken by surprise by this inexplicable emptying of the street. The officer had ceased his pacing and was staring, perplexed, over the barricade.

And then the house-owner drew my attention to a vehicle slowly approaching a nearby gable wall where it stopped, just out of sight of the line of soldiers.

What happened next is indelibly imprinted on my memory. Two men got out of the vehicle – if I recall correctly it was a Mini Countryman – and walked slowly in the direction of the barricade, both men with one hand behind their backs – and each holding a gun. Ever so nonchalantly, the two men drew closer to the barricade and then suddenly revealed their weapons, aimed at the soldiers, and opened fire. All of us in the room, in an automatic reflex, threw ourselves to the floor. By the time I had scrambled to my feet it was to see that the two gunmen had made a quick retreat to their vehicle – and were soon speeding away from the scene. It all seemed so surreal that for a moment I couldn't believe that it had happened at all.

But it was real enough, for we could see feverish activity taking place among the soldiers. It was obvious that they were preparing to advance towards the now-undefended barricade. In our room we looked at one another, and I could only guess that a similar question was being asked in every household: do we stay put or do we return to the street? If we stayed put, then the Army would most likely enter and smash up each house in turn. If we returned to the street, who could predict what might ensue?

But within minutes the residents had returned to the street and set out to defend their flimsy barricade, in a dramatically-changed situation where violence soon erupted. And when my mind replayed the image of those two gunmen sauntering towards their enemy it evoked teenage memories of the 'Gunfight at the O.K. Corral'. For to me that's what the gunmen's action had amounted to – a swaggering show of cinematic bravado, which had overturned a situation where ordinary people had been in the ascendancy but now those same people were put in great danger to life and limb. Indeed, later that day, when I returned to the remains of the barricade, someone had placed an empty milk bottle, containing a solitary flower, on a spot where dried blood stained the ground. What had happened, I wondered? Who had been injured there? And how seriously?

The whole incident left me with tangled emotions and confused thoughts. But one lingering feeling I had was that the involvement of the gunmen was, in effect, the IRA stamping their authority on the situation, as if to say: 'We know best how to deal with this – leave it to us.' Any spontaneous, and undoubtedly more creative, actions by ordinary people – the things many of us in the PD had been encouraging – were definitely now a thing of the past; those whose focus was now set on armed struggle were determined to exert *their* control over unfolding events. Any community-based, and community-controlled, *mass movement* to counteract the escalating events was over, all that had now been superseded by the single-minded pursuit of a 'Brits Out' campaign.

In those early days of the Troubles I had little time for the usual 'isms' so prevalent in this society – Unionism, Loyalism, Orangeism, Republicanism, Nationalism.

However, I knew from numerous republican friends that there existed a wide diversity of stances within their movement, some reactionary, some progressive. Indeed, I was a personal recipient of that strange diversity: one organisation threatened to knee-cap me for criticisms I had publicly voiced about the ‘armed struggle’, while another asked if I would consider becoming one of their ‘education officers’!

Hence, acknowledging the rich diversity of viewpoints which then existed within Republicanism, I personally felt that the IRA ‘split’ was a tragedy, for the opportunity to share different views and explore alternative responses was lost when people divided into bitterly opposing camps. If the movement had stayed together, and provided all these diverse viewpoints with an equal hearing – in the hope that a more progressive approach could be achieved – then perhaps the way the ‘war’ was ultimately to be pursued might have been different. As it was, the internal divisions could only but exacerbate the slow spiral downwards into a situation which I feel was encapsulated by Liam McMillan when he said (in 1973): ‘We stand not on the brink of victory but on the brink of sectarian disaster.’ Perhaps if there had been *no* split things could have worked out quite differently.

For the understandable anger and genuine emotions which were fuelling the split were also, unfortunately, replicated within the mindset of local communities. I had a vivid personal experience of this when I facilitated a discussion group in West Belfast.

This particular discussion took place on 14 March 1996. As the participants gradually arrived for the discussion it was evident that everyone was in shock from the events of the previous day. For in the town of Dunblane, Scotland, a man had entered the small primary school there and shot dead sixteen children, all in the 5-6 age range, and one teacher, before turning one of his weapons on himself.

As we sat there waiting for everyone to assemble, the sadness of the tragedy had clearly impacted upon all those present. Some of the women were fighting back tears, and one former member of the IRA could barely disguise his shock and disbelief, shaking his head repeatedly. After a brief discussion on the massacre we set down to our own task and commenced our own discussion.

About half an hour into that discussion I thought I would introduce the question of the morality of some of the killings carried out by the IRA, presumably on the Nationalist community’s behalf. I asked the group members: was everything that the IRA had done in their pursuit of ‘armed struggle’ acceptable to them, or did any of them have grave misgivings? As an example – which to me seemed a clear-cut one – I mentioned the case of Patsy Gillespie, a victim of the IRA’s first use of the stratagem which became known as the ‘human bomb’. (Mr Gillespie was a canteen worker at Fort George army base in Derry, and on 24 October 1990 armed IRA members arrived at his house, held his family captive and ordered him to drive a van bomb to Coshquin

vehicle checkpoint on the border with Donegal. Once there the bomb was detonated, killing him and five British soldiers.)

I was taken aback by the response from the members of the group. ‘He shouldn’t have been working in a British Army base.’ ‘He knew the risks he was taking.’

‘But do you think that still justified his killing?’

‘It was a tragedy, yes – but he was still a legitimate target.’

He was a ‘legitimate target’ for murder? A canteen worker? Perhaps some of those present had different views to the ones expressed, but if so, they kept them to themselves, and the general consensus was that it had been an understandable action on behalf of the IRA. Yet I couldn’t quite square what I was hearing. I knew these people were all humane, could weep at human tragedy; indeed, some had been close to tears only half an hour before. Yet if I had walked in on this group – *without* having known that other side to them – I could easily have felt that they were heartless and uncaring. But I knew different.

So, what was it about our conflict which allowed ordinary, caring people to accept a ‘war narrative’ which enabled them to pull down shutters on their deepest humane feelings?

To come back to the point I am trying to make about the republican split. If the split had *not* occurred within the republican movement back in 1969-70, and all shades of thought within republicanism had been allowed to engage in a free debate as to what actions might be productive and what might be counter-productive, what actions could be considered ‘right’ and what could be considered ‘wrong’, we might have ended up in a far better place, with far less blood having been spilled on all sides.

In a separate ‘Think Tank’ discussion which I facilitated, involving Republican ex-combatants, a leading member of the IRSP surprised many of the other participants when he said: ‘Within republican history, especially militant republicanism, it is common for us to say that there was “no alternative”. In fact, there were plenty of alternatives – we just didn’t like them.’†

It did not have to be armed struggle. There have been numerous examples in modern history of *non-violent* alternatives which succeeded in bringing about fundamental system change.†† Perhaps if the IRA split had *not* occurred, similar alternatives might have been tried here.

† Island Pamphlet No. 99, *Republicanism in Transition (4) The question of ‘Armed Struggle’*, page 6, available as a free pdf download from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

†† Gandhi’s ‘Salt Satyagraha’ (India, 1930); the ‘Carnation Revolution’ (Portugal, 1974); the ‘Yellow Revolution’ (Philippines, 1986); the ‘Singing Revolution’ (Baltic States, 1987-9); the ‘Velvet Revolution’ (Czechoslovakia, 1989); the ‘Peaceful Revolution’ (East Germany, 1989)