

Submission to the Omagh Bombing Inquiry

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I confirm that I have made clear which facts and matters referred to in this report are within my own knowledge and which are not. Those that are within my own knowledge I confirm to be true.

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1. List of Abbreviations

32CSC: 32 County Sovereignty Committee
32CSM: 32 County Sovereignty Movement
ANP: Arm na Poblachta
CAIN: Conflict Archive on the Internet
CIRA: Continuity Irish Republican Army
GAA: Gaelic Athletic Association
ICST: International Center for the Study of Terrorism
IMC: Independent Monitoring Commission
INLA: Irish National Liberation Army
IRC: Independent Reporting Commission
IRSM: Irish Republican Socialist Movement
IRSP: Irish Republican Socialist Party
LVF: Loyalist Volunteer Force
OIRA: Official Irish Republican Army
ONH: Óglaigh na hÉireann¹
PBP: People Before Profit
PIRA: Provisional Irish Republican Army
PLA: People's Liberation Army
PRONI: Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
PSA: Paramilitary Style Attack
PSNI: Police Service of Northern Ireland
RAAD: Republican Action Against Drugs
RIRA: Real Irish Republican Army
RNU: Republican Network for Unity
RSF: Republican Sinn Féin
RUC: Royal Ulster Constabulary
SDLP: Social Democratic and Labour Party
UCC: University College Cork
UCD: University College Dublin
UDA: Ulster Defence Association

¹ This is a title used by many paramilitary republican groups as well as being the official title of the Irish Defence Forces.

UVF: Ulster Volunteer Force

VDR: Violent Dissident Republicanism

2. Overview of Report

2.1 Contained within this report is an objective overview of the origins and development of dissident republican terrorism, as instructed by the Chair and Solicitor to the Omagh Bombing Inquiry. The report is based on the author's expertise, alongside his analysis of the extant academic literature and journalist reporting on the topic. This is coupled with consideration of official reporting, and analysis of statements and documentation produced by the paramilitary and political groups in question. The overarching aim of the report is to provide contextual understanding of dissident republicanism in the years preceding the Omagh bombing of August 1998, as well as providing an assessment of the impact of the attack on the organisational capacity and strategies of the groups in the years which followed.

2.2. The report commences with an overview of the author's career and expertise in this area. It has been chosen to start the report in this manner so as to provide readers with an understanding on the level of expertise on which the author is basing his analysis. This is followed by a note on the sources used. These two sections combined will be able to provide the readers, including the Inquiry team, with the transparency of process on which they can assess the veracity of what is stated in the remainder of the report. This is followed by a focus on the meaning of the two key terms of the report 'dissident' and 'republican.' What follows after these opening sections should be considered as the substantive elements of the report.

2.3 In order to gain a clear understanding of dissident republicanism of the 1990s and the early 2000s one must have an appreciation of the context from which they emerged, namely the Troubles. Therefore, the substantive section of the report commences with a consideration of Irish Republicanism throughout the Troubles. Achieving a comprehensive overview of this topic is outside of the capacity, and remit, of this report. However, there will be consideration of key elements of republicanism's evolution through the conflict. Each aspect focused on within this section has been chosen because of its direct relevance in the development contemporary dissident republicanism, or as an analogous situation. Within this section there is a consideration of the origins and evolution of republican paramilitary activity, and the gradual politicisation of the movement.

2.4 The brief overview of republican involvement in the Troubles is followed by an analysis of the splits in Irish republicanism which resulted in the birth of the contemporary

dissident organisations. By understanding the organisational origins one can get an appreciation of the foundations on which the key groups were formed. By definition each of the dissident groups formed as a result of a split from 'mainstream' republicanism. Therefore, there is a focus on the basis of four core splits in Irish republicanism from 1969 to 1997. The analysis charts the impact of splits from the origins of the Provisional IRA (PIRA) at the dawn of the Troubles, right up to the birth of the Real IRA (RIRA) in 1997, the year preceding the Omagh bombing. This section on splits also considers the formation of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) in 1974 and the Continuity IRA (CIRA) in 1986. While each split is assessed individually in relation to organisational origins, it is proposed that by viewing them chronologically it can assist in the development of our understanding of the evolution of the Republican Movement from conflict to peace.

2.5 As the Inquiry is focusing on the Omagh bombing of 1998 it is necessary to provide greater detail on the years preceding the bombing. Therefore, there is a detailed consideration of the years preceding the bombing, particularly from the collapse of the PIRA ceasefire in 1996. Within this section there is an analysis of the internal factionalism within the leadership of the PIRA. The growing divide within the paramilitary organisation was seen as most acute in disagreements between the PIRA Army Council and the Army Executive on the ongoing external negotiations with the British and Irish Governments. It was this growing friction within the paramilitary leadership which would ultimately lead to the emergence of the RIRA, and the political pressure group the 32 County Sovereignty Committee (later Movement) in 1997. Within this analysis the months leading up to the Omagh bombing of August 15th 1998 are provided particular attention. This will provide a clear understanding of how the actions of the newly formed paramilitary group, and what they demonstrated in relation to organisational capacity. In order to achieve this a timeline of paramilitary activity is presented from September 1997 to August 1998.

2.6 Prior to the conclusion of the report there is an assessment of the impact that the Omagh bombing has had on dissident Irish republicanism in general, and on the RIRA specifically. This will take into account the organisational, strategic and tactical impacts the attack had internally, as well as the impact on support for dissident republicanism. This section of the report will consider the RIRA's cessation from violence in September 1998, alongside its return to violence. Within this there will be consideration of the targeting of high profile targets in England in the early 2000s, alongside the targeting of the police and security

forces in Northern Ireland. While much of the focus in relation to paramilitary violence relates to high profile nationalised acts of what is often referred to as terrorist violence, this section of the report will also raise the issue of localised paramilitary style attacks (PSAs) as a form of paramilitary vigilantism which takes place within both republican and loyalist communities of Northern Ireland.

3 About the Author

3.1 This report has been authored by Dr. John F. Morrison, an Assistant Professor in Criminology at the School of Law and Criminology at Maynooth University, Co. Kildare, Ireland. Dr. Morrison started his academic training with an undergraduate degree in Psychology in University College Dublin (UCD), graduating in 2004, followed by an MSc in Forensic Psychology in University College Cork (UCC), graduating in 2005. For his masters dissertation Morrison researched why and how people became involved in the Provisional IRA, through his analysis of the autobiographies of former members of the paramilitary organisation.

3.2 Following his masters he changed discipline to start a PhD in International Relations at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. In 2010 he completed his PhD with a dissertation titled *'The affirmation of Behan?': an understanding of the politicisation process of the Provisional Irish Republican Movement through an organisational analysis of splits from 1969 to 1997*. Within this dissertation Morrison assessed the cause and impact of splits in the political and paramilitary wings of the Irish Republican Movement from 1969 to 1997. The four core splits, which are also focused on within this report, are analysed utilising political organisational theory and are presented as a framework by which we can chart the gradual politicisation of the movement. This analysis of this doctoral research was based on interviews with leadership and rank and file members of the core groups involved in each of the splits under analysis, as well as the primary source statements and literature produced by the groups in the lead up to and in the aftermath of the splits.

3.3 After the completion of his PhD Dr. Morrison completed a one year post-doctoral position at the International Center for the Study of Terrorism (ICST) at Pennsylvania State University, in the United States. Within this position Morrison worked as the project manager of the Violent Dissident Republicanism (VDR) project, led by Prof. John Horgan. Within this

project an open source database of VDR events and personnel was compiled. This was designed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of VDR activity from the emergence of the Continuity IRA (CIRA) up to the early 2010s. This database was compiled using exclusively open source materials, namely journalistic and academic reporting, alongside reports from organisations such as the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC).

3.4 In the years since leaving the post-doctoral position Morrison has maintained an academic interest in various aspects relating to VDR activity. He has published extensively on this topic, most notably with his 2013 book *The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism: The Role and Impact of Organisational Splits*. Alongside this monograph his peer reviewed publications on the topic include focuses on the rising threat of VDR activity (Horgan and Morrison, 2011), why people become dissident Irish Republicans (Morrison, 2011), the role of trust in post-split affiliation decisions (Morrison, 2016a), victims and targets of VDR activity (Morrison and Horgan, 2016), the statements of the New IRA (Morrison, 2016b), VDR learning (Morrison, 2016c), risk factors of VDR activity (Marchment, Gill and Morrison, 2019), the RIRA's tactical adaptation in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing (Morrison, 2020), post-Good Friday Agreement paramilitary vigilantism (Morrison, 2024a), and community legitimisation of Irish Republican paramilitarism (Morrison, 2024b). Alongside Prof Paul Gill, Morrison co-edited a special issue of the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* which looked at 100 years of Irish Republicanism from the Easter Rising of 1916 to 2016 (Morrison and Gill, 2016).

3.5 The analysis of VDR activities, organisations, and membership has been the primary focus of Morrison's research and expertise from his doctoral dissertation, right up to the present day. In the development of this report this knowledge and experience has guided the analysis core issues to be focused on in this report.

4 Note on Sources

4.1 What follows in this section is a note on the sources which have been utilised to compile the report, in order to provide transparency of process. This section will conclude by highlighting some of the key literature on dissident Irish republicanism.

4.2 The Northern Irish Troubles is one of the most widely researched conflicts in the world. Academics across disciplines, journalists and policy makers have compiled near endless volumes of analysis on the Troubles, its origins, key events and key actors. Assessed together these have been able to provide readers with a clear picture of the evolution from conflict to an ostensible peace. A core aspect of this research has been a focus on the evolution of Irish republicanism and nationalism during this period, with a particular emphasis on the actions and evolution of the PIRA and the Sinn Féin. However, due to the reduction of paramilitary violence and presence, and the smaller groupings, relative to during the Troubles, there has not been as much written on dissident/anti-Good Friday Agreement republicanism. However, what may be lacking in quantity is not lacking in quality. There have been a range of excellent analyses, many of which were relied upon in the completion of this report.

4.3 Alongside the traditional academic and journalistic books and articles on the topic one of the most important resources is the CAIN website based at the University of Ulster, and affiliated with the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) and Northern Ireland's social policy hub ARK. The CAIN website is an online repository of data related to the conflict in Northern Ireland. Within its pages it hosts key information, databases and bibliographies related to the conflict. Included amongst this are lists of key events, texts of paramilitary statements, and public records held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). The records contained across this website are invaluable to any researcher focusing on the Troubles, and post-conflict Northern Ireland. A similarly invaluable resource is the Northern Ireland Political Collection at the Linen Hall Library, in Belfast. Within the collection are hundreds of thousands of primary and secondary source materials including books, pamphlets, artefacts and a variety of ephemera. These collections combined has provided researchers of Northern Ireland politics and conflict with unmatched resources to complete their work, and gain a detailed insight.

4.4 In November 2003, the International Monitoring Commission (IMC) was established. The body's remit was to monitor the contemporary activities of paramilitary groups and the security normalisation of Northern Ireland. The IMC published twenty-six reports between 2004 and 2011, which they presented to the British and Irish governments. Their body's role came to a close in 2011. However, under the Fresh Start Agreement of 2015 a new body was established, the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC). The role of the IRC, similar to their predecessors in the IMC, was to report on contemporary paramilitary activities, as well as relevant measures being taken by the Irish and British governments, as well as the Northern Irish Executive. The combined reports of these bodies, and others, provide researchers with objective analyses in relation to the activities and capacity of paramilitary organisations.

4.5 This report was compiled by engaging with the above mentioned publicly accessible resources, alongside a range of key literature on the topic. The author also analysed the previously mentioned VDR events database, developed at the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University. This database provided the author with a compilation of activities which enabled the development of a clear timeline of VDR activity in the lead up to the Omagh bombing of August 1998.

5. Key Literature on the Origins and Development Dissident Republicanism

5.1 Across the report readers will see a series of citations to academic analyses on the origins and development of violent dissident republicanism. As mentioned previously there is not the same quantity of research on this topic as there is written about the Troubles and the Provisional IRA. However, the quality of analysis has been high, with many researchers utilising the above-mentioned resources alongside their own qualitative and quantitative analyses, including the analysis of primary source interviews. Listed below is a select list of some of the key academic and journalistic analyses which have assisted with the writing of this report, and has enabled the development of a comprehensive analysis of the origins and development of dissident republican paramilitary activity. It is important to note that primary source academic analysis on the 1997 split in the Provisional IRA, which saw the formation of the Real IRA, is few and far between. Much of the best writing on the topic comes from journalistic sources. It is important to note that while the journalistic writing will not have undergone the same peer review process as academic work in the area. However, the journalists cited in this report maintain a good reputation within academia, and their work is cited widely by academic experts in the area. When considering any points raised within the report multiple sources are considered to assess the veracity of the points being made.

5.2 The list below is in no particular order, and it should not be considered a judgment of poor quality of any literature which is not listed.

5.3 R. English, "Armed Struggle": The History of the IRA (London: Macmillan, 2003)

This comprehensive historical analysis of the IRA charts the path which Irish republicanism has taken from the Easter Rising of 1916 to the early post-Good Friday Agreement days of 2002. English's analysis in Part Four of the book provides the reader with insight into the decision making processes which lead to the ultimate politicisation of the majority of the Provisional Republican Movement, and the emergence of the RIRA in 1997.

5.4 J. Tonge, "They Haven't Gone Away You Know": Irish Republican Dissident and "Armed Struggle", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16, 3 (2004), pp. 671-93

This academic peer-reviewed article provides a succinct analysis of the dissident justification for continued 'armed struggle.' Focusing primarily on the CIRA and RIRA the analysis outlines the origins for each group, and how they utilise the 'betrayal' of republicanism by the PIRA and of Sinn Féin leaderships as a justification for their continuation of the 'armed struggle.' Towards the end of the article Tonge assesses the dissident republican violence from 1998 to 2003, before questioning whether these groups have any degree of support within Northern Ireland.

5.5 E. Moloney, "A Secret History of the IRA" (London, Penguin, 2nd Ed 2007)

Moloney's investigative journalism account of the internal workings of the IRA up to and including the acceptance of the Mitchell Principles in 1997, which resulted in the split resulting in the emergence of the RIRA. The insight provided by Moloney of the internal negotiations and rivalries within the paramilitary leadership in the lead up to this provides the level of detailed insight that few other accounts have achieved. The journalistic analysis is backed up by key internal documents and the text of a speech given by Seamus McGrane at the 1997 Army Convention, each contained within the Appendices.

5.6 M. Frampton, "Legion of the Rearguard: Dissident Irish Republicanism" (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2011)

Frampton's book utilises a variety of primary source interviews, and key secondary sources, to assess the origins of contemporary dissident republicanism. Within his analyses he charts the evolution of the various dissident groups from their origins up to their resurgence between 2007 and 2010. Within the book he assesses how the groups legitimise their continued existence, and he considers the role played by non-violent dissident organisations, as well as the dissident paramilitary groups.

5.7 J. Morrison, "The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism: The Role and Impact of Organisational Splits" (London, Bloomsbury, 2013)

The 2013 book written by the author of this report analyses the origins and rise of dissident Irish Republicanism through the lens of the splits. The analysis, based on comprehensive primary source interviews, provides an analysis of splits from 1969 to 1997 and suggests that by focusing on the role and impact of the splits that readers will gain insight into the gradual politicisation of the Provisional Republican movement, as well the origins of the dissident groups. The book proposes that these splits provided the Provisional leadership with the capacity and opportunity to take their next steps towards politicisation.

5.8 S. Whiting, "Spoiling the Peace: The Threat of Dissident Republicans to Peace in Northern Ireland" (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015)

Whiting's 2015 book, based on extensive interviews, presents the dissident republicans as spoiler groups. The book reflects on how the presence of spoiler groups is a common occurrence across peace processes, and their emergence in Northern Ireland should have been expected. She guides readers through an analysis of the various interpretations of republicanism and assesses the extent of ideological compromise of the Provisional leadership during the peace process. Parallel to this she outlines how the dissidents have utilised this as a justification for their continued activity.

5.9 M. McGlinchey, "Unfinished Business: The Politics of Dissident Irish Republicanism" (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019)

Through a series of nearly 100 in-depth interviews with republican actors McGlinchey investigates the ideological justification for involvement in 'non-mainstream' or 'radical' republicanism, alongside organisational strategies and objectives. This provides the assessment in the words of the interviewees and demonstrates clearly the debates that are ongoing across the groups. This book emphasises that the radical republicans feel betrayed by the Provisional leadership, and reject the 'authoritarian nature of the Provisional Movement' (McGlinchey, 2019, p.195). As is seen elsewhere across the literature McGlinchey emphasises that the radical republicans gain their legitimacy from through the historical struggles of the generations of republicans who have gone before them, and therefore reject the normalisation of contemporary political life in Northern Ireland.

5.10 J. Horgan, “Divided We Stand: The Strategy and Psychology of Ireland’s Dissident Terrorists.” (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013)

Horgan’s analysis, utilising the VDR database, primarily focuses on who participates in VDR activity. Within this he looks to assess who the personnel joining and rejoining contemporary paramilitary republicanism are. However, the book starts in its opening three chapters by providing an in-depth analysis of the splits which have resulted in the emergence of these groups, and a clear assessment of the threat they pose. This provides the foundation of understanding needed prior to addressing who becomes involved and why.

5.11 P.M. Currie and M. Taylor, “Dissident Irish Republicanism.” (New York, Continuum, 2011)

The edited volume by Currie and Taylor brings together a series of academics who assess dissident republicanism from a variety of perspectives. This includes, amongst others, Henry Patterson’s consideration of the value of the terminology used in describing the groups as ‘dissident’, James McAuley’s assessment of the loyalist response to dissident republicanism, and Jon Tonge’s contextualisation of the emergence of these heterogeneous dissident groups. This compilation of chapters provides a detailed early overview of dissident republicanism through multiple lenses of inquiry.

5.12 J Mooney and M. O’Toole, “Black Operations: The Secret War Against the Real IRA.” (Dublin, Maverick House, 2003)

This book gives an in-depth insight into the inner workings of the RIRA in the lead-up to and the aftermath of the Omagh bombing. Based on extensive interviews this book primarily looks at the Irish security services campaign against the RIRA. However, in doing so it also provides a considered understanding of the evolution of the group.

6. The Meaning of ‘Dissident’ and ‘Republican’

6.1 Across this report there is persistent usage of two key terms, namely *dissident* and *republican*. While these might be commonly used, often times there is not clear consideration as to their meaning. An analysis of the literature demonstrates that there is no consensus on either their meaning, or the appropriateness of their use, with respect to the groups and events which are under consideration in this report. Therefore, before the substantive section of the report begins it is worthwhile to briefly both of these terms.

Dissident

6.2 This report is ostensibly covering the actions of what have been termed ‘dissident’ republican groups, as distinct from ‘mainstream’ republicanism. ‘Dissident republicanism’ in this context is to refer to an individual’s or organisation’s distancing from the political strategy of Sinn Féin and the PIRA. Paramilitary groups including the CIRA and RIRA can be considered violent dissident republican (VDR) groups. However, not all ‘dissident’ republicans utilise or espouse the continuation of the ‘armed struggle’ (McGlinchey, 2019). Therefore, if one is to persist with the utilisation of the dissident terminology there needs to be a clear differentiation between violent and non-violent dissident republicanism.

6.3 While the term ‘dissident’ has been consistently used to describe these groups there is not a consensus on the appropriateness of the term. As McGlinchey (2019) points out those actively involved in the groups do not consider themselves to be ‘dissidents,’ as they propose that they have stayed true to the strategies, tactics and ideals of republicanism. For them it is Sinn Féin and the PIRA leadership who have deviated. An objective analysis of the evolution and splits within the republican movement can indicate the accuracy of this claim, as these groupings have invariably emerged as a result of the Provisional leadership proposing significant changes in political and/or paramilitary tactics and strategies. The ‘dissidents’ ostensibly leave as they feel that they cannot accept the proposed changes, and want to stay ‘true’ to what they believe Irish republicanism should stand for, and how it should organisationally operate. McGlinchey (2019) therefore proposes the adoption of the term ‘radical republican’ to refer to these actors, as they are rejecting the status quo of the dominant mainstream of Sinn Féin. For similar reasons Tonge (2004) proposes the utilisation of the term ‘ultras’ to describe these republican groups and actors. As will become clear across this report they propose that their mandate comes from a perceived historical

legitimacy of the approach they are taking. For them their approach is consistent with those Irish republicans who have come before them. They therefore often portray themselves as ‘purists.’ This is especially true for Republican Sinn Féin and the CIRA (Tonge, 2011).

6.4 Echoing the above Whiting (2015) outlines that Provisional republicanism across the Troubles, and beyond, has been through ‘a period of profound transition.’ Their processes have both evolved and adapted. This has consistently led those republicanism opposed to them to label them as ‘selling out.’ As will become clear across the report this evolution and adaptation has seen them gradually move away from the utility of armed paramilitarism to achieve their end goal of a united Ireland, and the ultimate adoption of a purely political approach. For the dissidents these changes were seen as going too far, and have been interpreted as the Provisionals selling out the principles of Irish republicanism. Whiting (2015) therefore proposes that these divisions are the manifestation of different interpretations of principles versus tactics. With the term ‘dissident’ being used to define those who dissent and move away from the mainstream republican group’s tactics and strategies one could objectively argue that the PIRA and Sinn Féin were the first ‘dissident’ republican movement of the Troubles era, as they moved away from the approaches taken and proposed by the leadership of the IRA and Sinn Féin at the time in relation to take seats in parliament, linkages with left wing groups and the utility of the ‘armed struggle.’

6.5 Horgan (2013) notes that alternative labelling of these groups has also been promoted outside of academia. He observes that in 2010 the term ‘residual terrorist groups’ was promoted by British and Irish governments, as well as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Others have proposed the term ‘anti-Good Friday Agreement Republicans.’ However, as is accurately noted by McGlinchey (2023) groups such as RSF and CIRA emerged prior to the Agreement and therefore their dissent from the ‘mainstream’ is grounded over a decade prior to the negotiation and its signing. While the arguments against the accuracy of the term ‘dissident’ are acknowledged and appreciated the term ‘dissident’ will still be retained across the remainder of this report. Similar to Horgan (2013) it is proposed here that a change in terminology would be unnecessary. ‘Dissidence’ can be argued to be the defining characteristic of these groups. Their dissidence is against the political trajectory of Sinn Féin and the erstwhile Provisional leadership. The heterogeneity of this dissidence is acknowledged, as it can come in many forms and for many reasons. The

term ‘dissident’ is not utilised as a value judgement, in the same way that ‘mainstream’ is not a value judgement either.

Republican

6.6 As noted already dissident republican groups, drawing on the past, often see themselves as being the ‘true’ republicans who have not deviated from the ideals and principles of Irish republicanism. The principles of Irish republicanism, as with other manifestations of republicanism, are based on liberty, equality and fraternity. Whiting (2015, p.58) proposes that the division between the dissidents and the mainstream is a clash between the purists (dissidents) and the pragmatists (mainstream). Both the purists and the pragmatists have the same goals, a united Ireland. However, their proposed methodologies of achieving this are different. This pursuit of a united Ireland is in contrast to Unionists and Loyalists who wish to maintain the status quo with Northern Ireland remaining as part of the United Kingdom.

6.7 In a post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland the ‘pragmatists’ of mainstream republicanism rely upon the utilisation of political, constitutional tactics to achieve their end goal. In comparison the dissidents propose that working within the existing system will lead to failure in achieving a united Ireland. They proposed that the existing system changes republicans, rather than republicans changing the system (Whiting 2015, p.59). The dissidents therefore propose forcing change of the system, at times through the utilisation of political violence. However, it is not just Sinn Féin and the dissidents who label themselves as Irish republican movements. The Irish political party Fianna Fáil also promote their ideals and principles as being ‘republican,’ and have the phrase ‘the republican party’ on the party’s logo. Founded in 1926, after a split from Sinn Féin, one of their guiding aims has been unity of the island of Ireland.

6.8 As Evans and Tonge (2012) emphasise the PIRA only existed as an active paramilitary force from late 1969 until 2005. They therefore only represent one specific phase of Irish republicanism. Their political wing, Sinn Féin has existed since the early twentieth century, and have gone through various strategic and political approaches and revisions. While the dissident republicans often portray themselves as ‘true’ republicans the history of Irish republican thought and action is so diverse that it is neither useful nor tangible to ascertain which group should be classified as ‘true’ republicans.

6.9 The origins of Irish republicanism dates back centuries, and has gone through many manifestations. One could look back to the founding of the Society of United Irishmen. Founded in 1791 by Theobald Wolfe Tone, amongst others, the United Irishmen engaged in four months of insurrection against the British in 1798. The United Irishmen of the 1790s, especially Tone, have continued to provide inspiration for each generation of republicans who have come since (English, 2007, p. 103). Within the 20th century one can witness their actions providing historical legitimacy across each wave of insurrection, from the Easter Rising of 1916 right up to the contemporary VDR campaign. Each generation espouses the virtues of the past. The dissidents propose that their mandate doesn't come from the living. They propose that they are carrying on the revolution of Tone, Padraig Pearse, James Connolly, and those other revolutionaries who have gone before them.

7. Key Republican and Nationalist Groups

7.1 Throughout the Troubles, and in contemporary Ireland, there are a variety of political and paramilitary groups who aspire to one day achieving a united Ireland. Within Dáil Eireann, the Irish parliament, each of the main parties have promoted themselves as ultimately aiming to achieve a united Ireland. While their end goal may be similar their approaches and timelines can be seen to vary. Within Stormont the two main parties espousing Irish nationalist and republican aspirations are Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). However, People Before Profit, with one MLA at the time of writing, are also calling for the end of partition. Presented below is a non-exhaustive list of some of the key political and paramilitary groups.

Political

7.2 Sinn Féin: Established in 1905, Sinn Féin has a long history of political republicanism. The current party was the political wing for the PIRA. But is now a fully political and democratic party.

7.3 Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP): Established in 1970 the SDLP are a constitutionally nationalist party. Their founding was in the midst of the civil rights movement. Their aims are to achieve a united Ireland, but have always only advocated political means to achieve this.

7.4 Fianna Fáil: Founded in 1926 in a split in Sinn Féin around taking seats in Dáil Eireann upon the removal of the Oath of Allegiance and the abstentionist position. Fianna Fáil was comprised of those opposing the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The party retains their republican principles in their contemporary form, and have historically been one of Ireland's two largest parties.

7.5 Fine Gael: Founded in 1933 the origins of the party can be traced back to the pro-Treaty side of the Irish Civil War. Alongside Fianna Fáil they have been historically one of the two largest parties in Ireland. They aim to achieve a united Ireland through purely political means. This is exemplified in their consideration 'a shared island' where they state that "Fine Gael, the United Ireland Party, shares that aspiration based on the principle of consent and a clear

majority, North and South, being in favour. We believe that uniting people is even more important than uniting territory” (Fine Gael, 2019).

7.6 Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP): Established in 1974 the IRSP are the political wing of the INLA. They are a left-wing Marxist-Leninist republican party founded by Seamus Costello.

7.7 Republican Sinn Féin (RSF): Founded in 1986 RSF is believed to be the political wing of the CIRA. They propose a strict abstentionist policy and propose the federalisation of a united Ireland in their policy document Éire Nua.

7.8 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM): The political pressure group emerging in the 1997 split. Originally labelled as the 32 County Sovereignty Committee the group is believed to have been the political wing of the RIRA.

7.9 Saoradh: Formed in 2016 this left-wing political group is believed to be the political wing of the New IRA.

7.10 Eirigi: Founded in 2006 the group proposes revolutionary socialist principles to be aligned with the aim of achieving a united Ireland. The group has been involved in protest activities, and there are no connections to paramilitarism.

7.11 Republican Network for Unity (RNU): Established in 2007 in response to their opposition of Sinn Féin’s support for the PSNI. Previously believed to be the political wing of Óglaigh na hÉireann these ties were severed in 2024.

7.12 Aontú: Established in 2019 in response to Sinn Féin’s position on the issue of abortion this socially conservative republican group has a small number of elected representatives in the Republic of Ireland .

7.13 People Before Profit (PBP): Founded in 2005 the socialist political group operates both north and south of the border and call for an end to the partition of Ireland.

7.14 Irish First: A right-wing nationalist party founded on anti-immigrant policies.

Paramilitary

7.15 Provisional IRA (PIRA): Founded in 1969 in a split from the OIRA. This paramilitary group became the largest republican paramilitary force. In 2005 they called an end to their armed campaign.

7.16 Official IRA (OIRA): Formed in the aftermath of the 1969 split with the PIRA the group was a left-wing republican paramilitary force. After an extensive period of inactivity they fully decommissioned in 2009.

7.17 Irish National Liberation Army (INLA): Formed in 1974 under the leadership of Seamus Costello the left-wing paramilitary group called a ceasefire in the immediate aftermath of the Omagh Bombing.

7.18 Continuity IRA (CIRA): Formed in 1986 when they rejected the proposal of dropping the abstentionist policy to Dáil Eireann. The CIRA were the only one of the main violent dissident republican groups not to call a ceasefire in the aftermath of the Omagh Bombing.

7.19 Real IRA (RIRA): Formed in 1997 through their rejection of the Mitchell Principles the RIRA was believed to be the main group responsible for the Omagh bombing. They called a ceasefire in the aftermath of Omagh. However, they returned a couple of years later with a bombing campaign in England.

7.20 New IRA: Formed in 2012 the New IRA is a paramilitary merger between RIRA, RAAD and other previously unaligned dissident republicans. Since their establishment they have largely been involved in the paramilitary targeting of police and prison officers.

7.21 Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH): Formed after a split in the RIRA in 2003 the group was involved in carrying out dissident republican attacks since 2009. In September 2024 it was reported that the group had split again.

7.22 Arm na Poblachta (ANP): A small violent dissident group which emerged in 2017. The group was responsible for a number of low-profile violent dissident republican attacks. They are believed to be made up of a mixture of ex-PIRA, CIRA and ONH members.

7.23 Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD): The dissident republican vigilante group was part of the dissident merger which saw the formation of the New IRA in 2012. Prior to the merger the actions of RAAD primarily focused on the targeting of suspected drug dealers in Derry, Tyrone and Donegal with paramilitary style attacks (PSAs).

8. The Troubles

8.1 In order to fully understand contemporary violent dissident republicanism one must see it as part of the evolution of paramilitary republicanism across the 20th century. The VDR groups responsible for the Omagh bombing, alongside the preceding and subsequent violence, have emerged from the republican violence of the Troubles era. Resultantly this section of the report aims to provide an overview of some key aspects relating to Troubles era republicanism. Within this brief section there will be consideration as to what republicanism stood for during this period; its short and long-term goals and its approaches to achieving these goals. The Troubles in Northern Ireland lasted from 1969 to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. However, this timeline should not be considered as the totality of paramilitary violence within the region. Paramilitary violence pre-existed the Troubles, and as the years subsequent to the signing of the Agreement have demonstrated it has not been removed in the years since. While the Troubles was neither the beginning nor the end of paramilitary violence on the island it is the most persistent and elongated period of paramilitarism in the island's history.

8.2 Before focusing on republican paramilitarism specifically it is worthwhile to first give a broad overview of all key paramilitary and military actors across the Troubles. The focus of this report is on paramilitary republicanism. This includes a variety of groups including, but not exclusively, the Provisional IRA (PIRA), the Official IRA (OIRA), the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), the Continuity IRA (CIRA), and the Real IRA (RIRA). Cumulatively their long-term aim was the achievement of a united Ireland, with many aiming to achieve a socialist Ireland in the aftermath of unification. In contrast the loyalist paramilitary groups sought to maintain the status quo, with Northern Ireland remaining as part of the United Kingdom. Loyalist paramilitary groups active during the Troubles include, but not exclusively, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Red Hand Commando. The loyalist paramilitaries emerged from the loyalist, unionist, Protestant communities, while the republican paramilitaries came from the republican, nationalist, Catholic communities. Both sides were involved in paramilitary violence across the sectarian divide, alongside their nationalised acts of violence impacting wider populations of Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. In addition to this both groups of actors were involved,

and continue to be involved, in localised vigilantism within the communities they claim to represent (Morrison, 2024a).

8.3 Post-Good Friday Agreement each form of violence has remained, but in a significantly reduced capacity in comparison to during the Troubles. Alongside the paramilitary actors the British military also played a role across the Troubles. There was an official British military presence in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 2007, the longest continuous deployment in British military history (Sanders and Wood, 2012, p.109). The army were brought in to protect the people of Northern Ireland in the summer of 1969, as a result of the growing violence and tension, and they were to remain in place for the entirety of the Troubles, and beyond. The British Army were initially welcomed in as protectors of the Catholic communities (Taylor, 1997, pp.56-57). However, this sentiment quickly changed through the Army actions, including the murder of fourteen innocent civil rights protestors by the Parachute Regiment in Derry in 1972 (Saville, 2010; Mullan, 2022).

Irish Republicanism in the Troubles

8.4 Across the Troubles the Irish Republican Movement, in its many disparate guises, went through an evolutionary process. While the long-term goal of an achievement of a united Ireland was constant the strategic approach to achieving it developed. This section will be focusing on that evolution, with particular focus on the evolution of the Provisional Republican Movement. Contained within republican violence were multiple rationales and approaches. This included community defence; nationalised paramilitary violence targeting police, military, politicians, civilians etc; sectarian paramilitary violence targeting loyalist paramilitaries and members of the loyalist and unionist communities; and paramilitary vigilantism where those who were suspected of non-political criminality or informing to the security services were violently targeted. Alongside this, the republican movement provided non-violent community supports, and were politically active even if not always electorally active.

8.5 The prominence of paramilitary over political activity, and vice versa, fluctuated across time. In the initial years of the Troubles the Provisional Movement adopted the strategy aiming for near immediate British withdrawal from Northern Ireland (Taylor, 1997, p.214). This is colloquially referred to as the 'Brits Out'. However, by 1977 they introduced what

they labelled the 'Long War' strategy, which they would retain for the remainder of the Troubles. This aimed to develop a demand from the British people for withdrawal from Northern Ireland, through a war of attrition. They intended to do this by engaging in a bombing campaign with the intention of making Britain's financial interests in Northern Ireland unprofitable, thus curbing long-term investment. At the dawn of the Troubles the PIRA were the dominant organisational force within then Provisional Movement. This was to change towards the close of the 1970s. The political role of Sinn Féin was to gain parity before eventually eclipsing the PIRA and becoming the dominant organisation within the Provisional Movement by the end of the 1990s (McDonald, 2008), one of the main disputes which resulted in the split which formed the RIRA.

8.6 Much is, understandably, made of the role of the hunger-strikers of the early 1980s in demonstrating the power of the electoral politics. In the aftermath of the elections of Bobby Sands and others the dual armed and political strategy truly came to the fore, exemplified by the 'Armalite and the ballot box' Irish republicanism framed as such by Danny Morrison at the October 1981 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis (Feeney, 2002, pp.292-333). However the gradual politicisation of the movement was developing since the mid-1970s led by the emerging influence of young northern members, particularly Gerry Adams (Coogan, 2000). From approximately 1974 right up to the split of 1986 the young influential northern members, known as the 'young Turks', started to gain a growing influence on the movement. They made strategic moves along the way to gain greater control of the movement, thus enabling them to drive the movement's strategy (Patterson, 1997). Many of these are covered in the section focusing on the 1986 split.

8.7 Across the 20th and 21st century paramilitary republicanism has gained its legitimacy from the generations of republican revolutionaries who have gone before them. For them their mandate does not come from victories at the ballot box, their legitimacy is portrayed as emerging from the centuries of fights for 'Irish freedom.' The fallen heroes and their actions are commemorated across the republican calendar, as a constant reminder of the position in history the movement takes. The membership are not just reminded of historical heroes, they are also challenged to learn the lessons of the past. This is exemplified in 1970 with Sinn Féin's publication of their document *The Lessons of History*. Within it they stated:

8.8 “The coming period should....see a new stage in the national independence struggle, one in which the lessons of the past will have been studied and learned and which will carry the independence struggle to a successful conclusion by establishing in Ireland a united, democratic republic, politically and economically independent, and governed for the benefit of the people.” Sinn Féin, (1970, p.5)

8.9 Each new manifestation of political and paramilitary republicanism presents themselves as the ones who will finally bring about a united Ireland, and not pass the struggle on to the next generation. This is as true today for the dissident republicans, as it was for their Provisional predecessors (McGlinchey, 2019).

8.10 When a new recruit joined the Provisional IRA they went through both training and education. A core component of their education came from the organisation’s training manual *The Green Book* (PIRA, 1977). Through reading this one can gain a significant insight into the organisation and its underlying policies and practices. It starts by drawing on the past for the moral legitimisation of paramilitary violence, in presenting the PIRA as the legal and lawful government of Ireland:

8.11 “Commitment to the Republican Movement is the firm belief that its struggle both military and political is morally justified, that war is morally justified and that the Army is the direct representative of the 1918 Dail Eireann Parliament, and that as such they are the legal and lawful government of the Irish Republic, which has the moral right to pass laws for, and to claim jurisdiction over the territory, air space, mineral resources, means of production, distribution and exchange and all of its people regardless of creed or loyalty.” (PIRA, 1977)

8.12 Within the pages of the manual they present their guerilla strategy designed to ‘effect their (the British) withdrawal by an effective campaign of continued harassment’ (PIRA, 1977). This is presented as a fivefold strategy:

8.13 “1. A War of attrition against enemy personnel which is aimed at causing as many casualties and deaths as possible so as to create a demand from their people at home for their withdrawal.

2. A bombing campaign aimed at making the enemy's financial interest in our country unprofitable while at the same time curbing long term financial investment in our country.

3. To make the Six Counties as at present and for the past several years ungovernable except by colonial military rule.

4. To sustain the war and gain support for its end by National and International propaganda and publicity campaigns.

5. By defending the war of liberation by punishing criminals, collaborators and informers.”
(PIRA, 1977)

8.14 This war of attrition was to last for close to 30 years, and ultimately end with no ‘victors,’ and thousands dead as a result of the violence perpetrated across the paramilitary, military, policing and security organisations. From the extended campaign of the Troubles numerous paramilitary actors gained the experience, motivations and skills which they continued to use through their involvement in contemporary violent dissident republican groups. These groups emerged as a consequence of the splits in the movement, which will be covered in the next section.

9. Splits in the Irish Republican Movement: 1969-1997

9.1 In order to understand the origins of the dissident republican groups one needs to understand the organisational splits from which they emerged. An analysis of these splits provides us with a clear understanding not just of the origins of the dissident groups. It also provides an a framework by which one can review the gradual politicisation of the Provisional Republican Movement. Across this section there is a focus on four core splits. These splits have been chosen as they represent the most significant splits within Irish Republicanism from the birth of the Troubles in the late 1960s to the Omagh bombing of 1998. The four splits under review, and graphically depicted in Figures 1 and 2 are:

9.2 1969/70: The IRA splits in 1969 and Sinn Féin in 1970. The split in the IRA leads to the formation of the Provisional IRA (PIRA) and the Official IRA (OIRA). The political split in Sinn Féin results in the development of Official Sinn Féin and Provisional Sinn Féin. What was once referred to as Provisional Sinn Féin ultimately became more commonly referred to solely as Sinn Féin, and remains so today.

9.3 1974: The Official Republican Movement of the OIRA and Official Sinn Féin split to see the formation of the new paramilitary group, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), and its political wing the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP).

9.4 1986: The Provisional Republican Movement of the PIRA and Sinn Féin split to see the formation of the Continuity IRA (CIRA) and their political affiliates in Republican Sinn Féin.

9.5 1997: The Provisional Republican Movement once again splits resulting in the formation of the Real IRA (RIRA), and the political pressure group 32 County Sovereignty Committee (32CSC), who would ultimately be referred to as the 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM).

9.6 The purpose of this report is ostensibly to understand the paramilitary activity led up to the Omagh bombing of August 1998. However, the paramilitary and political factionalisation of the Republican Movement are inextricably linked. Therefore if one is to gain a holistic understanding of the origins of these groups, there needs to be an assessment of the splits within the political as well as the paramilitary wings of the Movement. While the report

concentrates on these four splits it is acknowledged that these are not the only splits which took place within this timeframe, and there were even more prior to the Troubles. Nevertheless, these four divisions are addressed as they are the ones which are most significant to assist in our understanding of the Omagh bombing.

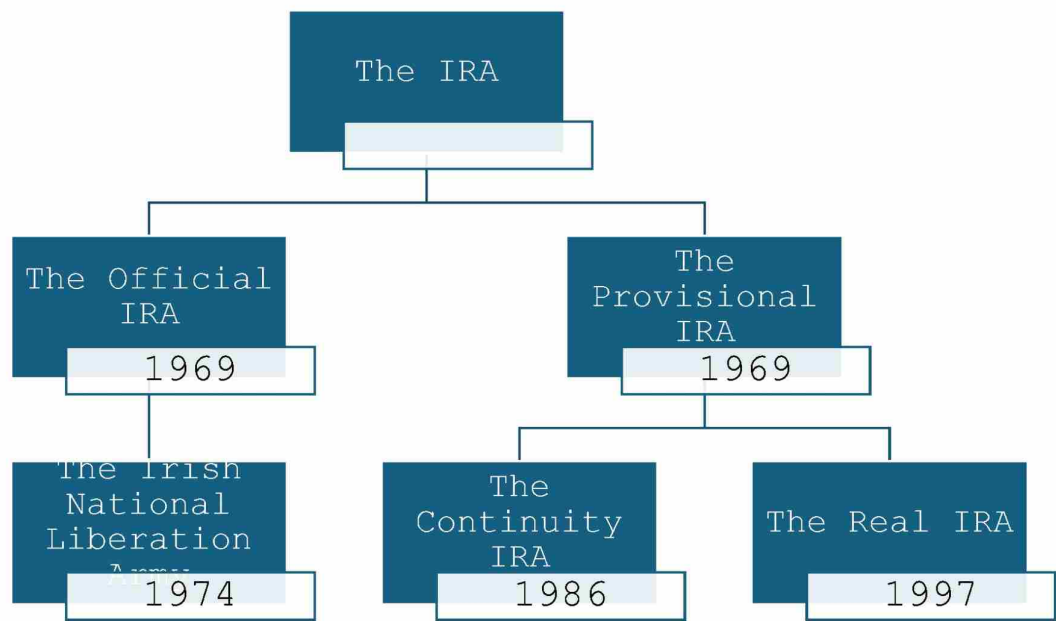


Figure 1: Chart of Core Paramilitary Splits Under Review in Report

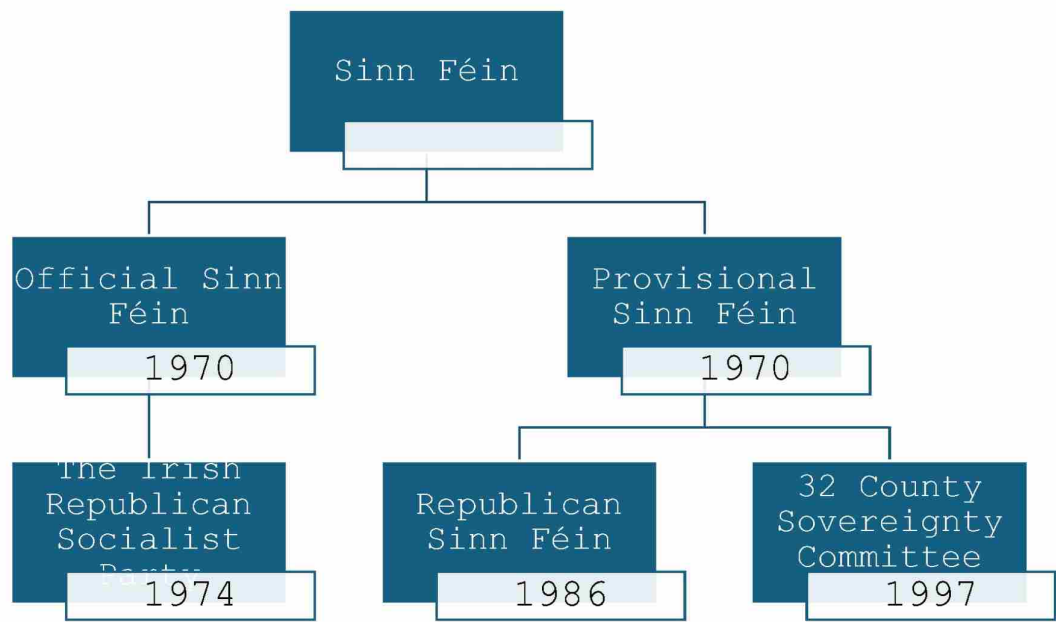


Figure 2: Chart of Core Political Splits Under Review in Report

The Processes of Splintering

9.7 As noted previously the author of this report has published a book which analyses splits in the Irish Republican movement from 1969 to 1997 (Morrison, 2013). Within this book the analysis focuses on the causes and consequences of each of the splits under consideration. It is proposed within that book, and elsewhere (Morrison, 2017), that one must understand the stage based process of the splits, rather than viewing them as a singular event. The process leading to the eventual fragmentation of the organisation can in some instances take years. There are similar processes, with slight but significant differences, involved in an even and an uneven split. An even split refers to an organisational divide where there is close to a 50/50 divide in the membership initially after the split. The 1969/70 split between the Provisionals and the Officials is a good example of this. An uneven split is when the majority of the membership sides with one over the other. The emergence of the RIRA and CIRA in 1997 and 1986 respectively are clear examples of these. However, it is proposed (Morrison, 2013) that we must also understand the process of split avoidance to gain a holistic understanding of these processes, as not all internal debates ultimately result in the organisational fragmentation. The differentiation between the different types of splits are detailed below.

9.8 Even Split

Stage 1: The Origins of Split

Stage 2: Factional Development

Stage 3: Inevitability of and Preparation for Split

Stage 4: Organisational Exit and Breakaway Group Formation

Stage 5: Aftermath of Split: Inter-Organisational Competition and Re-Organisation.

9.9 Uneven Split

Stage 1: The Origins of Split

Stage 2: Factional Development

Stage 3: Successful Application of Voice *and* Inevitability of and Preparation for Split

Stage 4: Organisational Change or Maintenance of Status Quo *and* Organisational Exit and Breakaway Group Formation

Stage 5: Aftermath of Split: Inter-Organisational Competition and Re-Organisation.

9.10 Split Avoidance

Stage 1: The Origins of Conflict

Stage 2: Factional Development

Stage 3: Successful Application of Voice

Stage 4: Organisational Change or Maintenance of Status Quo

Stage 5: Aftermath of Conflict: Re-Organisation

9.11 These models have been developed through analysis of literature of splits in political, terrorist, and business organisations. The theoretical foundation of the models come from political organisational theory which states that prior to an organisation being able to achieve their strategic political goals that they must first aim to achieve organisational survival. Utilising this as the theoretical foundation three core hypotheses have been developed to outline the role of organisational survival within splits in paramilitary and terrorist organisations:

9.12 H1: The immediate goal of each sub-group at the time of split is organisational survival in a form which they respect and recognise.

H2: That the conflict at the centre of the split is, for at least one of the sub-groups, threatening to the organisational identity.

H3: The sub-group most willing to make compromises is the one most likely to be successful in attracting a wider membership and support in the aftermath of the split.

9.13 By having the addendum of ‘in a form which they respect and recognise’ to the traditional political organisational theory hypotheses is deemed to more accurately describe the immediate goal of an organisation at a time of split. This assists in developing an understanding as to why some groups will be willing to divide the group, and when combined with hypothesis 2 explains why only some intra-organisational conflicts will result in the division of the organisation. This model of organisational fragmentation was developed by the author of the present report (Morrison, 2017), and has been applied to the analysis of splits in the Irish Republican Movement (Morrison, 2013). At the time of writing the model has not been directly applied, or tested, within any other organisational splits. However, it has been assessed within the peer review academic process.

9.14 Focusing on the origins of the internal conflicts within the organisation, as is documented in these models, will provide a foundation on which one can understand how and why conflicting factions emerge internally within the organisations. The stage of the process which will ultimately decide whether a split takes place, and what form of split it will be is

the third stage. Within the even split there will be an inevitability of split, as the conflict at the heart of the division will be deemed to be intractable. However, within the uneven split one side will ‘successfully apply voice.’ In essence what this means is that they successfully argue their side of the division and achieve the support from the majority of the membership and the wider support base. However, they will not be able to convince their opponents in the debate to side with them and stay within the organisation. A split will not happen as a result of all forms of internal conflict. A grouping will only leave to form their own independent autonomous organisation if the dispute at the heart of the split is deemed, by them, to be a threat to the maintenance of the survival of the organisation in a form which they both respect and recognise (Morrison, 2017). As is demonstrated above the aftermath of an uneven split will lead to either the maintenance of the status quo, or significant organisational change, dependent on which side is the ‘winner’ of the internal debate. The aftermath of each form of split will result in some form of inter-organisational competition for membership and support. In the aftermath of an even split especially this can result in violent feuding, as was witnessed in the aftermath of the 1969/70 and 1974 splits under consideration here.

9.15 The manifestation of the above theoretical stage based processes is evident across each of the four splits under review here. What is presented across the rest of this section is a historical overview of the four separate splits. There is a relatively brief overview of the three initial splits, with more detailed consideration given to the 1997 split which ultimately lead to the formation of the RIRA. Within this analysis there will be particular consideration given to the internal factionalism within the leadership structures of the PIRA between the calling off of the ceasefire called in August 1994 and the emergence of the RIRA in 1997.

1969/70: Official IRA/ Provisional IRA

9.16 The split in 1969/70 may be considered as *the* defining split which has shaped contemporary republicanism. It was from this division in the IRA and Sinn Féin that the Provisional Republican Movement emerged, with the PIRA going on to become the dominant republican paramilitary force across the following three decades. While the approximate origins of this split may lie in the longstanding Irish republican history the proximate roots are more identifiable within the aftermath of the IRA’s Border Campaign/Operation Harvest of the late 1950s and early 1960s (Rekawek, 2011). This paramilitary campaign took place between 1956 and 1962. In the aftermath of this campaign there was witnessed a significant deterioration in public support for the IRA and Sinn Féin. This deterioration in support was as

a result of the majority of the wider public no longer believing that the Republican Movement was representative of their beliefs. This decline in support resulted in an environment which meant that the IRA found it increasingly difficult to operate. When the Border Campaign ended in 1962 the deterioration of support for the Republican Movement continued. The decline in support was seen in the lack of organisational access to finances, which therefore made it more difficult to access weapons and artillery (Morrison, 2013, pp.41-6).

9.17 The decline in support was also seen with the disillusionment of the Movement's membership. The Border Campaign was seen internally as an operational failure (McGlinchey, 2019, p.145). This disillusionment with the direction of the Movement resulted in significant numbers of members to exit the organisation, as they did not see the possibility of the achievement of a united Ireland while following the strategies and tactics of the time. As well as those who voluntarily exited there was also a significant proportion of the membership and leadership who were interned or on the run, as a result of the Border Campaign. This further weakened the IRA in both standing and relevance. The weakening of the IRA in the aftermath of the Border Campaign saw the organisation at one of its weakest points from a morale and capability point of view (Morrison, 2013, p.44).

9.18 As a result of the organisational fragility of the Movement there was an internal re-evaluation of the direction, tactics and strategy (English, 2003, p.83). A new leadership with Cathal Goulding as the IRA Chief of Staff came into place. This new leadership ultimately distanced itself from the 'armed struggle' and placed greater emphasis on a left-wing political approach. Their aim was to make the aims and strategies of the Movement to be more in line with the wider Irish population. These left-wing policies were significantly removed from those traditional promoted by the Republican Movement (Bishop and Mallie, 1988). This therefore led to discontent amongst the old-guard traditionalists remaining within the leadership and the wider movement, resulting in a number of them exiting the organisation. Many of these left-wing policy proposals were emerging from the Wolfe Tone Society, established in 1963. This society was made up of those who were mainly external from the organisation, but met to discuss the future directions of Irish Republicanism. They were largely influenced by the left-wing academic Dr. Roy Johnston (see Johnston, 2006) These debates in turn influenced the positioning taken by the leadership at the time, which played a role in the Goulding leadership distancing itself from armed Republicanism, and adopting a more peaceful political strategy. This rise in left-wing ideals and the demotion of the armed

campaign resulted in the growing internal factionalism of the leadership and membership. Many of the traditionalists remaining vehemently displayed their discontent with the direction being taken. The discontent was most acute with respect to the downgrading in importance of the IRA and the armed campaign, displayed in the decline of training and operation. There was some internal resistance to this downgrading with a number of small units actively preparing for an armed campaign, defying the guidance of the leadership.

9.19 Prior to, and during, the Border Campaign the Republican Movement held a policy of abstentionism. This meant that if members of Sinn Féin were successfully elected to Dáil Eireann, Westminster, or Stormont that they would refuse to take their seats. This policy was in place based on the belief that each of the three parliaments promoted the continuation of the partition of the island of Ireland (Maillot, 2005, pp.8-20). However, in the General Army Conventions and of the IRA and the Ard Fheiscanna (party conventions) of Sinn Féin in 1965 and 1966 the Goulding leadership was proposing the end to the abstentionist policy to all three parliaments. For many of the traditionalist republicans this was reneging on one of the cornerstones of what it was to be a republican. In their eyes the proposal was to change a revolutionary movement to a constitutional party (Morrison, 2013, p.51). This was a proposed move from an armed to a political movement, with growing left-wing influences. Combined this was to prove to be too significant a change for many within the membership and the leadership. Across the mid to late 1960s the seven person leadership of the IRA Army Council was divided evenly. Three were in favour of the advancement of the armed campaign, and three against, and the final member Tomás MacGiolla 'neutral.' This near even divide was equally reflected in the leadership of Sinn Féin. This division was to grow in strength as the 1960s came to a close, particularly within the summer of 1969.

9.20 In the late 1960s in Northern Ireland there was the growth of the civil rights movement, which was campaigning for equal rights for Catholics within Northern Ireland (Prince, 2018). However, during their marches and campaigns civil rights activists were frequently attacked by loyalist groups as members of the RUC and the B-Specials (police reservists) either stood by or engaged in the violence themselves. This resulted in riots on both sides of the sectarian divide. As a result there were frequent calls from within the nationalist community for the IRA to intervene, send weapons, and to defend the communities. Yet, the leadership resisted these calls, as they wanted to maintain the politicisation of the Movement. The growing tensions in Northern Ireland came to a head in August 1969 with incidents such as the Battle

of the Bogside (Keeley, 1982, p.145) and the heightened sectarian rioting across the Northern Ireland. In Belfast there were hundreds of homes which were burned to the ground, which left thousands of people homeless. Those who were made homeless as a result of the arson were mainly from Catholic nationalist or republican backgrounds. Resultantly the British government sent army troops into Northern Ireland in the middle of August. The IRA leadership's refusal to intervene with arms or paramilitary support gave fresh impetus to the new emerging internal factions developing within the Movement. This was heightened by the return of many old-guard members of the IRA who had previously left. These growing tensions were ensuring the inevitability of the split. Many from this growing dissident faction defied the leadership and attempted to defend the republican communities alongside a growing number of young Northern nationalists, a number of whom would go onto lead the Provisional Republican Movement throughout the Troubles.

9.21 The emerging 'dissident' grouping began to prepare for their ultimate exit. While there was a series of divisive issues which came to the fore across the 1960s it was the divided opinion in relation to the IRA's responsibilities which accelerated and ultimately led to the split taking place. In the eyes of the dissidents the IRA had failed in their duty to protect the republican and nationalist communities in the 'six counties' (Morrison, 2013, pp.60-61). In the lead up to the actual split taking place some regional sections of the IRA began to move away, most notably the Belfast IRA. However, it was in the aftermath of the 1969 Army Convention. Within that Convention the issues of abstentionism, and the establishment of a National Liberation Front (a coalition of left-wing radical group) were put to a vote and were passed. However, in the aftermath of what was a divisive convention the dissidents met to form the Provisional Army Council and the Provisional IRA. This was led by figures such as Sean MacStiofain as Chief of Staff, Daithi O'Conail and Ruairi O'Bradaigh as members of the Army Council, alongside a number of Belfast based republicans who had left prior to the Convention. This split in the paramilitary wing was followed in January 1970 by a split in their political wing, Sinn Féin. In the Ard Fheis of that year a number of dissenters staged a walk out. A vote to end the abstentionist policy had received a majority, but had failed to achieve the requisite two-thirds majority to be passed. However, following this defeat for the motion Seamus Costello, a leading member of the Officials, called for a vote for the Ard Fheis to recognise the votes passed by the Army Convention. As this was a non-constitutional vote it would have only required a simple majority to pass. It was with this that the dissidents staged a walkout. Immediately, after their walkout they went on to establish their own

autonomous ‘caretaker Sinn Féin Árd Comhairle’ [Executive]. With that the split had taken place both at a paramilitary and a political level (White, 2006, pp.151-63; Morrison, 2013).

9.22 In the aftermath of this split the membership and support was fairly evenly divided between the Provisional dissidents and the Officials. With this came a political and paramilitary competition for support (Morrison, 2013, 79-83). This included the competition for support internally within the pre-existing membership, as well as for the numerous young northern nationalists who were keen to join-up to continue the armed struggle. Alongside this the Official leadership had to re-organise their movement in the aftermath of a significant depletion of their membership, and the Provisionals had to establish a new organisational structure from the ground up. Within Belfast in particular there were continued calls for the paramilitary groups to supply community defence and weaponry. While the Officials did not completely adhere to a purely political strategy in the years after the split they were more restrained than their Provisional rivals. This was one of the major factors as to why in the long run the PIRA won the competition for paramilitary membership and support. The intensity of the competition for membership and support was seen most clearly in the violent feuding between erstwhile comrades (Holland and McDonald, 1994, pp.19-20). This was especially visible within parts of west Belfast with members of both sides of the divide living in close proximity. This violent feuding, which resulted in the deaths and injury of many, was as a result of the relatively even nature of the split. In essence the internalised factionalism which preceded the divide continued after the groups split. While these Republican feuds continued on the streets and in the prisons, so too did they Republican paramilitary offensive against the British forces and the loyalists. This period of time saw Northern Ireland engulfed in a protracted conflict that would continue across the next three decades.

1974: Official IRA/ Irish National Liberation Army

9.23 The Official IRA and Official Sinn Féin were to split once again four years after the acrimony of 1969/70. The 1974 fragmentation saw the emergence of the paramilitary group the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) and their political wing the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP). This new Movement, collectively referred to as the Irish Republican Socialist Movement (IRSM), was initially led by Seamus Costello who in 1974 was court

martialled and expelled from the Official Republican Movement² (Hanley and Millar, 2009, pp.271-2). In the aftermath of his expulsion he went on to form the IRSM.

9.24 Prior to this split the Officials had been significantly surpassed by the Provisionals in terms of membership and support. While the origins of the 1969/70 had seen the reluctance of the Official leadership to continue to engage in the armed campaign the reality of the Troubles resulted in the leadership seeing the necessity to engage in ‘acceptable’ forms of paramilitary activity. However, the accumulation of the Officials paramilitary attacks were proving to be increasingly unpopular. These attacks include the murder of Ranger William Best in May 1972, the Aldershot barracks bombing resulting in the death of a Catholic priest, and the murder of Minister of Home Affairs John Taylor. As a result of the growing discontent the OIRA declared a ceasefire on May 29th, 1972. Members were only to use paramilitary force in situations of self-defence or retaliation, the paramilitary response had to take place within 48 hours of the initial attack, and had to be approved by Dublin HQ. This policy led to heightened internal discontent (Bowyer Bell, 1990, p.21).

9.25 Across the Troubles the vast majority of the armed activity was to take place on the streets of Northern Ireland. However, the Officials leadership was predominantly based in Dublin, without the daily exposure to the violence. For the Northern Ireland based membership this leadership was largely seen as disconnected from the realities of the conflict with their calls for armed restraint and the extolling of a primarily political approach. The leadership extolled the need to reach across the sectarian divide and to join unionist and loyalist communities in the fight for the working classes. Policies and recommendations such as these were largely met with disdain by the Northern based membership when they saw their communities as being constantly under threat by loyalist paramilitaries. Issues like these were to lead to heightened internal fragmentation. While the membership of the OIRA felt like they were being restrained by their leadership’s policies they were witnessing the PIRA engaged in frequent paramilitary activity, and growing their arsenal of weapons (Morrison, 2013, 87-91).

9.26 Seamus Costello, who would go on to lead the establishment of the INLA was the Director of Operations (Hanley and Millar, 2009, p.149) at this time, and found this strategy

² This is the collective term for the Official IRA and Official Sinn Féin

of defence and retaliation to be debilitating. He was to become a leading voice questioning the continuation of this policy. He, alongside other would be dissenters, believed that the OIRA needed to have a stronger armed presence for both defensive and offensive purposes. However, the national leadership was unwilling to compromise, which made the emerging internal conflict close to irreconcilable. While there was growing divisions across the organisation this split was to be largely led by Costello who dominated the call for a more militaristic approach to be taken by the OIRA. At the 1972 Army Convention he put forward a motion for the support of the continuation of the armed campaign, a motion which was passed. From there he continued to actively propose the strengthening of the armed campaign, proposals which had the backing of a significant minority of the Movement. He garnered support through local engagement, promoting his alternative strategy through his role as Director of Operations. As the development of his internal dissident grouping evolved he also started to secure weaponry for what would be his new paramilitary group. In retaliation, and to minimise the strength of the future INLA, the Goulding leadership discontinued and disarmed those suspected of dissidence (Morrison, 2013, 92-5).

9.27 The awareness of Costello's preparations for a splinter group resulted in the leadership of the OIRA removing him from his position as Director of Operations, and ultimately expelling him from the OIRA (Holland and McDonald, 1994, pp.25-6). In the lead up to his expulsion he was accused of vote rigging at the 1973 Ard Fheis, and individual OIRA units were being actively briefed against him by leading members of the Movement. This ultimately led to his dismissal in February 1974 by an Official IRA Court of Inquiry. In a subsequent court martial, which was at the request of Costello, he was accused of undermining the OIRA, misappropriating Army funds and faction building. He was found 'guilty' and dismissed 'with ignominy' (Hanley and Millar, 2009, pp.271-2). He was similarly dismissed from Official Sinn Féin. This was initially for six months, but he was later permanently dismissed as he did not adhere to the conditions of his suspension.

9.28 With his and his supporters' forced exit Costello went on to form the IRSM. They were joined by a number of other disillusioned members who were angered by the leadership's moves against him and his proposed escalation of the armed campaign. The left-wing paramilitary force established by Costello was originally entitled the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This was later to change to the INLA, a name it still retains today. The new paramilitary group was initially kept secret, even from members of the newly formed IRSP

which included a number of members who had joined from the civil rights movement. Many of these members left the IRSP when the existence of this paramilitary wing was apparent. While Costello had put some plans in place for the establishment of then INLA his plans had been subverted by the leadership of the OIRA. Therefore, the INLA did not declare its existence until they were more readily equipped (Morrison, 2013, pp. 98-9).

9.29 As with the 1969/70 split the 1974 split resulted in violent feuds between the erstwhile comrades. These resulted in both the OIRA and the INLA losing members who were killed by their organisational rivals. This alongside the exit of many IRSP members significantly weakened the IRSM in its early existence. Both groups had both rank and file and leadership figures killed as a result of this feud. For the OIRA the most significant loss was the death of Billy McMillen, one of their most senior members in Belfast, with the INLA losing their founder Seamus Costello at the hands of the OIRA (Holland and McDonald, 1994, pp.112-8).

1986: Provisional IRA/Continuity IRA

9.30 In 1986 the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin split once more. This time leading to the formation of the Continuity IRA and Republican Sinn Féin (Morrison, 2013, pp.105-148). These groups, led by Ruairi O'Bradaigh and Daithí O'Conail, left in the aftermath of votes in the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis and the PIRA General Army Convention to drop the abstentionist policy to Dáil Eireann, with their new political and paramilitary organisations proposing that they would uphold 'true' republican principles. Many of those who left with them were 'old guard' southern republicans many of whom had led the formation of the Provisionals in 1969/70. However, unlike that split the '86 divide was very much an uneven split. The Provisionals led by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were able to bring the vast majority of the Movement with them, and maintain their course without any significant disruption caused by feuds, or the bitter competition for membership and support. This split is a story of the how the young Northern leadership of Adams, McGuinness and others, gradually took over the Movement from an old-guard largely Southern leadership. It was this new leadership who would go on to lead the Provisionals' politicisation process into the peace process.

9.31 The 1986 split finds its origins in the early days of the Troubles, within the mid-1970s. Across 1975, after five years of conflict, the PIRA entered into negotiations with the British

Government and their representatives in the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). The republicans' demands were for the construction of a plan for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. In order to facilitate the negotiations the Provisionals were on ceasefire throughout. However, with no development on their demands (Bew and Gillespie, 1993) the ceasefire came to a close in November '75. Throughout the ceasefires and negotiations there was growing discontent within amongst the Provisionals, both on the streets and in the prisons (Morrison, 2018). The negotiations were led by O'Bradaigh and O'Conail, members of the old-guard southern leadership. However, amongst the growing young membership, actively involved in the armed conflict, the negotiations and ceasefires were much maligned. They believed that the leadership were politically naïve, and therefore unable to achieve anything tangible from the process (Morrison, 2013, p.109). There was growing sentiment that the leadership had possibly taken the Movement as far as they feasibly could, and that perhaps it was time for a new leadership to come into place. However, this was not an overnight coup. The 1986 split is a story of gradual change both in relation to policy and leadership.

9.32 Across the negotiations many of the criticisms were coming from within the prisons, from key figures such as Gerry Adams³ and Ivor Bell, influential both within and outside of prison. Bell and Adams were leading Belfast Republicans. Adams would go on to become president of Sinn Féin, with Bell spending a short time between 1982 and 1983 as Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA. They believed that the leadership were being naïve in their approaches, and that the longer the negotiations went on without any clear advantage being gained by the PIRA that the paramilitary force were being weakened. This was not the first time the Provisional IRA had negotiated with the British. In fact both Adams and Bell had been involved, alongside O'Conail and others, in talks with William Whitelaw in London in 1972 (Coogan, 200, pp.392-3). However, the 1975 negotiations were a more elongated and open process. The longer the negotiations went on without any clear benefit to republicans the more demoralising it was becoming for the wider membership. This demoralisation was to provide an opportunity for a new leadership to gradually begin to take over. Those who left to form the CIRA and RSF propose that the Adams-McGuinness leadership leaned on the discontent relating to the '75 ceasefire in the years which followed in order to strengthen their hold on power (Morrison, 2013, p.111). They utilised the handling of the negotiations as a

³ Adams had been interned without trial and was later convicted for attempted escapes from Long Kesh in 1973 and 1974. The 1975 conviction for those attempted escapes was overturned in 2020.

way to portray the southern leadership as being out of touch with those involved in the day to day activities of the armed campaign.

9.33 As with each of the other Provisional splits under review the 1986 split was framed by the proposed politicisation of the Movement. In this instance it specifically relates to the proposal to drop the abstentionist policy to Dáil Eireann. While this ultimately came to a vote in 1986, the discussions which led to this started back in the mid-1970s largely within the prison walls. Republican prisoners such as Gerry Adams were calling into question the direction and long term strategies of the Movement. He and other leading Republican prisoners were calling on their incarcerated comrades to take their time in prison to educate themselves on international revolutions, and see how this could be applied to Ireland (Morrison, 2013). Within this they were challenged to consider not just the armed responses, but to also consider how political approaches could be aligned to assist the continued armed struggle. Therefore, unlike the leadership of the Official IRA they were proposing the political and armed campaigns to go hand in hand with each other. These discussions led to debate around the utility of electoral politics, debate that would continue to engulf the Movement for decades to follow. While these discussions were happening within the confines of the prison walls they were also influencing the external debates across the Movement. From 1975-'77 Adams was writing letters for the newspaper *Republican News* under the pseudonym Brownie (Taylor, 1997, pp.200-2). Juxtaposed with his discussions of day-to-day life within prison the articles also contained critiques of the external leadership with a strong emphasis on the political element of the struggle. Included within this was the calling into question of the abstentionist policy to Dáil Eireann.

9.34 These debates which started within the prisons could be seen as the origins of the politicisation of contemporary Sinn Féin. In the years leading up to 1986 the newly emerging northern leadership gradually gathered support for their position on the need for a dual political and paramilitary strategy, across both the new and old guard membership of the Movement. This gathering of support allowed them to reduce the significance of the future split. They were able to gather this support because unlike Goulding in the 1960s they were not planning to dramatically change the organisation. They were proposing to retain the armed struggle, as well as the abstentionist policies to Stormont and Westminster. It was only abstentionism to Dáil Eireann which was under discussion. The merits of this more gradual

evolution was easier to sell to the membership, and the time they took to establish the support for the change stood to them (Morrison, 2013, pp. 124-8).

9.35 In the late 1970s the IRA was being restructured to facilitate the implementation of their new 'long war' strategy. The army was divided between Northern and Southern commands (Moloney, 2007 pp.377-8). The Northern Command, alongside the Army Council and General Headquarters took charge of the active service operations. The developing northern leadership were gaining further prominence within the leadership. This led to escalation in tensions at a leadership level. However, in contrast to 1969/70, this was not reflected across the membership at large. The emerging Adams leadership was gaining membership support both north and south of the border and across the old-guard and new membership.

9.36 The value of the proposed equal prominence of armed and political republicanism was most clearly illustrated in the elections of Bobby Sands and other hunger strikers across 1981 (Coogan, 2000, pp. 494-501). During their campaigns those on hunger-strike gained vast support and media attention both nationally and internationally. Resultantly they saw large sways of voters casting their votes for the hunger-strikers when they chose to stand for election. They were standing for election to Westminster and Dáil Éireann on abstentionist policies. These elections were designed to garner national and international support for their hunger strike campaign, and to maintain their campaign in the headlines. However, in the elections which followed immediately after the hunger strikes were completed, Sinn Féin failed to gain anything near as much support. Resultantly in the years which followed the idea of dropping abstentionism to Dáil Éireann was gaining prominence, as it was perceived that this may have been preventing people voting Sinn Féin in times other than heightened emotion and attention. Through these discussions the membership were becoming acclimatised to the idea. As these proposals gathered pace it was always clearly emphasised that this would not go hand in hand with a downgrading of the armed campaign. However, those who would go on to join the CIRA and RSF believed that during these discussions that their possibility for true debate was being suppressed (Morrison, 2013, p.126-7).

9.37 With the growing prominence of Adams and his allies within the Provisional Movement one of the greatest barriers to their influence was the continued leadership of O'Bradaigh and O'Conail. In the early '80s the Adams leadership sought to reduce the influence of O'Bradaigh, O'Conail and their allies, and to further isolate them in the Movement. This first

came with a vote in the 1981 Ard Fheis to remove *Éire Nua* as the official policy of Sinn Féin. While they succeeded in achieving a majority vote for its removal it was not until the '82 Ard Fheis where they got the requisite two thirds majority. *Éire Nua* had been Sinn Féin policy throughout the 1970s. The policy proposed that a united Ireland should be federalist in nature, based on the four ancient provinces of the island, with a new capital in the midlands town of Athlone (Sinn Féin, 1972). O'Bradaigh and O'Conail were vocal advocates of this policy, and indeed had led its development (Taylor, 1997, p.104). RSF and CIRA still have this as a core element of their policies today. The withdrawal of the policy illustrated the growing tensions in the leadership, as it was seen as a way to outmanoeuvre O'Bradaigh and O'Conail. For them the removal of the policy was seen as a threat to the republican identity they aspired to and led to them stepping down from the *Árd Comhairle* of Sinn Féin in 1983. In essence this was not just a rejection of a policy, for many this was the rejection of the old leadership by the majority of the Movement.

9.38 For the politicising leadership of Adams, McGuinness, Danny Morrison⁴ and others they viewed abstentionist policy to *Dáil Eireann* as stunting their progress in the south. For the majority of the southern electorate *Dáil Eireann* was viewed as their legitimate legislator. This set it apart from Stormont and Westminster in the north. Those who would ultimately leave to form Republican Sinn Féin and the CIRA argued that recognition of *Dáil Eireann* was the recognition of a partitionist parliament. They predicted that this in turn would ultimately result in the party coming to accept a second partitionist parliament, namely Stormont as a Northern legislator (Evans and Tonge, 2012). For them abstentionism was a fundamental principle which positioned them against the legislative partition of Ireland. They believed that the dropping of this policy was negatively impacting the organisational identity. The years preceding the 1986 votes in the PIRA and Sinn Féin saw the Adams leadership meticulously developing their support base both politically and within the paramilitary group. This was further isolating the traditionalist leadership. This preparation significantly reduced the impact of the future split. One of the key elements of their preparation was to gain the support of some influential old-guard republicans such as John-Joe McGirl, Seamus Twomey and Joe Cahill. Their support played the role in reducing the impact of historical heritage of O'Bradaigh and O'Conail. In contrast the future CIRA gained the support of Tom Maguire,

⁴ The Sinn Féin Director of Publicity and editor of the newspaper *An Phoblacht/Republican News*.

the sole surviving member of the second Dáil⁵, as well George Harrison and Tom Falvey who were responsible for US gun-running. However, the impact of their support was negated by the cumulative support being gained by their rivals (Morrison, 2013, p.140-1).

9.39 When the split did eventually come to pass in 1986 the political and paramilitary groups of RSF and CIRA were weakened by the amount of support that the Provisional leadership was able to garner in the lead up to the split. Resultantly the CIRA was unable to mount any paramilitary offensive until the mid-1990s. There was no significant feud between erstwhile comrades, as the CIRA and RSF did not have the capabilities to truly threaten the continued Provisional dominance and had to concentrate on the long-road to establishing themselves as any form of force. They faced serious barriers in attaining any weaponry (Morrison, 2013, p.143), and therefore could not develop a serious armed campaign, in clear contrast with the next split to be considered. The Provisional leadership were not destabilised by their exit, and perhaps it even strengthened their capabilities to pursue a more politicised approach. While RSF continue to define themselves against the policy battles of 1986 the Provisional leadership have long since moved on from this.

1997: Provisional IRA/Real IRA

9.40 The final split under consideration here is the most significant split in relation to the Omagh bombing, as it is the split which saw the emergence of the Real IRA. This split took place in 1997 as a result of discontent about involvement in the ongoing peace process. In the end the split occurred as a result of discontent, in sections of the PIRA Army Executive in particular, about the endorsement of the Mitchell Principles. However, as with each of the splits one can chart the origins years prior to the actual event of the divide. The Mitchell Principles were a set of standards which each party, including Sinn Féin, had to agree to before they could enter into peace talks. Within these principles was a commitment to the promotion of exclusively peaceful and democratic means to achieve their political goals. Those who went on to form the RIRA saw this as an ‘infringement of the organisation’s constitution and the negation of the IRA’s claim to be fighting a legitimate ‘war’ against British ‘colonial’ occupation of Northern Ireland’ (Frampton, 2011 p.91). Frampton (2011) notes concerns around the Mitchell Principles should also be viewed as symbolic of their

⁵ The IRA proposed that the Second Dáil was the last legitimate government of Ireland. Once the Dáil had approved the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 the island of Ireland was politically partitioned. Therefore in the eyes of republicans the legitimacy of Dáil Éireann ceased.

broadier disquiet over the trajectory of the paramilitary Movement. This disquiet over the trajectory had been building in the years leading up to 1997.

9.41 What is presented in this overview of the final split is a consideration of the internal factionalism from which this division eventually occurred. While this split also sees the establishment of the political group 32CSC, later 32CSM, the division is most significant within the paramilitary wing of the Provisional Republican Movement. This was not a major split in terms of number of members leaving the Provisionals. The vast majority of the membership stayed with the Adams and McGuinness leadership. However, with the majority of the RIRA membership coming from within the Quartermaster and Engineering departments the skillset and expertise enabled them to launch a near immediate paramilitary campaign. While the process leading up to the split invariably is viewed through the lens of the emergence of this paramilitary force, it should also be considered as a continuation of the politicisation process under the Adams-McGuinness leadership as through their internal negotiations they were able to bring the vast majority of their membership and support on the road towards peace and ultimately the full cessation of violence (Morrison, 2013, p.151). This was once again as a result of the gradual internal political groundwork they had laid in the lead up to the division.

9.42 In the years following the 1986 split which saw the formation of CIRA and RSF the Provisional leadership continued to pursue the growing politicisation of the Movement. In 1987 Sinn Féin published 'Scenario for Peace', a policy document which replaced the traditional Republican demand of 'Brits Out' with one of national self-determination (Frampton, 2011 p.59). They were developing the concept of peace as a dominant discourse, while tragically juxtaposing it with ongoing paramilitary violence. The following year saw the emergence of one of the most significant early steps in the peace process, the initiation of talks between Adams and the late leader of the SDLP, John Hume (Coogan, 1996, pp.396-7). These talks were to lay the groundwork for the peace process which was to begin in earnest in the 1990s. It also privately demonstrated the Provisionals' willingness to look beyond the paramilitary campaign. It has since been revealed that in 1985 John Hume had sought to hold talks with the PIRA Army Council. However, these talks were never to take place (Irish Examiner, 2015). The Hume-Adams talks were not to become public until 1993. From then in a series of statements they outlined that the purpose of these talks was to achieve 'a just and lasting peace for all the people of this island' through 'agreement and reconciliation.'

(Hume and Adams, 1997). Within their closing statement in 1997 they particularly challenged the British government to ‘respond positively and imaginatively, both in terms of the demilitarisation of the situation and particularly in dealing with the issue of prisoners, in urgently addressing the equality agenda and in assisting the search for agreement among the people of Ireland’ (Hume and Adams, 1997).

9.43 As these talks between Hume and Adams were ongoing the British and Irish governments under the leadership of Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds negotiated a separate document under the title of the *Downing Street Declaration*. Internally within Republicanism this was seen as a setback, as it deviated from the Hume-Adams talks. Internally this was seen as an indication that the Irish government were more willing to negotiate with the British government, as opposed to with those within the nationalist and republican communities (Frampton, 2011 pp. 91-92), and that they were seen as more favourable to the people of the unionist community. The text of the statement indicated the right to self-determination for the people of Ireland, and outlined that Northern Ireland would only unite with the rest of the island of Ireland if a majority of the Northern Irish population was in favour of this move. It indicated that the British government noted that it was for the people of the island of Ireland to exercise the right to self-determination ‘on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland’ (Downing Street Declaration, 1993). The joint declaration also indicated the desire to find a constitutional settlement to the conflict, and that parties such as Sinn Féin with links to paramilitaries could only participate in talks to achieve this if and when they abandoned violence.

9.44 Internally within the PIRA Army Council the contents of the Declaration was rejected. However, Gerry Adams convinced them to not indicate this rejection publicly. Instead they called for clarifications on points contained within the document, while concurrently touring the Republican Movement to get soundings from the wider membership (Moloney, 2007, [pp.417-418](#)). By early 1994 the possibility of a new PIRA ceasefire was being discussed amongst the leadership. Talks continued with the SDLP, however, clandestine talks which had been ongoing with the British government had collapsed. There was therefore a diverted focus to establishing a pan-nationalist front with the SDLP, and through negotiations with the Irish government (Moloney, 2007, [pp.418-22](#)). The republican representatives involved in the negotiations were telling their membership that the armed struggle was still in operation.

However, the SDLP were informed that the republican leadership wished to pursue purely political strategies (Bean, 2007, pp.118-20). By August 31st, 1994 the PIRA had reached a point in the negotiations where they announced a four-month ceasefire, which continued beyond that initial four-month period. This was in acceptance of a fourteen point proposal put forward by Taoiseach Albert Reynolds.⁶

9.45 In their statement announcing the ceasefire the PIRA stated:

“We believe that an opportunity to secure a just and lasting settlement has been created. We are therefore entering into a new situation in a spirit of determination and confidence, determined that the injustices which created this conflict will be removed and confident in the strength and justice of our struggle to achieve this.

9.46 We note that the Downing Street Declaration is not a solution, nor was it presented as such by its authors. A solution will only be found as a result of inclusive negotiations. Others, not the least the British government have a duty to face up to their responsibilities. It is our desire to significantly contribute to the creation of a climate which will encourage this. We urge everyone to approach this new situation with energy, determination and patience.”
(PIRA, 1994)

9.47 This announcement also emphasised in its opening line that this ceasefire was called in recognition of ‘the potential of the current situation and in order to enhance the democratic

⁶ This proposal included:

1. The treatment of Sinn Féin as a normal political party;
2. Proposal of a private meeting between Reynold and Adams within two weeks of the ceasefire;
3. Regular consultation between Adams and Reynolds;
4. Regular consultation between Sinn Féin and the Irish government as required by events;
5. Briefings of Irish government by Sinn Féin on the full spectrum of issues relating to the peace process;
6. A Forum on Peace and Reconciliation to be arranged;
7. Sinn Féin’s participation in the Forum to be guaranteed
8. The end of measures designed to isolate Sinn Féin and the wider republican community;
9. Reynolds would look to persuade the British government to drop their efforts to marginalise Sinn Féin;
10. Reynolds would look to persuade Bill Clinton’s White House to allow an Army Council member to visit the United States to win support in the US prior to the ceasefire;
11. Reynolds would seek to persuade the Clinton administration to lift the general visa ban on Sinn Féin members;
12. Reynolds to seek quick release of IRA prisoners;
13. Reynolds and John Hume to influence the British government to open cross-Border roads and the scrapping of repressive legislation, and to address the issue of IRA prisoners;
14. The Irish Department of Foreign Affairs would seek foreign support for the peace strategy. (Moloney, 2003, pp. 424-425)

process and underlying our definitive commitment to its success'(PIRA, 1994). This was a point emphasised by Taoiseach Albert Reynolds when he was addressing the Dáil on the ceasefire (Reynolds, 1994). In that address he emphasised the role which the Irish government had played, while also highlighting the commitment of the British and American governments to the process. Months previously President Bill Clinton had provided Adams with a short term visa to enter the United States, a significant move which provided Adams with the ability to bring the strong Irish American support base along with him. As the peace process progressed the American role was to become even more significant.

9.48 While the 1994 ceasefire was greeted positively externally, as the process went on there was growing discontent within the PIRA. It was this discontent which would ultimately build and result in the 1997 split. The discontent was largely coming from the Army Executive, who had been isolated from the negotiation process. The Executive had not been informed of progress, on grounds of security. Even when it came to the declaration of the ceasefire two unnamed representatives of the Executive were only told a couple of days before it was called, and were told to inform the other ten members. Their growing discontent lay in the belief that the negotiations were not progressing the Republican cause while the British government were standing firm on the need for decommissioning. Alongside this was their disillusionment at being isolated from the excluded and alienated from the process (Moloney, 2007). This discontent was being led primarily by the Quartermaster General Michael McKeivitt, Seamus McGrane the Executive chair, Brian Gillen the OC of the Belfast Brigade, and the Director of Engineering 'Frank McGuinness'⁷ (Moloney, 2007; Mooney and O'Toole, 2003). However, they also had support from other prominent republicans, including Brian Keenan an Armagh based Republican who had played a prominent role in a number of high profile operations, as well campaigning for the support of the restructuring of the IRA into a Northern and Southern Command. It is reported that by the summer of 1995 they Executive was split 10-2 against the ceasefire strategy (Moloney, 2007). There was a growing belief within the Executive that the longer the ceasefire was to continue the weaker the PIRA

⁷ Mooney and O'Toole (2003, p.33) propose that this is a pseudonym which was used even internally within the Movement. Little is known of his actual identity, with Mooney and O'Toole (2003, p.33) quoting a RIRA Army Council member who stated 'He would turn up at Executive or GHQ meetings and he would be known as Frank McGuinness. He mustn't have trusted any of us, at any time. We were all shocked to find out that wasn't his name at all.'

were becoming. Gerry Kelly, and an Adams ally, toured the country and found discontent with the direction of the Movement in Belfast, Tyrone, Derry, Monaghan, and South Armagh.

9.49 In January 1996 the Executive called an extraordinary General Army Convention. The purpose of a General Army Convention is to elect an Army Executive, who in turn select members for the Army Council (Boyne, 1996). When the General Army Convention is not in session the Army Council is the most powerful body in the organisation. What was becoming clear with the Executives call for a Convention was that they were looking to call an end to the ceasefire and bring in a new more hardline leadership. Before the Convention could sit the Army Council called an end to what had become a 15 month ceasefire (Moloney, 2007, pp.440-3). On February 9th 1996 the PIRA bombed Canary Wharf in London, thus signalling the end of the cessation (Taylor, 1997, p.352). While the Executive had called for the Army Convention in January it did not actually take place until October of that year. Within the months that passed between the end of the ceasefire and the Convention taking place in October the PIRA had re-engaged in the armed campaign. In that time the Adams leadership had acquired time to prepare for the inevitable push against them.

9.50 Within the Convention the Army Council were ordered to seek a four-month ratification from the Executive, and that the first post-ceasefire Convention was to take place fifteen months after any new ceasefire. McKevitt, one of the leading dissidents, put forward a motion which stated:

9.51 “The Army Authority shall retain, maintain and ensure the safety of all armaments, equipment and other resources of Oglai gh na hEireann until such time as the sovereignty and unity of the Republic of Ireland has been attained. Once a settlement has been agreed, leading to a united Ireland, all decisions relating to decommissioning of armaments, equipment and other resources must be ratified by an Army Convention.” (Moloney, 2007, pp.450-1)

9.52 This motion was designed to prevent the possibility of decommissioning. It was passed unanimously. Alongside this it was voted that the Army Council could no longer decide on entering into a ceasefire with a simple majority. It required at least five of the seven members to vote it favour. While all these motions were designed to destabilise the power which Adams and his allies held one of the most significant tasks of any Army Convention is to elect a new Executive. At first it appeared like the dissidents had secured a 7-5 majority on the Executive. However, at the last minute the newly elected Executive member Brian

Keenan changed his allegiance and sided with Adams and colleagues in his support for the peace process. When this was coupled with the fact that Frank McGuinness was unable to attend the Convention a new Army Council was voted in made up strongly of Adams allies. Therefore, while his leadership appeared to be weakening entering into the Convention, he emerged in an even stronger position than he was in going into it (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003). It has been proposed that the key to this was the role which Brian Keenan had played (Morrison, 2013, p.157). He was not only able to provide his own personal support at a leadership level. His wealth of experience meant that he was held in high esteem by his comrades in South Armagh and across the country. He was therefore able to influence those whose support may have been wavering across the country.

9.53 In May 1997 the Labour Party, under the premiership of Tony Blair, was elected into power. Blair appointed Mo Mowlam as the Secretary for State for Northern Ireland. Mowlam indicated early on into her role that if the PIRA call a ceasefire she was willing to let Sinn Féin into peace talks without the obligation of decommissioning. Resultantly in July 1997 the Army Council voted for another ceasefire. While this was sold to the Army Executive on tactical grounds the dissidents within the Executive were still distrustful. They believed that this would lead to the weakening of the PIRA as a paramilitary force. Therefore when the ceasefire was called this was without the full support of the Executive (Moloney, 2007 pp.467-72).

9.54 However, while it was the ceasefire which was consolidating the division within the leadership, it was the Mitchell Principles which brought this factionalism to the point of split (Guelke, 1999). These principles, proposed by the US Special Envoy for Northern Ireland Senator George Mitchell, were essentially the ground rules that each political party had to agree to in order to be involved in any future talks on Northern Ireland's political future. Parties across the sectarian divide were asked to affirm their 'total and absolute commitment':

1. To democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues;
2. To the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations;
3. To agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission;

4. To renounce for themselves, and to oppose any effort by others, to use force, or threaten to use force, to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations;
5. To agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with which they may disagree; and
6. To urge that punishment killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions. (Mitchell Principles, 1996)

9.55 For those within the Executive who were opposed to the Principles they saw signing up to them as a deviation from the purpose of the PIRA, and therefore would be unconstitutional and tantamount to accepting of a 'Unionist veto' on the future of Northern Ireland. In their opinion there would be no going back if the PIRA accepted the Principles as this could be considered as the paramilitaries accepting the legitimacy of the Northern Irish state. They foresaw the demise of the organisation if they were to sign up to a disarmament process. There would be no opening for them to return to the 'armed struggle.' Considering all of this the Executive were accusing the Army Council of discrediting and betraying the core principles of Irish Republicanism (Moloney, 2007, pp 473-5).

9.56 Three key members of the Sinn Féin negotiation team were members of Sinn Féin as well as reportedly being members of the Army Council. They were Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Pat Doherty (Morrison, 2013, pp. 158-9).. Therefore, signing up to the Principles could be seen as them breaching the constitution of the IRA which could lead to their expulsion from the paramilitary group. With there being a deadlock between the Army Council and Executive another General Army Convention was called to deliberate on the matter. It was becoming clear that a split was unavoidable. Prior to the Convention the Army Council accepted that there needed to be a constitutional amendment for the Principles to be accepted. The Executive proposed that those who were members of the PIRA and Sinn Féin could resign their IRA membership prior to engaging in the talks, in order to avoid the constitutional crisis. However, this transparent attempt to wrestle power away from them was never going to be accepted (Moloney, 2007, pp.474-5)

9.57 This Convention took place in Gweedore, Co. Donegal in October 1997 (Moloney, 2007 p.475).⁸ The Adams faction of the leadership had learned from the previous Convention in 1996 and therefore in '97 were prepared for what was to come. Within the Convention Adams and his allies was able to portray the Executive as attempting to stage a coup against them, with their proposal for Adams and colleagues' resignation. Across the Convention the dissident faction was isolated. There was a high proportion of Adams loyalists present.

9.58 When presenting his arguments against the Mitchell Principles and the actions of the Council the outgoing Chairman of the Executive, and leading dissident, Seamus McGrane presented four core arguments. Within his speech he argued that the Mitchell Principles were unconstitutional, that the Army Council had failed to appropriately ratify the July ceasefire, that the Army Council had treated the Executive poorly by withholding requested documentation, and finally that the morale of IRA volunteers was poor based on their confusion and frustration surrounding the decision to call another ceasefire. With respect to the Mitchell Principles he accused the Army Council of attempting to interfere with 'or alter the fundamental aims and constitutional status' of the PIRA (Moloney, 2007 p.509). When it came to a vote these four core points which McGrane raised were voted on in one block, alongside a separate vote to grant constitutional dispensation for delegates to attend the Stormont talks. On both votes the Adams faction won easily. Reminiscent of Brian Keenan in the 1996 Convention one of the prominent dissidents, Brian Gillen, flipped late to side with the Army Council's position (Moloney, 2007 pp. 477-9). This was once again a major blow to the strength of the dissidents.

9.59 In the aftermath of the 1997 Convention the Executive was once again dissident, in that the majority of its membership was against the direction that the Adams leadership was taking the Provisionals. However, this was now only by two votes. However, in the first meeting of the new Executive five members resigned and went on to form the RIRA (Morrison, 2013 p.159). Led by Michael McKevitt, Seamus McGrane, Liam Campbell, 'Frank McGuinness', and Pascal Burke the new grouping was to become widely known as the Real IRA (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003). As detailed by Moloney (2007 pp. 479) this new

⁸ The information pertaining to this Convention is most widely, and specifically reported by Ed Moloney in his book *A Secret History of the IRA*. Academics such as Morrison, Frampton and others invariably rely on this source to gain an in-depth understanding of what took place during the Convention. Therefore this section detailing the Convention is predominantly drawn from the investigative journalism of Moloney.

dissident paramilitary group was largely made up of members of the quartermaster and engineering departments. This included the Belfast and Southern Command's quartermasters. Outside of these departments many of those who were to join the newly forming RIRA were based in the Border Counties of Northern Ireland and the Republic.

9.60 It is proposed that within a matter of weeks of leaving the PIRA that McKevitt began to develop the new paramilitary force which would become widely known as the Real IRA. McKevitt's new manifestation of the IRA was officially established in a small meeting in a farmhouse in Oldcastle Co. Meath (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.31). His aim, it is proposed, was to pursue a strategically timed bombing campaign in Northern Ireland and Britain, and ultimately seize back control of the PIRA (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.30). As with the CIRA and other dissidents before them they believed that it was not them who were breaking away but that it was the PIRA leadership who had moved away from them (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.31). At the meeting in Oldcastle the first Army Council of the RIRA was elected. While McKevitt was nominated as Chief of Staff, but refused. Instead it is reported that 'Frank McGuinness' was elected to the position, with McKevitt as Quartermaster General, Séamus McGrane as Director of Training, Liam Campbell as Director of Operations and Pascal Burke as the Director of Finance (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, pp.34-5). Mooney and O'Toole (2003, p.36) in their analysis of this first meeting outline that 'McGuinness' proposed militarily targeting the British military as this would provide a strategic advantage. This is a point similarly raised by an anonymous RIRA interviewee of the current author's who stated that in the early days of the group that they had:

"...urged members that they must kill a British soldier face to face, no sniper, with a gun as the Provos hadn't done that in years and this would prove that they were different."
(Morrison, 2013, p.192)

9.61 McGuinness was to argue against the use of car bombs in towns and against commercial targets. He believed that these kinds of attacks were liable to kill innocent civilians and to also leave forensic evidence for the security forces if and when they failed to explode. However, Campbell as Director of Operations disagreed. He proposed that large bombs were effective and would make Northern Ireland ungovernable. The bombs were cheap and easy to manufacture, and easy to transport. The Army Council were to side with the arguments put

forward by Campbell, a decision which McGuinness was to go on to accept Finance (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, pp.36-7).

9.62 They were joined in the separation from 'mainstream' republicanism by the 32 County Sovereignty Committee (32CSC). This grouping of political dissidents was led by Michael McKevitt's wife Bernadette Sands-McKevitt and Francie Mackey. Sands-McKevitt gave the grouping an air of historical legitimacy, as her brother was the hunger striker Bobby Sands. The 32CSC was not a traditional political party. Instead they styled themselves as a political pressure group, who drafted a paper to the United Nations accusing the British state of denying the people of Ireland their sovereignty (32CSC, 1997). They promoted themselves as the 'watchdogs of Irish sovereignty' (Frampton, 2011). The grouping was initially established within Sinn Féin as an internal pressure group. However, they were soon expelled from the party and barred from the 1998 party Ard Fheis. Upon their expulsion they reconstituted as the 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM).

9.63 As is illustrated in the timeline of activities in the next section 1997 and 1998 saw a significant escalation in VDR activity. Much of this is as a result of the newly formed Real IRA being able to develop their paramilitary capabilities early in their autonomous existence. However, the context of the peace process also gave legitimacy for launching their own campaign of violence. The RIRA's core base was emerging from within the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. This was particularly evident within the border counties, as well as Dublin and Cork. The aim of their paramilitary campaign was to disrupt, and place pressure on, the peace process thus making it difficult for their former comrades in the PIRA and Sinn Féin. They envisioned that recurring republican violence would force the unionist representatives to withdraw from talks, leading to the collapse of the peace process. In mounting their paramilitary campaign proposals were made to co-ordinate with previously formed dissident groupings such as the CIRA and INLA (Morrison, 2013). Even within the strictures of the CIRA's principles they appeared willing to coordinate (Frampton, 2011). This was starkly highlighted with the Omagh bombing of August 1998. As has been previously mentioned the CIRA were largely inactive in the years which immediately followed their establishment in 1986. However, for both them and the INLA the 1997 ceasefire prompted the opportunity to violently protest against the peace talks, thus leading to an increase in their activity (Oppenheimer, 2009, p.335). The context of the Provisionals' involvement in peace talks legitimised their escalation of violence, as they were able to

portray themselves as maintaining the armed revolutionary republican tradition that they portrayed the PIRA and Sinn Féin as leaving behind.

9.64 In the most comprehensive analysis of paramilitary republican weaponry A.R. Oppenheimer (2009) outlined how, in stark contrast to the Continuity IRA before them, that the Real IRA was able to mount a paramilitary campaign so early in their existence. Within his analysis Oppenheimer (2009, pp.171-2) outlines that due to McKevitt's role as the PIRA's quartermaster general that he was able to access the paramilitary group's explosives, artillery and weaponry. One of the key roles of the quartermaster general is control over the arms dumps of the group. This was control and access he had for fourteen years. As a result the RIRA were able to obtain a small number of small arms, a small quantity of Semtex, alongside detonators and timing devices. Included amongst this were Ireco detonators, like the one used in the Omagh bomb (Oppenheimer, 2009, p.161). Oppenheimer (2009, p.171) even cites the possibility that the dissidents could have been secreting arms since the 1994 ceasefire, and that the RIRA were only taking arms from the dumps of certain IRA units. Mooney and O'Toole (2003, p.29) propose that from 1994 McKevitt was holding secret meetings with close confidantes about the future direction of the PIRA. Within these discussions there was frequent discontent aired about the direction Adams was taking the organisation, and from this a trust in and affiliation to McKevitt was developed by those others present. This was to result in them following up outside of the Provisionals in the aftermath of the 1997 General Army Convention.

9.65 It has also been proposed that in the aftermath of the 1997 split from the Provisional IRA that there were certain levels of co-operation between the RIRA and elements of their former Provisional comrades. Harnden (1999, pp.432-3) proposes that the use of a Semtex-based detonating cord indicated this potential co-operation. He notes that alongside most other RIRA bombs that this device was developed in either North Louth or South Armagh. Within his analysis of the IRA and South Armagh Harnden (1999, p. 381) also notes that a number of PIRA, US sourced, detonators had fallen into the hands of the RIRA in the aftermath of their split from the Provisionals.

9.66 One can potentially see the preparations for the Omagh bombing in the events which preceded it. The RIRA was able to present themselves as a paramilitary force very early in their existence. It has been reported that much of this was down to Liam Campbell when he took on the role of Director of Operations. He developed a strategy of a series of car

bombings and developed an operational coalition with the CIRA and the INLA. In January 1998 the RIRA, under the guidance of Campbell, planted a bomb within Banbridge Co. Down. There were two separate warnings given to the Samaritans and the Co. Louth radio station LM/FM from a group calling themselves ‘Óglaigh na hÉireann’ about the presence of a bomb in Banbridge. Upon receiving these warnings the RUC moved quickly and located the car with the explosives on board. The bomb was located and successfully diffused by the British Army (Mooney and O’Toole, 2003, pp. 51-2). Months later, on Saturday August 1st, the new paramilitary grouping once again targeted the Co. Down town. The RIRA concealed an explosive in a car parked on Newry St. within Banbridge. At 4:30pm the bomb exploded injuring over 33 civilians and two RUC officers. The bomb had been delivered at 4pm. Twenty minutes prior to the detonation the RUC received a warning call. The caller neither indicated a location of the bomb, or the time it would explode. This amounted to chaos and confusion. With the police attempting to evacuate the town the bomb exploded causing destruction and injury. This was to be a dark prelude to the attack only two weeks later in Omagh (Mooney and O’Toole, 2003, pp. 139-40; Frampton, 2011 p.292).

10. Key RIRA and 32 County Sovereignty Committee/Movement Personnel

10.1 Contained within this section are brief descriptions of some of the key personnel affiliated with the origins of both the Real IRA and the 32 County Sovereignty Committee/Movement. As with the rest of this report these descriptions are based on open source information which is within the public domain.

RIRA

10.2 Michael McKevitt: The former quartermaster general of the PIRA, from Co. Louth, was a senior founding member of the RIRA. During his time in the PIRA he was noted as masterminding the Libyan arms-smuggling operation (Moloney, 2007, p.558). He is reported as being one of the PIRA members who was present at a meeting when the 1976 Kingsmill massacre was planned (Harnden, 1999, p.188). This Co. Armagh mass shooting resulted in the death of 10 Protestant civilians. He was believed to be the leading figure within the RIRA, and while he did not take on the role of Chief of Staff he was still believed to be in charge (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, pp.33-35). In June 2009 he was found liable for the Omagh bombing, and in 2003 was found guilty of directing terrorism and membership of an illegal organisation (BBC, 2021). He was married to Bernadette Sands-McKevitt.

10.3 Seamus McGrane: A co-founder of the RIRA from Co. Louth, he was chair of the PIRA Executive at the time of the split in 1997. Within the RIRA he was appointed to be Director of Training. During the Troubles the Louth man was convicted of IRA membership in 1976 (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.34). McGrane was seen as a close confidante of McKevitt, and instrumental to the RIRA (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.227). He was convicted for plotting a bomb attack on, then, Prince Charles during his visit to Ireland in 2015 (BBC, 2019). At the time of his death McGrane was in his third spell in prison for IRA involvement. He had previously served time in the 1976 (McDermott, 2019), and then again for a short spell after the emergence of the RIRA (McIntyre, 2019) when an underground training bunker was found in Co. Meath (McDermott, 2019). He was purported to be the leader of the dissident group Óglaigh na hÉireann formed in 2008 (McIntyre, 2019).

10.4 'Frank McGuinness': The director of engineering and member of the Executive in the PIRA prior to the split in 1997. Was a lead dissident in the lead up to the 1997 split and in the

formation of the organisation (Moloney 2007), and was believed to be the RIRA's first Chief of Staff (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.33). His true identity is unknown, and the name 'Frank McGuinness' is believed to be a pseudonym used by him even internally within the paramilitary group. He was known to be a skilled bombmaker, with expertise in surveillance and counter-surveillance (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.34).

10.5 Liam Campbell: From Louth, Campbell was believed to be the Director of Operations of the RIRA in the lead up to the Omagh bombing. Campbell was arrested in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing (Horgan, 2013, p.34). In 2009 Campbell was found liable in the civil case for responsibility of the Omagh bombing (Horgan, 2013, p.171). Campbell had been involved in the smuggling of diesel, contraband, cattle and alcohol. He continued smuggling after the 1997 ceasefire as was thus dismissed by the PIRA (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.34). In July 1983 he was subject to an exclusion order by the Northern Ireland Secretary which banned him from crossing the border (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.35). In 2022 Campbell was extradited to Lithuania to face charges relating to weapons smuggling (BBC, 2022). In 2023 the case against him in Lithuania was dropped (Sherry, 2023).

10.6 Paschal Burke: A founding member, from Dublin of the RIRA (Frampton, 2011, p.91) and the organisation's Director of Finance. Along with five others Burke was linked to the foiled robbery of a Securicor van in Wicklow in May 1998 (Horgan, 2013, p.92). This plot was foiled as a Garda surveillance operation was aimed at Burke (Lally, 2015). He was sentenced to eight year in prison for his role (Hade, 2015). An Garda Síochána noted that Burke was known to them as an 'Engineer' involved with the explosives department of the PIRA (Commission of Investigation: Ronan MacLochlainn, 2018). Burke had previous convictions for explosives offences (RTÉ, 2015) during his time in the PIRA in the late 1980s (O'Regan, 2015). He was in his mid-30s when the RIRA was formed. He was from Ballyfermot in Dublin, and had been involved in the anti-drugs movement and community groups around the area (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.35).

32CSC/M

10.7 Bernadette Sands-McKevitt: A founding member of the 32CSC. She was elected the first chairperson of the committee. As the sister of the hunger-striker Bobby Sands she spoke of how her brother had not died for the gains of the Good Friday Agreement. She stated

“Bobby did not die for cross-border bodies with executive powers. He did not die for nationalists to (be) equal British citizens within Northern Ireland” (Simpson, 1998). She talk in similar ways about others who had died for the republican cause “Well, the last two IRA volunteers to die on active service, Ed O’Brien and Diarmuid O’Neill, did not die for parity of esteem and equal citizenship. They died for freedom. Throughout this conflict, men did not give up their lives and liberty, families did not suffer terribly, and there was not all this heartbreak and sacrifice for what is on the table now. The campaign was for an end to British rule, not a rejuvenated partition” (Magill, 1998). In a 1998 interview with Magill magazine she stated that “it isn’t a matter of reducing or phasing out British army patrols. British rule was unjust before 1969, when there wasn’t a single British soldier on the streets” (Magill, 1998).

10.8 Joe Dillon: Public relations officer for the organisation, who organised the first 32CSC meeting. Was charged for possession of explosives in 1998, but charges dropped in 2001 (Irish Examiner, 2001). Dillon personally developed the 32CSM’s submission to the United Nations (Mooney and O’Toole, 2003, p.111). In his 20s Dillon was a founding member of the Saor Éire (Reinisch, 2021). In 1967 he was convicted with attempted robbery of the Dublin Corporation rent office in 1965 (Irish Republican Marxist History Project, 2019). He was later charged with murder and bank robbery in relation to the death of Garda Richard Fallon in 1970, but was found not guilty (Irish Independent, 2012).

10.9 Rory Dougan: A long-time republican from Armagh but living in Dundalk (O’Farrell, 2000). He was a former member of Sinn Féin. He grew disillusioned with the prospect of ‘selling out’ through the Good Friday Agreement and resigned from Sinn Féin in 1997 when Sinn Féin applied for office space in the House of Commons (Mooney and O’Toole, 2003, p.44-5). He was a former director of elections for Sinn Féin and after his exit from the party said of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness “They are honourable men but their analysis is wrong and they have taken us in the wrong direction” (Irish Independent, 1998). In the aftermath of the Omagh bombing Dougan said of the bombing’s condemnation by the Sinn Féin leadership “If we were wrong now, then they were wrong for all them years: and if we are right now then they are wrong” (Dudley Edwards, 2019).

10.10 Ciaran Dwyer/O’Dwyer: Former member of the PIRA quartermaster department from Limerick. Released in 1995 after serving five years of a ten year sentence for possessions of

explosives, guns and ammunition. In 1977 he was convicted for membership of the IRA and in 1973 he was convicted for 'unlawful collection' (Magill, 1998). In 2003 he was charged with membership of the IRA (Irish Examiner, 2003). He played a key role in recruiting members to the 32CSC (Irish Independent, 1998).

10.11 Michael Burke: Cork republican who became a key recruiter for the organisation. Had previously served time for PIRA activities. In 1986 Burke was convicted for the false imprisonment of the businessman Don Tidey. For this he received a 12 year sentence (Irish Independent, 1998). In 1999 he was convicted of promoting an illegal lottery to raise funds for the 32CSC, for who he was a National Organiser (RTÉ, 1999).

10.12 Francie Mackey: A Sinn Féin councillor for Omagh from 1985. Elected president of the committee. He had no history of involvement in paramilitary republicanism (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, pp.47-8). In 2023 he indicated that now was the time for dissident republicans to 're-evaluate our political thinking,' and that expectations should be changed as to how a united Ireland would be reached (Belfast Telegraph, 2023). With the re-establishment of the Stormont Executive in 2024 he wrote that "prior to Sinn Fein treachery the republican position was always about upholding and protecting the sovereign rights of the Irish people. It was always our right not an aspiration to restore a United, Sovereign Independent Ireland free from outside interference. The latest document to get the DUP back into Stormont flies in the face of the Nationalist position and Republican position and is totally about protecting the Union" (Mackey, 2024).

10.13 Marian Price: A former member of the PIRA, and hunger striker. Served time for the 1973 Old Bailey bombing which she carried out with her sister Dolours and Gerry Kelly. Accused Gerry Adams of betraying the IRA's armed struggle (Moloney, 2007, p.560). Alongside Dillon, due to her republican credentials, she was seen as a key figure in legitimising the 32CSC (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003, p.46). She was from a republican family in West Belfast. While in prison on hunger strike she was given a Royal prerogative of mercy, and thus freed from prison. Her views on the path of Sinn Féin and the peace process have been clear since the 1990s. In a 2003 interview with the Guardian she stated that "I don't believe Stormont is a stepping stone to a united Ireland. If Sinn Fein wanted to administer British rule in [Northern Ireland] there were easier ways to do it than fight a 25-year war. They could have joined the SDLP" (Cowan, 2003).

11. Timeline of Violent Dissident Republican Activity: September 16th 1997 – August 15th, 1998

11.1 Presented in this section of the report is a timeline of VDR activity from September 1997 to August 15th 1998. This has been presented to outline the prior capabilities of paramilitary republicanism in the months leading up to the Omagh bombing. By developing this timeline one can see the types of weaponry used by the groups, and the locations targeted. This timeline has been compiled through the assessment of the VDR database, developed using open source reporting on violent dissident republican activity. The sources included journalistic accounts of VDR activity, as well as drawing on chronologies of activity presented by CAIN. The timeline presented below is combines the CAIN and VDR databases/chronologies of violent dissident republican activity. Included across the timeline are which groups are attributed to be responsible. However, it must be noted that not all attacks were claimed by any group. Therefore, the attributions are presented as a possibility, rather than certainty.

11.2 In 2013 it was proposed (Horgan, 2013) that there had been three core waves of VDR activity:

- **Wave 1: 31st August 1994- 15th of August 1998:** From the first PIRA ceasefire to the Omagh Bombing
- **Wave 2: 16th August 1998- 27th of January 2007:** From the Omagh Bombing to Sinn Féin's acceptance of the PSNI
- **Wave 3: 28th of January 2007- The Present Day:** From Sinn Féin's acceptance of the PSNI to the Present Day

11.3 While this wave model requires refreshed analysis, the proposal is that the timeline presented in this section of the report represents the culmination of the first wave of VDR activity. As previously noted the CIRA emerged in the aftermath of the 1986 split in the Provisional Movement. However, it was not until the mid-1990s that they re-emerge through their gradual re-introduction to paramilitary activity. Therefore, while the start of this first wave is defined by the slow rise of CIRA activity, the culmination of the wave is notable for the significant spike in violence with the emergence of the RIRA. The level of VDR activity

between 1994 and 1996 was almost non-existent. However, from September 1997 to August 1998 one can see a clear shift, with an escalation in activity. This escalation is proposed to be the result of the PIRA's July 1997 ceasefire being used to legitimise this intensification of violence.

11.4 To detail this escalation in violence what is presented below is a timeline of the most significant VDR acts in the time period under review. The timeline notes the location, nature, target and immediate impact of each attack. Where possible organisational attribution is given to the perpetrators of the attack. However, this is not always possible as not all attacks were claimed, or attributed to an individual group by the police.

11.5 16th September 1997 - van bomb exploded at Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) station in Markethill, County Armagh. No injuries or casualties. Short warning given prior to the bomb exploding. At the time claimed by the CIRA. The bomb is reported to have been an estimated 400lbs, and caused extensive damage to buildings.

17th October 1997 – a bomb hoax in Carryduff Co. Down, leading to a DUP rally being evacuated from a hall. After a search of the premises the meeting was resumed. This was attributed to the CIRA

30th October 1997- CIRA bomb detected and defused in the Department of the Environment in Derry city centre.

20th November 1997- two controlled explosions carried out on a small bomb outside the offices of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) at Belfast City Hall. BBC received warning from anonymous caller claiming to be CIRA.

6th January 1998 – a large car bomb defused in the centre of Banbridge, County Down. The bomb estimated to be 300-500lbs. RIRA believed to be responsible.

8th January 1998 - one and a half tonnes of home-made explosives found by Gardaí in a disused shop at Howth pier in Dublin. Explosives believed to be connected with RIRA, and four men were arrested.

24th January 1998 – car bomb explodes at the ‘River Club’ on Factory Road, Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh. Bomb warnings received at 7.30pm and the bomb exploded at around 9.30pm. The building was extensively damaged but there were no injuries. CIRA believed to be responsible.

20th February 1998 - car bomb exploded at RUC station in Moira, County Down. Seven police and four civilians receive minor injuries in the attack. RUC station, homes and cars extensively damaged in the attack. Bomb believed to be 500lbs. CIRA believed to be responsible.

23rd February 1998 - car bomb exploded in centre of Portadown, County Armagh. The bomb was believed to be 300lbs in size. The CIRA were believed to be responsible.

24th February, 1998 – a 250lb bomb is found, unarmed in Redhills in Co. Cavan. Attributed to be a CIRA bomb.

3rd March, 1998 – a 400-600lb car bomb is found in a Renault car in a shed in Hackballscross, Co. Louth. The car bomb was filled with homemade explosives. Attributed to CIRA.

10th March 1998 - mortar bomb attack on RUC station on Newry Road in Armagh, County Armagh. The mortars were noticed by a British Army patrol who raised the alarm. Conflicting reports of which groups it was responsible for the attack, whether it was the RIRA or CIRA

20th March 1998 – a bomb is defused in Derry city centre by the British Army. The bomb is planted at the Northern Bank in Guildhall Square. Attributed to CIRA.

22nd March 1998 – a bomb estimated to be between 1,200 and 1,300lbs is found in Dundalk Co. Louth. It is reported that the bomb was due to be transported to Northern Ireland. Conflicting reports as to whether it was the CIRA or RIRA who was responsible. However, geography would suggest it was likely to be a RIRA bomb.

24th March 1998 – mortar bomb attack on Forkhill Army/RUC base. It is reported that four mortars were fired at the base. No one was injured in the attack. However, one mortar exploded in the grounds. CIRA believed to be responsible.

25th March 1998 – on the day that Senator George Mitchell sets a two week deadline for political parties to reach an agreement two mortars are fired at British Army security post in Glassdrummond Co. Armagh. No organisation specified as being responsible.

2nd April 1998 – a 600lb bomb is found in the ferry port of Dun Laoghaire in Co. Dublin, believed to be destined for the UK. Believed to be a RIRA bomb.

3rd April 1998 – hoax device consisting of a paint bucket filled with car fillers and a Mark 19 time power unit on railway line at Red Bridge, Newry. RIRA believed to be responsible.

10th April 1998 – Good Friday Agreement Signed

30th April 1998 – 600lb car bomb placed in Market Square, Lisburn. The bomb was diffused by the security services. RIRA believed to be responsible.

1st May 1998 – RIRA members involved in the robbery of a security van in Cullenmore, Co. Wicklow. One of the raiders was fatally shot by police.

4th May 1998 – two homemade mortars are attempted to be fired at Grosvenor Rd. RUC station in Belfast. One mortar explodes in the tube with the other fails to reach the target. CIRA believed to be responsible.

9th May 1998 – mortar bomb attack at Belleek RUC station. No injuries are reported. Unclear whether CIRA or RIRA responsible.

15th May 1998 – car and trailer bomb abandoned in Kinawley, Co. Fermanagh. CIRA believed to be responsible.

16th May 1998 – 500lb car bomb placed near Armagh RUC station, successfully defused. RIRA believed to be responsible.

23rd May 1998 – 900lb+ and 400lb+ bombs are found in Carrickaneena, Co. Louth. RIRA believed to be responsible.

24th May 1998 – bomb partially explodes on railway line at Finaghy in Belfast. CIRA believed to be responsible.

23rd June 1998 – a landmine is detonated near Drumintee and Forkhill in County Armagh. It was reported in the Sunday People Newspaper (March 14th, 2004) in an article entitled *ETA had Real IRA Phone Bombs* that this had been detonated using a mobile phone. However, this is not referred to in other descriptions of the detonation. RIRA believed to be responsible.

24th June 1998 – a 200lb car bomb exploded in Newtownhamilton, County Armagh. A 50 minute warning was given prior to the bomb exploding. People were still being evacuated when the detonation took place and six people were injured. The INLA claimed responsibility but it is believed that the RIRA supplied the explosives.

2nd July 1998 – a bomb explodes on the Belfast-Dublin train line. The explosion takes place near Newry. A telephone warning was given and the attack was attributed to the RIRA.

9th July 1998 – 1400lb of explosives found in an abandoned trailer on the Moy to Blackwater Road in Co. Tyrone. RIRA believed to be responsible.

13th July 1998 – a 500lb car bomb is defused outside the courthouse in Newry, Co. Down. RIRA believed to be responsible.

21st July 1998 - mortar bomb attack on Corry Square RUC Station in Newry, County Down. Responsibility for the attack is claimed by the RIRA.

28th July 1998 - incendiary bombs placed in stores in Portadown, County Armagh. RIRA believed to be responsible.

1st August 1998 – 33 civilians and 2 police officers are injured when a 500lb car bomb explodes in Newry Street in the centre of Banbridge, County Down. Extensive damage is done to the buildings on the street too. RIRA claimed responsibility. A 20 minute warning was given prior to the bomb detonating.

4th August 1998 – An RUC police patrol is shot at in Lurgan, Co. Armagh. Unspecified who is responsible.

15th of August 1998 – The Omagh Bombing

11.6 As the above timeline indicates the level of violent dissident republican activity significantly escalated in the months preceding the Omagh bombing of August 1998. Prior to that there had been very limited VDR activity. The July 1996 Killyhevlin Hotel, bombing in Enniskillen Co. Fermanagh was the most significant VDR attack prior to this pre-Omagh escalation. The CAIN chronology of the conflict notes that the attack, which injured 17 people, was claimed by the Continuity IRA. However, as has been noted already the 1997 ceasefire by the PIRA provided the legitimacy for escalation of VDR activity. It provided the opportunity for the VDR groups to fill the paramilitary republican vacuum which was left behind, and allowed for them to become spoiler groups during the peace process negotiations (Whiting, 2015). One can see this escalation truly begin with the September 16th, 1997 bombing of the RUC station in Markethill, Co. Armagh.

11.7 What the timeline demonstrates is that the violent escalation was not just in relation to RIRA activity but also CIRA, and to a lesser extent INLA, activity. Many of the attacks are unable to be attributed in terms of which organisation was responsible. However, the pattern of broad VDR violent escalation was clear. There was a combination of focused targeting of RUC officers and stations, alongside the placing and detonating of car bombs in populated areas such as Banbridge.

12 Impact of the Omagh Bombing of Dissident Republicanism

12.1 To understand the true impact of the Omagh bombing on dissident republicanism one must consider the reaction both internally within the violent dissident paramilitary groups, as well as externally. This section considers those reactions, while also assessing the operational and organisational evolution of the core VDR groups. As part of this section there is also an assessment of public support and/or sympathy for dissident republicanism

Immediate Responses

12.2 The national and international reaction to the Omagh bombing was one of horror. This was a stark juxtaposition to the hope which had emerged from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. In the immediate aftermath of the attack internal and external pressure was mounting on the VDR organisations to step away from the ‘armed struggle.’ In response both the INLA and the RIRA called ceasefires. The CIRA was not to follow suit. However, there was a clear reduction in their paramilitary activity in the months that followed.

12.3 On August 16th, the day after the devastating attack the 32CSC (1998) issued a statement declaring that they were ‘deeply saddened and devastated by the terrible tragedy’ the day previous. They continued by saying that they ‘share the grief and sorrow of everyone on the island of Ireland and we offer our sincere sympathy to the injured, the bereaved, their families and friends at this moment in time. The killing of innocent people cannot be justified in any circumstances.’ While the majority of their statement focused on their declarations of grief and sorrow the final two sentences of their statement was designed to distance themselves from any involvement in the attack. Within this they asserted that they were a political rather than a military group, and rejected ‘categorically’ that their group was in any way responsible.

12.4 In the days which followed, on August 18th, the RIRA announced that they were ‘embarking on a process of consultation on our future direction.’ While they were engaged in this consultation they stated that ‘all military operations have been suspended from 12 midnight.’ The beginning of the statement frame it as ‘a direct result of the Omagh tragedy and also in response to the appeals of Bertie Ahern and others’ (Belfast Telegraph, 1998).

12.5 The following month on September 8th the RIRA took the next step and announced the ‘complete cessation’ of violence. This was after deliberations within the leadership structures of the RIRA, most specifically within the Army Council. The decision to enter into a ceasefire was made with the distinct awareness that the Omagh bombing was potentially disastrous for the group. There was mounting internal, security, and legislative pressure, alongside significant public backlash. This was impacting the group’s ability establish and maintain a membership and support based, a detriment to their ability to survive as an active paramilitary force (Morrison, 2020), a point emphasised by a leading member of the group:

“The Omagh bombing stopped the influx of new recruits and support who were loyal before...Omagh was a mistake, not the way things should have been done on a mission.” (Morrison, 2020, p.157)

12.6 However, according to a quote from another RIRA member there were those within the leadership who were actively proposing the maintenance of the armed campaign during the leadership’s deliberations.

“It was very glum. We were all quiet because we knew how serious things were. There was a debate about what we should do next, after this disaster. We knew we were in a deep hole and some people said we could and should bomb our way out of it. But in reality there was only one thing we could do - call a ceasefire.” (Mooney and O’Toole, 2003, p.172)

12.7 While two of the three main VDR groups announced near immediate cessations of violence the leadership of Sinn Féin were publicly unequivocal in their condemnation of the attack and took the opportunity to clearly reaffirm their commitment to the peace process and to achieving their goals through exclusively political means. This was emphasised by the president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, in a statement issued on September 1st 1998.

“My position on what happened in Omagh on 15th August is quite categoric. I have condemned it without equivocation. This appalling act was carried out by those opposed to the peace process. It is designed to wreck the process and everyone should work to ensure the peace process continues as is the clear wish of the people of the island. Sinn Féin has called for a complete halt to such actions and has urged all armed groups to stop immediately...Sinn Féin is committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means to achieve a way forward.

12.8 We have to work politically to make the Omagh bombing the last violent incident in our country, the last incident of this kind. We are committed to making conflict a thing of the past...The Good Friday agreement has the powerful potential to take us forward and we must urgently press on with its implementation. Inclusive and honest dialogue is the only way forward in this country.” (Adams, 1998)

12.9 While this was the public facing position of Sinn Féin their paramilitary wing of the PIRA was equally condemnatory. On September 3rd in the Republican newspaper An Phoblacht/Republican News a spokesperson for the PIRA called on the RIRA to disband.

“[M]any republicans feel...aggrieved that they have tarnished the name of Óglaigh na hÉireann and many are justifiably angry at their use of the term ‘Real IRA’. The grouping have done only disservice to the republican cause. They have no coherent political strategy, they are not a credible alternative to the Irish Republican Army. In the immediate aftermath of the Omagh bomb they announced a temporary halt to their actions. This is insufficient. They should disband and they should do so sooner rather than later.” (An Phoblacht/Republican News, 1998)

12.10 Within the same interview the spokesperson proposed that the bombing had angered the Irish republican community, while also damaging the pursuit for a united Ireland.

“The Omagh bomb had undoubtedly caused damage to the struggle for Irish independence and unity. We suspect that this attack and previous bomb attacks by this and other groupings have been aimed at the peace process, in general, and at Sinn Féin's peace strategy in particular. Irish republicans throughout the 32 counties have, both privately and publicly, made very clear their anger at the actions of those responsible for the bomb.” (An Phoblacht/Republican News, 1998)

12.11 The public statements of condemnation were replicated in the actions of leadership members of the PIRA. It was reported that approximately 60 members and associates of the RIRA were visited by their former PIRA comrades. The purpose of their visits, which took place prior to the announcement of the RIRA ceasefire, was to strongly dissuade them against future paramilitary activity (Morrison, 2020).

Operational Adaptation

12.12 The ceasefire that the RIRA announced in 1998 was to be broken in 2000 with the return of their armed activity, a return to violence they had been preparing for. It is reported that during the ceasefire they took the time to regroup, and reconsider the direction of their paramilitary struggle. It was clear that the ceasefire was not going to be permanent, as they were acquiring new weaponry from the Balkans and developing a strategy to target England (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003). Therefore, on their return to violence their campaign was very different to the actions presented in the timeline in the previous section. The leadership of the organisation was unwilling to immediately sanction any attacks within Northern Ireland. It was observed that if they were responsible for civilian casualties again, even if not to the same scale as with the Omagh bombing, that this would have been destabilising to their organisational existence (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003). Therefore, bombings similar to Omagh and Banbridge were replaced with the targeting of Hammersmith Bridge, Ealing Broadway Station, BBC Television Centre and MI6 Headquarters. This bombing campaign in England was designed to demonstrate to their membership and support that they were capable of continuing the armed struggle, and take the fight to British soil (Morrison, 2020), similar to the PIRA's previous bombing campaigns in England.

12.13 As the bombing campaign in England became established it soon became internal policy that an attack in England was to be closely followed by one in Northern Ireland as well (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003). This was designed to maintain their disruptive influence on the normalisation of post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Irish peaceful politics. These attacks were not on the scale of Omagh or Banbridge. Yet, they were demonstrating that the group still maintained significant paramilitary capabilities. However, this was unsustainable as a result of security and legislative pressure. The organisation was widely infiltrated by informers, and large swathes of the leadership had been incarcerated. Leading figures including Michael McKevitt, Liam Campbell, and Colm Murphy had all been arrested. By 2002 there was emerging discontent within the organisation, discontent which was ultimately to lead to another split. In October 2002, from prison, McKevitt and other incarcerated members called on the then RIRA leadership to discontinue activity. Within his statement he accused the external leadership of the RIRA of corruption, and that their 'financial motivations far outweigh their political commitment to our struggle at this time' (RIRA, 2002). The statement proposed that the leadership had 'forfeited all moral authority to lead

the IRA' (RIRA, 2002). In the aftermath of the statement the leadership strongly rejected the allegations, and contradictory and condemnatory sentiments were issued by those internally opposed to him (Horgan, 2013). The acrimony escalating ultimately resulted in a split which saw the formation of Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH), who remained loyal to McKevitt. While McKevitt called for a cessation of activity, this was not based on a reduction in his commitment to armed struggle. It was instead, ostensibly, based on his discontent with the leadership of the paramilitary group. Therefore, the emergence of a new VDR group as a result of this intra-organisational conflict is unsurprising. The title Óglaigh na hÉireann is one which has been utilised by the vast majority of paramilitary republican groups, as well as the Irish Defence Forces. In the years which followed it would also be a name utilised by a splinter group breaking away from the Continuity IRA a few years later (Frampton, 2011 p.180).

12.14 With the RIRA infiltrated by informers, and weakened by internal factionalism and external security pressures the leadership saw the need to once again reassess the organisational trajectory. In a 2008 interview with the journalist Suzanne Breen, after a period of subdued levels of armed activity a spokesperson for the RIRA stated that:

“We’re emerging from a three-year period of reorganizing in preparation for a renewed offensive...if there was minimal visible military activity in recent years, there was plenty of behind-the-scenes restructuring. Important ground-work has now been completed...In terms of other internal changes, people have been dismissed from the movement in Belfast and elsewhere. Units that weren’t up to scratch have been disbanded. Mistakes were made previously but more rigorous vetting of volunteers is now in place.” (Breen, 2008 cited in Horgan 2013, [p.94](#)).

12.15 This emergence from a period of restructuring aligned with the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) beginning to report ‘heightened’ levels of RIRA activity (IMC, 2007). These heightened levels of violence were strongly influenced by Sinn Féin’s acceptance of the PSNI as the legitimate police force of Northern Ireland. For the VDR groups this was a further treachery by their former comrades in Sinn Féin. The PSNI were viewed by the dissidents as equivalent to their predecessors in the RUC. They were viewed, and portrayed, as a British police force illegitimately operating within Ireland. This was, and continues to be, portrayed as Sinn Féin abandoning republican ideals and siding with those

who across the Troubles the PIRA and other Republicans were repressed by. This narrative was to provide a dominant form of legitimisation for the continuation of armed dissident activity, and the continued autonomous existence of the groups. It was also to shape the paramilitary activity for years to come, with the continued targeting of PSNI officers.

12.16 In July 2008 the PSNI chief constable, Hugh Orde, emphasised the dissident threat against his officers. He outlined how the previous 18 months there had been “at least 25 attempts to kill...officers” (Horgan 2013, [p.6](#)). The following year, in March 2009 within a matter of days of each other the CIRA and the RIRA carried out two of the most high-profile attacks since the Omagh bombing of 1998. On March 9th the CIRA murdered the Catholic PSNI officer Stephen Carroll in Craigavon. This was two days after the RIRA murdered two off-duty British soldiers, Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar, at Massereene Barracks in Antrim. The targeting of Catholic PSNI officers was to become a dominant tactic of the groups. In Randalstown, Co. Antrim in 2010 PSNI officer Peadar Heffron was the victim of a VDR car bombing. He survived with life-changing injuries. Then on April 2nd, 2011, in Kiltyclogher on the outskirts of Omagh PSNI officer Ronan Kerr was murdered by a car bomb outside of his home. Similar to Heffron he was a GAA playing Catholic PSNI officer. The GAA was traditionally a nationalist/republican sporting organisation. From 1903 to 2001 the GAA had banned members of the British army and police-force from participating in Gaelic games (RTÉ, 2001). Therefore the presence of Catholic PSNI officers as active members of GAA clubs was symbolic of the normalisation of both politics and security in Northern Ireland. The targeting of Catholic officers such as Heffron, Kerr and Carroll was designed to deter others from Catholic/Nationalist/Republican backgrounds to join the police. By successfully deterring a more representative police force the VDR groups could present the PSNI as an unrepresentative Protestant force, therefore legitimising the VDR paramilitaries’ continued existence as protectors of Nationalists and Republicans.

Support or Sympathy for Dissidents

12.17 In the aftermath of the Omagh bombing it was internally acknowledged by members of the RIRA that there was a significant loss of support, with a deterioration in new recruits joining. This led to acknowledgement that, as a result of this immediate deterioration in support, that Omagh was a ‘mistake’ (Morrison, 2013 p.161). While this was the immediate reaction it is important to ask what levels of support do the dissident groups have in the years

which followed the attack. This is not a straightforward question to answer. One would normally look to electoral success for indications of support. However, with RSF maintaining their abstentionist platform and 32CSM generally not competing in elections this is not a reliable metric. In Northern Ireland when RSF candidates do run in elections they have to stand as independents, as they refuse to renounce the armed struggle to achieve their end goal of Irish unity. Evans and Tonge (2012) observe that in the first decade of the Troubles that Sinn Féin did not contest elections. However, they and the PIRA clearly received significant passive and active community support across this period, support that went so far as to legitimise their paramilitary activity (Morrison, 2024). When Sinn Féin competed electorally from 1982 onwards they were invariably capturing approximately one third of the Nationalist vote. However, it was only with the cessation of PIRA violence that they became the majority Nationalist party in Northern Ireland (Evans and Tonge, 2012).

12.18 In the absence of electoral votes as a reliable indicator of their levels of support one must look to other metrics. One clear approach is to consider the Northern Irish population's responses to political opinion polls. Whiting (2015) outlines that in a 2002 BBC Hearts and Minds survey that amongst the responses from the nationalist community that 3.3% said that 32CSM best represented their views, with 3.8% stating that RSF best represented theirs. Whiting (2015) notes that this survey took place at a time when support for the Good Friday Agreement was at its lowest ebb. The Assembly was suspended and Sinn Féin and the PIRA were engulfed with allegations of a 'spy ring' in Stormont. Within the 2006 iteration of the same survey RSF held support from approximately 4% of the nationalist community and 2.4% across the overall population of the survey, with 32CSM only garnering 1% support from within the nationalist community.

12.19 One of a series of issues in relying on these results as an indicator of VDR support is the fact that the questions were in relation to the political wings of the two key dissident groups, rather than the paramilitary groups. However, in a 2010 ESRC Northern Ireland General Election Survey (Evans and Tonge, 2012) the Northern Irish electorate was asked about their levels of sympathy for the violent manifestations of dissident republicanism. One of the clear benefits of this survey is the respect for the heterogeneity of respondents. There is consideration for the need to differentiate between those from nationalist communities, those who are Catholic, and those who self-identify as nationalist. While there is clear overlap across these three groups when one allows for a more careful consideration of demographic

differences there can be a clearer understanding gained. Therefore what is portrayed below are results relating to each of these demographic groups.

12.20 Before the results of this sympathy question are addressed it is important to contextualise the broader viewpoints of the respondents with respect to dissident republicanism. 75.9% of all Protestant respondents saw the dissident threat as either major or minor. In contrast 51.2% of Catholic respondents viewed the threat as such. Amongst the Catholic respondents 9.8% believed that the dissidents posed ‘no threat’ in contrast to 3.5% of Protestant respondents. The findings demonstrated that 26.6% of Catholics and 17.9% of Protestants answered ‘don’t know’ and the remaining 12.4% of Catholics and 2.7% of Protestants refused to answer. Within the same survey respondents were asked on their levels of “‘sympathy for the reasons why some Republican groups (such as the Real and Continuity IRAs) continue to use violence.’” Overall 8.2% of the respondents declared that they did have sympathy, with 4.4% stating they had a lot of sympathy and 3.8% saying they had a little sympathy. In contrast 75.3% declared no sympathy, and the remaining 5.8% stating that they didn’t know. Evans and Tonge (2012) point out that this amounted to 14% of Nationalists and almost one-third of self-identifying Nationalists as having some level of sympathy. This research differentiates between ‘Nationalists,’ as in those who reside in communities of Nationalist background, and ‘self-identifying Nationalists’, as individuals who have made the ideological choice of nationalism (Evans and Tonge, 2013).

12.21 In the analysis of the demographic breakdown of sympathy it appears that this has roots in an ideological choice, rather than based on structural factors. The sympathy for the dissident campaigns is coming from the ‘Green-Red’ strata of society, namely nationalists with a left-wing orientation. In contrast the practicing Catholic population are, from the results of this survey, objectively unsympathetic towards the VDR activity.

12.22 Evans and Tonge (2012) warn that we must interpret these results with caution. They are to be interpreted with important caveats in mind. Amongst these caveats is that the measure of ‘sympathy’ is not tantamount to support, and is therefore a much softer metric to rely upon. Whiting (2015, p.109) also warns against over-interpreting the result that approximately one third of those self-identifying as Nationalist had some degree of sympathy with the reasons for dissident violence. Amongst the survey respondents only 24% self-identified as Nationalists. Therefore this sympathy amounts to approximately one third of less

than one quarter of survey respondents, which is not as significant as it appears at first reading. These findings should not be dismissed out of hand though, as it is more socially acceptable to not declare sympathy for these groups. Therefore the actual levels of sympathy or support could be higher than reported here, a point acknowledged by McGlinchey (2019, [p.187](#)). She notes that there are other indicators of support that one can look to, including attendance at dissident commemorations and demonstrations. For example she points out that the Irish Times (2016) reported that RSF's Easter Rising march to the GPO in Dublin attracted a crowd of up to 2000 attendees. While this number of attendees is striking, attendance at these events is not necessarily equivalent of support for all of the actions and policies of the group. This variety of metrics for assessing levels of dissident support are worthwhile to consider. However, the dissidents themselves propose that their mandate does not come from the living, it comes from those who have gone before them, the 'patriot dead' Whiting (2015). They legitimise their continued existence by saying that they are continuing the fight started generations previous.

The 'New IRA'

12.23 In 2012 a new VDR force, the New IRA, was to emerge. While the previous VDR groups had emerged as a result of splits the latest was to form as a result of a dissident merger. In their opening statement the group stated that:

"Following extensive consultations, Irish republicans and a number of organisations involved in armed actions against the armed forces of the British crown have come together within a unified structure, under a single leadership, subservient to the constitution of the Irish Republican Army... The necessity of armed struggle in pursuit of Irish freedom can be avoided through the removal of the British military presence in our country, the dismantling of their armed militias and the declaration of an internationally observed timescale that details the dismantling of British political interference in our country." (IRA, 2012)

12.24 This new group was a merger between the RIRA, Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD), and other unaligned republicans (McDonald, 2012). Their political group is believed to be Saoradh (McGlinchey, 2021), a republican political pressure group formed independently in 2016. They continue to pose the most sophisticated contemporary VDR threat. They have maintained the targeting of PSNI officers, and as recently as February 2023 attempted to murder DCI John Caldwell in Omagh. They have also targeted prison officers,

and have murdered prisoner officers David Black and Adrian Ismay (Morrison, 2016b). This targeting of prisoner officers was designed as a direct response to the perceived ‘torture and degradation’ of dissident republican prisoners. They have previously also launched a letter and parcel bombing campaign. This has targeted high profile politicians, police, MI5, UK based transport hubs and British Army recruitment offices (Morrison and Horgan, 2016). Alongside this they were responsible for the murder of the journalist Lyra McKee (Morrison and Horgan, 2016). While their high profile nationalised paramilitary activities gain most attention they have also carried on RAAD’s engagement in localised paramilitary vigilantism through their utility of paramilitary style attacks (PSAs) against suspected drug dealers, informers, and other anti-social or criminal actors (Morrison, 2024). The focus of this new group, and VDR activities in general, is more targeted than it was in the late 1990s. The focus of the nationalised violence is mainly on the representatives of the state, military, prison officers and police. In parallel to this they are continue to pursue localised vigilante campaigns to maintain control within the small pockets of community support they may have left.

13 Conclusion

13.1 What has been presented across this report has been a contextualisation of violent dissident republicanism in the lead up to the Omagh bombing of 1998. The reports demonstrates that despite the nascent existence of the RIRA, between 1997 and 1998, that they had already revealed their ability to engage in sophisticated levels of paramilitary activity. While they have not garnered significant levels of support within the republican and nationalist communities they pronounce that their legitimacy comes not from electoral successes or the opinions of the living, but from the history of Irish patriotism and oppression. The report has aimed to demonstrate the origins of each of the core groups involved in violent dissident republican activity up to and after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. When considering these one can observe the organisational dynamics which lead to the ultimate separation of the Movement at both political and paramilitary levels. The structure of the report has been designed to allow for the consideration of dissident republican evolution in the lead up to, and the aftermath of the Omagh bombing. This has enabled a holistic understanding of the internal context in which the bombing took place, and the impact it had on the trajectory of violent dissident republican activity.

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