

PIRA Propaganda: The Construction of Legitimacy

by
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INTRODUCTION

The past three years in Northern Ireland have been marked by particularly “dramatic” events. In November 1987, a father touched the hearts of millions when he told the world of his last moments with his daughter amidst the rubble of a Provisional IRA “mistake”. In March 1988, the SAS shot dead a Provisional IRA Active Service Unit in Gibraltar. As a result, three more funerals were thrust into an already tense atmosphere of policing Provisional IRA funerals. In the end the RUC’s politically courageous decision not to police these funerals was totally negated by the actions of a Protestant “Rambo”. At the funeral of one of his victims some of the most sickening scenes yet filmed in Northern Ireland showed the very public murder of two British soldiers. In August 1988, eight young soldiers were blown to pieces by the Provisionals near Omagh. There were the inevitable eyewitness accounts of mutilated bodies, desperate cries of anguish and of young men crawling away to die alone. 1989 and 1990 were notable for a number of Provisional shootings and bombings, in Northern Ireland and in Europe, in which civilians were killed or maimed “by mistake”. Some were victims of mistaken identity; others were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Following the 1988 incidents, politicians in all parts of Ireland and Britain demanded action, and the British government announced a major security review. As a result of this review, both legislative and judicial changes were introduced and the finances of terrorist organisations came in for particular attention. The most controversial new measure, however, was the British government’s media ban, which seeks to deny direct access to electronic media by proscribed organisations.

The Provisional IRA, too, was forced to react to these events. In January of 1989, in an unprecedented move, it announced that it had disbanded the Active Service Unit which it said had been responsible for most of the mistakes of 1988, and the Enniskillen bombing of 1987. At Sinn Fein’s annual convention held a couple of weeks after this announcement, President Gerry Adams made a statement openly criticising the Provisional IRA, and the Provisional IRA responded with a statement accepting the criticism and promising not to kill any more civilians. These events and the downturn in Sinn Fein’s vote put the Provisional IRA on the propaganda defensive.¹

This is certainly not the first time the Provisionals have been on the defensive. The reason why they have always been able to recover, and even assume the offensive, is because of their careful and considered construction of legitimacy. This essay will examine the Provisional IRA’s construction of legitimacy from two angles. First, it will analyse the legitimacy the Provisional IRA constructs around its cause. As one would expect, the most common

propaganda themes are Ireland's historic and inalienable right to national self-determination and Irish nationalism (or rather the Provisionals' interpretation of it). And second, it will consider the legitimacy the Provisional IRA constructs around its use of violence. Two related propaganda themes are most prominent here: the historical continuity of "physical force republicanism"; and attacks on the methods the British government has adopted in response to the Provisional IRA. It is admitted that these themes are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. The reason that they are differentiated in this paper is because in terms of "de-constructing" the Provisional IRA's legitimacy, primary responsibility as regards the former area lies with the Republic of Ireland, whereas in the second area it lies with Britain.

LEGITIMACY AND "THE CAUSE"

In constructing legitimacy around its cause, the Provisional IRA takes as its fundamental premise that all Ireland has a natural and inalienable right to national self-determination. The only thing preventing Ireland from claiming this right is the British presence, which is invariably described as "colonial", "neo-colonial" and "imperialist". To supplement this theme, and indeed to make its version of national self-determination meaningful, the Provisional IRA also has to promote an Irish national image distinct from the British and increasingly from the European.

NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION

What the Provisionals claim they are fighting for is Irish national self-determination, based on the argument that Ireland is "historically, culturally and geographically one unit."² Conveniently enough, the Provisionals' version of history begins in the twelfth century when English forces first tried to conquer Ireland. The Irish continued to resist until 1921, when finally a measure of freedom was achieved. But, as this historical argument goes, the December 1918 election had produced a mandate for an all Ireland republic which the Anglo-Irish Treaty failed to deliver. Thus the Irish Free State was illegal, and a continuation of the struggle was necessary to obtain national self-determination. The Provisionals have always been aware of and readily exploited Britain's colonial past.³ But the presence of British soldiers on the streets of Northern Ireland is only the most obvious manifestation of Britain's colonial or neo-colonial policy. As circumstances in Ireland and the rest of the world have changed, so has the Provisionals' explanations of Britain's presence in Northern Ireland. In the 1980s, Provisional propaganda increasingly emphasised the strategic interests of Britain and its NATO and EEC allies as the rationale for Britain wanting to maintain its presence there. A 1984 article in *An Phoblacht*, the Provisional Sinn Fein newspaper, asserted that

The British presence, which once made sense in classic imperialist/capitalist terms, can now only be explained in terms of strategic interest, of NATO and can properly be defined as political imperialism.⁴

But as stated above, Britain's military presence is only the most manifest aspect

of its imperialist designs.

While NATO's strategic doctrine may remain remote to the Catholic community of Northern Ireland, the socio-economic deprivation it suffers is not. Presenting this socio-economic deprivation as another aspect of Britain's colonial policy has undoubtedly propaganda advantages for the Provisional IRA. It enables the Provisionals to argue that Northern Ireland is "administered directly in the British interest" through the maintenance of "structural discrimination."⁵ According to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, British neo-colonial policies have also had their impact on the Republic of Ireland which, while being administered by Dublin, is done so in the interests of Britain.⁶ The Anglo-Irish Agreement, argues Adams, is the latest example of Britain modernising its colonial arrangements:

In the final analysis the agreement is about stabilising British interests. ... It is an attempt to isolate and draw popular support away from the republican struggle while putting a diplomatic veneer on British rule, injecting a credibility into establishment 'nationalism' so that British rule and the interests it represents can be stabilised in the long term, and insulating the British from international criticism of their involvement in Irish affairs.⁷

The British presence today then, is presented as part of an historic continuum of colonialism. But the Provisionals also represent a continuum of fighting against Britain's colonialism and for national self-determination.

According to the Provisionals, the men and woman of all generations in Ireland who have fought against British rule have provided our "glorious heritage" and to "follow in their footsteps is at once an obligation, a privilege, and an inspiration."⁸ Historical appeals appear regularly in the pages of *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, and the analogy with the present situation is emphasised;

There is little doubt that recent IRA operations ... evoked memories of Tom Barry's IRA freedom fighters driving the British out of the twenty one counties and people can be confident that today's IRA will push the British out of the rest of Ireland.⁹

The history of Ireland, argue the Provisionals, shows that there will be no peace until the British leave, and that increased repression or even execution cannot deter the Provisional IRA. The original IRA and its true descendants (the Provisional IRA)

did not disappear after 1916 when they executed the leaders and interned thousands and nor did it in 1981 when they executed ten republicans on a hunger strike in Long Kesh after years at the hands of a barbarous brutal prison system which had inflicted repression and torture at will.¹⁰

The implication of this line of analogy, of course, is that the Provisional IRA is part of an historical process, fighting for a right that is denied solely by the British presence in Ireland.¹¹ As will be discussed below, the legitimacy that the

Provisional IRA constructs around this historical analysis stems largely from the Irish Republic. Much the same can be said about its interpretation of Irish nationalism and what constitutes an Irish identity.

Irish Nationalism

It was Patrick Pearse who decreed that Ireland should be Gaelic as well as free,¹² and in doing so not only denied a diversity of culture, but also limited Irish nationality to the Gael. Pearse, like the Provisionals, claimed inspiration from the Young Ireland group, especially Thomas Davis, and the Gaelic League. Both these groups were essentially cultural organisations stressing language, literature, folk stories and sport. Of the Gaelic League in particular Pearse claimed to have “said it again and again that when the Gaelic League was founded in 1893, the Irish revolution began.”¹³

The Young Ireland group had helped to stage a rebellion in 1848, which was a dismal failure. But, it was important for its impact on the development of Irish nationalism. Its justification for the rebellion was based on the historical right of the Irish nation to exist. It was not based on a “foreign” philosophy, as was Wolfe Tone’s advocacy of the Rights of Man. Rather, it provided an indigenous intellectual framework for nationalists who were fighting for an Ireland not merely free but Gaelic as well, and for the elimination of English language and cultural as well as political dominance in Ireland. But Pearse took the centrality of Gaelicness and language much further than either Hyde or Davis;

Irish nationality is an ancient and spiritual tradition, and the Irish nation could not die as long as that tradition lived in the heart of one faithful man or woman. But had the last repository of the Gaelic tradition, the last unconquered Gael, died, the Irish nation was no more. Any free state that might therefore be erected in Ireland, whatever it might call itself, would certainly not be the historic Irish nation.¹⁴

Thus Pearse equates Gaelicness with Irishness. It is this rather narrow, and somewhat polarising, interpretation of Irish identity that is pushed by the Provisionals in their argument that “[t]he extent to which we become free in fact and secure our freedom will be the extent to which we become Gaels again.”¹⁵

Perhaps the best example of the Provisionals’ attitude to a pluralist Ireland is the abandonment of their federal plan for a future united Ireland which would have devolved considerable powers to Ulster. But now federalism, according to Gerry Adams, is only a sop to Unionists which must not be tolerated.¹⁶ The loyalist people of Northern Ireland are simply “neo-fascist, anti-nationalist and anti-democratic.”¹⁷ The possibility of any Unionist resistance is dismissed as “hypothetical.”¹⁸ Once the British withdraw from Ireland, Unionist consent to the Gaelic republic will somehow be a natural consequence. Actually, this is one of the few areas of inconsistency in Provisional IRA propaganda. In order to maintain their image as defender of the Northern Ireland Catholics, the Provisionals frequently invoke the threat of a Protestant “backlash”.

The frequent references in Provisional IRA propaganda to Ireland's historic battle for self-determination are coupled with appeals for a lost 'identity' and a lost language. The Irish language is heavily promoted in the pages of *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, and Sinn Fein claim to be striving for a situation where "the Irish language will become the everyday language of the people."¹⁹ At the 1983 *Ard Fheis*, the Provisionals' national convention, Gerry Adams told the delegates "'Better broken Irish than clever English.' If you have Irish, no matter how little or how poor, use it."²⁰ Other aspects of Irish culture stressed within the pages of *An Phoblacht/Republican News* include the activities of the Gaelic Athletic Association, and traditional folk and dance evenings. Stressing a distinct culture alongside historic appeals is important for the Provisionals. The aim is to encourage people north and south of the border to see themselves as culturally distinct from the English, and to prevent the Irish from becoming totally submerged in American "pop culture". But it is an interpretation of Irish nationalism which puts the English conquest in direct opposition to Irish civilisation; the Anglo-Saxon against the Gael.

The legitimacy surrounding the Provisional IRA's cause, an independent thirty-two county Gaelic republic, is constructed around themes of national self-determination and a particular interpretation of Irish nationalism. This cause, in turn, provides some of the material with which the Provisionals construct legitimacy surrounding their violence.

LEGITIMACY AND VIOLENCE

As was suggested above, there are two predominant propaganda themes related to the construction of legitimacy surrounding the use of violence; the historic theme of physical force republicanism, and elements of British policy in Northern Ireland. But it is important to remember that these are also presented within the overall framework of Ireland's historic and inalienable right to self-determination, as defined by the Provisionals.

Physical Force Republicanism

The origins of "physical force republicanism" lie with the Fenians, whose whole philosophy was based on the assumption that English rule in Ireland was based on force and could only be ended by force. Patrick Pearse adopted the Fenian idea that a small group, perhaps just seven men, could lead Ireland to independence. He believed that the majority of Irishmen had sold their Irishness to the Home Rule concept, and needed to be mobilized by those qualified to defend the national honour.²¹ Pearse defined the national honour in terms of an independent and Gaelic state, and said, "I do not know how nationhood is achieved except by armed men, I do not know how nationhood is guarded except by armed men."²² Pearse's glorification of violence and bloodshed is not unique, especially when considered in historical context, but what Pearse had done was to establish the four premises on which physical force republicanism is currently based: firstly, that the use of force is legitimate; secondly, that the Republic is not a thing to be negotiated for; thirdly, accepting anything less than a Republic is a betrayal of national honour; and finally, that a small elite group can both define and defend the national honour.

In presenting themselves as the direct heirs of this physical force republicanism, the Provisionals stress two things: the necessity of physical force; and a rejection of any sort of compromise or constitutional approach. Not surprisingly, this sort of propaganda overflows with historical reference points and comparisons particularly regarding the 1916-22 era. Catholics are encouraged to see themselves as oppressed slaves who should fight their way out of slavery, just as Patrick Pearse recommended;

I should like to see any and everybody of Irish citizens armed. We must accustom ourselves to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We must make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people, but bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation that regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood. THERE ARE MANY THINGS MORE HORRIBLE THAN BLOODSHED, AND SLAVERY IS ONE OF THEM.²³

However, while the English presence in Ireland may be wrong, and while there may be no real peace in Ireland while it remains, the Provisionals still need to convince their audience that their strategy of violence is the correct one. This is done in three closely related themes: first, that violence is morally right; second, that violence is defensive; and finally, that violence is necessary because no other method will bring the desired results.

The Provisionals believe that the justness of their cause, gives them the moral right to engage in violent actions. During the 1983 *ArdFheis*, Gerry Adams declared that the armed struggle is a "morally and correct form of resistance in the six counties."²⁴ Within this armed struggle the Provisionals enthusiastically present themselves as defenders of the Catholic community. To compound this defensive image, all other groups are dismissed as totally inadequate. The Provisionals can then hold themselves in readiness for the "Protestant backlash".²⁵

This inability of any other group to defend the Catholic community is extended into an argument that no other group can claim to speak for or represent the Catholic community. The rejection of any sort of constitutional road to a united Ireland is based also on historical grounds. According to Gerry Adams,

[t]here are those who tell us that the British will not be moved by armed struggle. As has been said before, the history of Ireland and of British colonial involvement throughout the world tells us that they will not be moved by anything else.²⁶

The argument is that each time republicans put their faith in constitutional politics they were outmanoeuvred and blatantly disregarded by the British. History had proved that the 'stepping stone' theory of Collins had failed. Now there is no room for compromise because

each time we compromised in our struggle for independence, we succeeded in doing nothing but bringing destruction and death on our country, and handing onto a new generation an unfinished struggle for freedom, which the young men and woman, in their turn, had to pay for in rivers of blood.²⁷

Thus any demands for peace are “reactionary rubbish,” as they in no way advance the “freedom struggle.”²⁸ The last legitimate government of Ireland recognised by the Provisionals is the ‘Second Dail’ which met in 1921, and on this basis they remind people that “Stormont, Westminster and the Dail Eireann have no right to direct the destiny of the Irish people.”²⁹ Nor have the members of any of the political groupings within these institutions any right to speak on behalf of the Irish people.

Two other groups excluded from any representative role by the Provisionals are the Official IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). Both these groups use or have used violence, and claim legitimacy from much the same historical sources as the Provisionals. But theirs is a legitimacy dismissed as false by the Provisionals, with the implication being that only the Provisionals can define and defend the national honour. The “legitimacy” battle between the Provisionals and the Officials spilled over into a physical battle in October 1975. The Provisionals accused the Officials of betraying fundamental republican principles and of being too left-wing.³⁰ The INLA, like the Provisionals, emerged from a split in the Official IRA, and perhaps for this reason the Provisionals initially provided them with some support.³¹ But by 1986, the Provisionals were calling for the INLA to disband, saying it comprised “a group of people who, for personal financial benefit are masquerading as republicans.”³²

The Provisionals do attempt to construct an image of legitimacy based on the claim that they are the direct heirs of the physical force tradition. Inherent in this tradition are claims that the use of force is morally and politically legitimate, that the Republic cannot be negotiated for, advocating or accepting anything less is a betrayal of republican principles, and that only the Provisionals can define and defend the national honour.

British Policy

The claims that only violence can achieve the desired republic are supplemented with further themes attacking the British presence in Northern Ireland. The British military presence is singled out for special condemnation, as are all other instruments of law enforcement. Provisional IRA violence is presented as a defensive reaction against the oppressive British state. This then opens the way for attacks on the credibility of the security forces, and a process which Maurice Tugwell calls “guilt transfer,”³³ whereby the blame for all the deaths, injuries and destruction caused by the Provisional IRA is placed firmly on the British regime. The treatment Catholics, and particularly Provisional IRA prisoners, receive within the justice system is another favourite target of Provisional IRA propaganda.

Accusations of offensive action by the security forces have been a prominent part of Provisional IRA propaganda since ‘Bloody Sunday’ in 1972. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, Ulster Defence Regiment, and the British Army (in particular, the Special Air Service) are all accused of adopting shoot-to-kill policies, an accusation given some credence by the Stalker debacle, which will be discussed below. Even when Provisional IRA volunteers are killed on the

point of committing a clearly intentional lethal action, the Provisional IRA claims its members are shot deliberately when they could have been arrested. One such incident occurred in Loughall in 1987. After this incident the Provisional IRA released a statement which claimed that “[v]olunteers who shot their way out of the ambush and escaped saw other Volunteers being shot on the ground after being captured.”³⁴ However, while enjoying a significant place in Provisional IRA propaganda, the number of direct confrontations with the security forces resulting in the death of a Provisional IRA member remains relatively small. The vast majority of active volunteers caught are taken into custody.

Provisional IRA allegations of torture and brutality while in custody began in earnest after the introduction of internment in August 1971. It is certainly possible with the benefit of hindsight to criticise the British for countenancing the introduction of internment, not least because it provided the Provisional IRA with an effective recruiting campaign, somewhat sarcastically acknowledged by the Provisionals themselves;

The Republican movement in Belfast extends to her Majesty’s forces their heartfelt thanks for the magnificent recruiting drive that they have held on our behalf.³⁵

Nor is it possible to praise the British for the physical implementation of internment. It was clumsy; the use of out-dated intelligence resulted in the interning of many who had little or no connection with the Provisionals; and leaks permitted the escape of some who did. The clumsiness of the internment operation, and the techniques used by the British on some of those detained, led the Irish government to enter a petition against Britain in the European Commission on Human Rights. Similarly, allegations of security force misbehaviour prompted Amnesty International to undertake several investigations in Northern Ireland. These allegations certainly embarrassed the British, and whatever the degree of truth contained in them, they were undoubtedly encouraged and manipulated by the Provisionals. Particularly after the introduction of internment, Sinn Fein urged people to go to bodies such as The Association for Legal Justice and voice allegations of brutality.³⁶ In an attempt to brutalise the image of the Army, posters were displayed in the Republic of Ireland and mainland Britain showing baton wielding and gas-masked soldiers.³⁷

Strongly linked to attacks on the credibility of the British state is the process of guilt transfer. Blaming the British for all the violence in Northern Ireland is common in all areas of Provisional IRA propaganda, and related to colonial and oppressive themes. Less than a month after the Provisionals had shocked the world with their detonation of a bomb at the Conservative Party’s annual conference in Brighton, Adams described this action as “an inevitable result of the British occupation of the six counties.”³⁸ Danny Morrison reacted to the same event by saying “[t]he moral position is irrelevant. What the British government and the British people have to realise is that what they are doing leads to this type of action.”³⁹ Similarly Owen Carron, on his election as a Westminster MP, when asked to condemn violence said,

the major part of violence is created and maintained by Britain. All other violence is a counter to the state violence of the security forces. The real terrorists are the UDR and the Police.⁴⁰

As well as demonstrating the process of guilt transfer, this statement presents Provisional IRA violence as reactive to the actions of the security forces. But the Provisionals also attack the British administration of justice, particularly the legislation and penal system under which the security forces operate.

The two pieces of legislation most constantly attacked by the Provisionals are the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act and the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act. Both Acts do contain sweeping powers and the Provisionals argument is that they are applied indiscriminately, and are used simply for the purposes of harassment and intelligence-gathering. For example, Adams claims that in 1973, the security forces searched "75,000, one fifth of the number of houses in the whole of the 6 counties; almost every house searched was in a nationalist area."⁴¹

But the treatment of Provisional IRA members actually in custody is, perhaps, the singularly most consistent theme in Provisional IRA propaganda. Allegations of maltreatment and improper conditions appear frequently in the pages of *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, as do letters smuggled out of the jails complaining of brutality and thefts by prison staff. One of the most common complaints is of the authorities' refusal to grant compassionate parole, which is another "callous weapon" of oppression.⁴² "The tortuous indignity of strip-searches"⁴³ is also an aspect of the prison regime presented in highly emotional terms.

Prisoners and hunger strikes are nothing new to the Republican movement, with names such as O'Donovan Rossa and Terence MacSwiney a prominent part of Republican culture. At the centre of propaganda surrounding Provisional IRA members in prison is the claim that they are "political" prisoners. To a large extent the British initially concurred with this, and accorded Provisional IRA prisoners "special status". But this was removed in 1976, and its reinstatement has been a major goal of the Provisional IRA ever since.

In October 1980, Provisional IRA prisoners in the H-Blocks announced their intention to go on hunger strike. They demanded

as of right, political recognition and that we be accorded the status of political prisoners. We claim this right as captured combatants in the continuing struggle for national liberation and self-determination. We refute most strongly the term 'criminal' with which the British have attempted to label us and our struggle.⁴⁴

This particular hunger strike ended in December without death. In March 1981 however, Bobby Sands began a hunger strike that was ultimately to end in ten deaths. Before Sands died, he was elected to the British parliament as the member for Fermanagh/South Tyrone. Sands' election, and the themes surrounding his campaign, is surely an indication that, while the Provisionals'

methods may be condemned, there is a fairly wide acceptance in the Catholic communities of Ireland that their motivations are political. If this is so, then it is not surprising that the Provisional IRA is able to construct legitimacy around issues of the administration of justice. This is certainly one of the biggest challenges facing British counter-insurgency strategy. But it is important to remember that this article is concerned with a much wider counter-Provisional IRA strategy, and in this the Republic of Ireland has as big a role to play as Britain's.

LEGITIMACY AND THE IRISH REPUBLIC

After the Brighton bomb of October 1984, the then Irish Prime Minister, Garret FitzGerald condemned the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein in no uncertain terms. But contained in his condemnation is one very significant phrase, which if it provides the basis for explaining the Provisional IRA's construction of legitimacy, may also provide the basis for 'de-constructing' it;

There is however one particular shade of our feeling today which is unique to those of the Irish nationalist tradition. I mean our deep anger at the arrogance of the Provisional IRA in doing these things in the name of our tradition, in the name of our aspiration, in the name of our legitimacy.⁴⁵

So then, what is the Republic's tradition, aspiration and legitimacy?

The New Irish Free State, established by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, took much of its ideology from Pearse, including his interpretation of what the Irish nation should be. Once the civil war (during which Northern Ireland and partition were not issues) was settled, the Free State concentrated on asserting its independence. In accordance with the ideas of Pearse, independence involved asserting Catholicism and Gaelicism. In the 1920s and 30s, a series of laws was passed enshrining the Catholic moral code. In 1925, divorce was prohibited; this prohibition still requires a constitutional referendum to change it. In the 1930s, dance halls were required to apply for licences and the importation and sale of contraceptives was forbidden. In 1937, the secular constitution of 1920 was dropped, in favour of acknowledging the special position of the Catholic church. The Catholic church was given control over education, and in 1923, Gaelic was made compulsory in all primary and secondary schools.⁴⁶ Change has been extremely slow, and as a result "our tradition" remains defined primarily in terms of a Gaelic and Catholic Ireland.

In 1984, the Dublin government organised a forum to discuss features of the overall Irish situation, and invited all interested parties to contribute. The resultant New Ireland Forum Report was an attempt to define the problems of Ireland and the two major cultural identities within it. However, it was far from being a critical review of the origins and attitudes of the Republic itself, and as a result 'old' rather than 'new' Ireland attitudes predominate. Like the Provisional IRA, the chapter dealing with the historical origins of the problem puts the blame solely on the British. The British establishment of Northern Ireland, the report declares "was contrary to the desire of the great majority of the Irish

people for political unity and sovereignty of Ireland as expressed in the last all-Ireland election of 1918.”⁴⁷ And because of the British failure to

accept the democratically expressed wishes of the Irish people and because of the denial of the right of nationalists in the North to political expression of the Irish identity and to effective participation in the institutions of government, the 1920 arrangements did not succeed.⁴⁸

Similarly, the report says that the hope generated among nationalists by the Sunningdale agreement of 1973 was destroyed because the British “failed to sustain” it.⁴⁹

Thus, the Forum report offers the same historical analysis as the Provisionals, which puts Britain at the heart of the problem; because Britain failed to consider the wishes of the Irish people as a whole, the report argues, Northern Ireland is and always will be a failed political entity. There are many things the report fails to consider,⁵⁰ but among the most obvious are a recognition that the Irish state and Provisional IRA have the same heroes and martyrs, and that the Free State was established by a forerunner of the “ballot box and armalite” strategy. They also share the same national aspiration, as defined in Articles II and III of the Republic’s constitution.

Although the degree of commitment to a united Ireland among both northern and southern nationalists can be questioned,⁵¹ the aspiration is undoubtedly strong. The rhetoric too, is frequently forthright and unambiguous. For example, in 1969 the then Irish Prime Minister, Jack Lynch, took to the national air waves to declare,

... the reunification of the national territory can provide the only permanent solution for the problem, it is our intention to request the British government to enter into early negotiations with the Irish government to review the present constitutional position of the six counties of Northern Ireland.⁵²

A decade and a half later, the Forum Report had dropped unity as the only solution, but maintained it as the political structure that the Forum “would wish to see established.”⁵³ “Our aspiration” then, also remains fundamentally unchanged.

The Forum Report proposes a set of ten realities which it claims are “necessary elements of a framework within which a new Ireland could emerge.”⁵⁴ The third of these states,

[a]greement means that the political arrangements for a new and sovereign Ireland would have to be freely negotiated and agreed to by people of the North and by people of the South.⁵⁵

The central ambiguity of this is: when would these negotiations take place - before or after a British withdrawal? Haughey, in explaining his interpretation of “agreement”, seems to confirm the Unionist interpretation that negotiations would take place only after a British withdrawal;

*Agreement and consent means that the political arrangements in Ireland to be established following the cessation of British military political presence will have to be negotiated ...*⁵⁶

This raises the question of Unionist resistance to any sort of united Ireland. And again, particularly Fianna Fail's answer bears close resemblance to the Provisional IRA's. In 1971, Neil Blaney dismissed the Unionist backlash theory in the following terms,

*... there has been no backlash, and there will be no backlash now, because the people have come to realise that they are our people and we are their people ... They realise that the six county setup cannot last much longer, and that is why there has been no backlash.*⁵⁷

Over ten years later, and despite a massive showing of Unionist strength in bringing down the Sunningdale agreement, Fianna Fail still dismisses lightly the threat of Unionist resistance; "They've never actually been pushed into a situation of having to carry out their threats."⁵⁸ This coincides with the Provisional IRA's argument that the question of Unionist resistance is merely "hypothetical."

The New Ireland Forum Report is fairly indicative of the monolithic interpretation of Catholic/nationalist history which presents Britain as the source of the problem and claims the whole island should be administered as one unit. And this as the Unionists rightly point out means

*with both the state and church supporting the same objective of unity as the Provisional IRA, that the great mass of Roman Catholics in Ireland find the legitimacy of the IRA can be couched in terms which they find difficult to reject.*⁵⁹

Thus, "Our legitimacy", that is, the Republic's, remains the same.

LEGITIMACY AND BRITAIN

It is the British government's responses to the Provisional IRA, both physical and non-physical, that have allowed the Provisional IRA most latitude in attacking the credibility of the British state. It must be said however, that the British are far from blameless, and have on occasion inexplicably set themselves up. One of the earliest, and in many respects the most damning, examples of this was the Compton Commission's conclusion that torture implied that the inflictor derived pleasure from his actions, and that therefore the security forces were not guilty of torturing detainees interned in 1971. The Compton Report⁶⁰ was widely criticised throughout Britain, Ireland and the United States. The Irish government immediately announced that it would request that the European Commission on Human Rights investigate the torture allegations. In September 1976, the Commission found against Britain and the case proceeded to the European Court of Human Rights.

Eventually in 1978 (on appeal) the European Court ruled that the five interrogation techniques in question did not constitute torture, but ill-treatment. Whether the five techniques did constitute torture as opposed to ill-treatment is

essentially a definitional problem, as not all ill-treatment is torture. But it is difficult not to agree with Lord Gardiner that the techniques were "illegal alike by the law of England and the law of Northern Ireland."⁶¹ And in using these techniques, whatever the justification, the British government gave the Provisional IRA a successful and credible propaganda line.

Despite British undertakings to abandon the techniques and considerable sums of compensation, the allegations of torture did not cease, although the focus of the allegations did shift to the RUC and the Castlereagh Holding centre in Belfast. In June 1978, after a series of media disclosures, an Amnesty International Mission concluded,

[o]n the basis of information available to it, Amnesty International believes that maltreatment of suspected terrorists by the RUC has taken place with sufficient frequency to warrant the establishment of a public inquiry to investigate it.⁶²

The British government did respond with the Bennett Report into interrogation techniques and procedures. Bennett's recommendations, including the video taping of interviews, were implemented, and the number of complaints against the RUC fell dramatically.⁶³ Nonetheless, the indefensible behaviour of a section of the RUC and the British government's initial failure to counter it, gave the Provisionals more valuable and credible propaganda, and led to writers such as Kelley and Curtis giving the impression that all Provisional IRA suspects were callously tortured by all members of the RUC.⁶⁴

The RUC was again at the centre of an embarrassing episode for the British government involving the Deputy Chief Constable of Manchester, John Stalker. Stalker had been sent to Northern Ireland to investigate a number of fatal shootings by the RUC in late 1982. But before Stalker could finish the inquiry he was removed and suspended from duty on the flimsiest of evidence. Although it was denied by the government that his removal had anything to do with Northern Ireland, it was generally believed that Stalker was about to uncover evidence of a RUC shoot-to-kill policy. Stalker, in his own account of these events, seems reluctant to use such terminology, but clearly suggests that an informant led the RUC to target several of those shot, in revenge for a land mine explosion which had killed three policemen in November, 1982.⁶⁵

Stalker's report was completed by Colin Sampson, Deputy Chief Constable of West Yorkshire, but in February, 1988, the Attorney General decided that no charges would be brought against any member of the RUC. Nonetheless, Stalker, in his book levels some very serious charges against the RUC and alleges some serious weaknesses in RUC operating procedure.⁶⁶ Many of the issues raised by Stalker are extremely complex and largely outside the scope of this article. What is not, however, is the blundering and clumsy manner in which these events were handled by the British. The Stalker episode is another object lesson in transferring legitimacy to Provisional IRA's cause. It is by ruthlessly exploiting British security force blunders in Northern Ireland, rather than through its own actions, that the Provisional IRA has been able to construct most legitimacy surrounding its violence. As noted earlier, much the same can be said about the administration of justice.

Two particular examples stand out: the “supergrass system” and the classification of Provisional IRA prisoners. Questions most often raised about the use of supergrasses involve the use of questionable and uncorroborated evidence (mainly the confessions and subsequent allegations of the supergrasses), the number of people involved in the trials, and the length of time spent on remand while awaiting trial.⁶⁷ The spectacle of over thirty people in the dock, with the supergrass as often as not retracting his evidence,⁶⁸ certainly gave credibility to Provisional IRA accusations of ‘Sham’ and ‘Show’ trials. These trials did nothing to re-establish confidence in the British system of justice, already severely dented on both sides of the border. And coinciding as they did with the accusations of a RUC shoot-to-kill policy, the Provisional IRA was able, once again, to construct legitimacy for its use of violence.

Since 1976, Provisional IRA members have been classified as ordinary criminals, and the British government claims it deals with them as criminals. This is clearly not the case, and claiming that it is only puts the British government in an unnecessarily difficult counter-propaganda position. For example, the British government’s claim that Provisional IRA members are ordinary criminals alongside its use of the SAS against them, not only lacks credibility, but also has had the effect of, at times, making it appear ridiculous. SAS units operating against the Provisional IRA give credibility to its accusations of an oppressive state, and convey the impression that the government is not in control of the situation, especially when statements are issued that subsequently have to be revised.

The British state’s treatment of imprisoned Provisional IRA members is another area where the Provisional IRA has been able to construct legitimacy. This must raise questions as to the credibility of the British state’s attempts to classify convicted Provisional IRA members as criminals. Bobby Sands’ election to Westminster, Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew’s election to the Dail and several empirical studies⁶⁹ point to the conclusion that this is not a perception shared by wide sections of the Irish community. Thus attempts to criminalise Provisional IRA members are always going to have to be at variance with credible propaganda claiming that they are political prisoners.

CONCLUSIONS: DE-CONSTRUCTING LEGITIMACY

This article has argued that Provisional IRA propaganda constructs legitimacy around two broad themes; its cause and its violence. It also suggested that the Republic of Ireland continues to provide much of the legitimacy surrounding the cause, whereas Britain provides much of that surrounding the violence. The major conclusion to be drawn from this is that defeating the Provisional IRA will require a concerted effort from both the Republic of Ireland and Britain. Northern Ireland is not simply Britain’s problem. Neither is Northern Ireland Britain’s simply to give away.

An unequivocal recognition by the Republic that one million people do not wish to belong to the Catholic and Gaelic state that the Republic has defined itself to be, would seem to leave the Republic with two alternatives. It can decide that the Catholic and Gaelic state is more important than national unity, or it can

decide that unity is more important than the Catholic and Gaelic state. Either way, the Republic would move away from the convenient but unsustainable argument that only Britain stands in the way of the Catholic, Gaelic and unified state. Such a move would also do much to de-construct the legitimacy the Provisional IRA has been able to construct around the themes of national self-determination and Irish nationalism.

For Britain the crucial problem remains how to respond best to the Provisional IRA on a day to day basis. At a general level, it must be accepted that the use of force, including lethal force, is sometimes necessary against the Provisional IRA. Republican and liberal arguments that it is not are as pointless as denying that any of the Provisionals' grievances are legitimate. But what prevails in Northern Ireland is a situation where the circumstances in which the security forces can employ lethal force is still virtually a state secret, twenty years after such force was first used.⁷⁰ Having such circumstances widely publicised could produce a number of advantages. It would allow the British government to take a more offensive propaganda approach, rather than always having to defend the actions of its security forces. It would also mean that the Provisional IRA would not only have knowledge of the risks entailed in its behaviour, but also, in a legal sense, it would have to consent to these risks (*volenti non fit injuria*).

Dismantling the 'prison culture' is undoubtedly one of the most difficult tasks facing the British government because it involves a recognition that "criminalisation" has not worked. But such a recognition would release Britain from an incredible counter propaganda position, and would do much to de-construct the legitimacy the Provisional IRA constructs around the themes of defensive and necessary violence and colonial and oppressive themes.

Looking back over twenty years of violence, it seems that a combination of the Republic's clinging to a false analysis of Northern Ireland and Britain's inability to stop the violence has created a void skilfully exploited by the Provisional IRA. Admittedly, de-constructing the legitimacy of the Provisional IRA's propaganda will be no easy task. But it is argued that without some attempt to do so, security offensives will remain a necessary but not sufficient response to the Provisional IRA.

Endnotes

1. However, the PIRA's list of 'legitimate' targets remains extensive. Included in this list are labourers working on crown buildings and, a recent addition to the list, any employee of Pickfords Removal Company helping the families of British soldiers leave Northern Ireland! See also *The Independent*, 24 January 1989; *The Economist*, 4 February 1989, pp. 50-51.
2. G. Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom* (Dingle: Brandon Press, 1986), p. 88, and G. Adams, *A Pathway to Peace* (Dublin: Mercier, 1988), pp. 10, 84.
3. M. McGuire, *To Take Arms* (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 16, 74-5.
4. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 5 August 1984.
5. Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, op. cit., p. 94.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
8. *Republican News*, Sept-Oct, 1970.
9. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 2 January 1986.
10. *Ibid.*, 3 April 1986.
11. Adams, "The Politics of Irish Freedom," op. cit., p. 88.
12. *Collected Works of Padraic Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin and London: Mansell and Roberts, 1922), p. 135.
13. Pearse, quoted in S. Cronin, *Irish Nationalism, Dublin: The Academy Press* (1980), p. 100.
14. *Collected Works of Padraic Pearse...*, op. cit., p. 303.
15. *Republican News*, January/February, 1971.
16. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 5 November 1981.
17. *Ibid.*
18. David O'Connell in *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 July 1971. See also Adams, *A Pathway to Peace*, op. cit., pp. 11-12 and *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, op. cit., p. 89.
19. *Sinn Fein Eire Nua, (The Sinn Fein Policy)* (Dublin: Sinn Fein, 1979), p. 5.
20. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 17 November 1983.
21. See R.P. Davis, *Arthur Griffith and Non-Violent Sinn Fein* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1974); and Cronin, op. cit., pp. 102-3.
22. *Collected Works of Padraic Pearse...*, op. cit., p. 75.
23. *The Tatler*, No 7, Belfast, c1971-72, quoting from P.H. Pearse, "The Coming Revolution," in *Collected Works of Padraic Pearse ...*, op. cit., pp. 98-9. Emphasis not in the Pearse original.
24. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 17 November 1983.
25. *Ibid.*, 2 January and 6 March 1986.
26. *Ibid.*, 17 November 1983.
27. *Republican News*, 11 January 1975.
28. *Ibid.*, 24 December 1977.
29. *Ibid.*, November, 1970.
30. See K. Kelley, *The Longest War* (London: Zed Press, 1982), p 241. The lack of Official IRA activity since the mid-1970s has led to speculation about its continued existence. The strongest evidence to support the view that at least part of the organisation remains intact, comes from its continuing control of 'drinking clubs' in Belfast and elsewhere. See P. O'Malley, *The Uncivil Wars* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1983), pp. 394-5.
31. T.P. Coogan, *The IRA* (London: Fontana, 1980), p. 569.
32. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 9 January 1986.

33. M.A.J. Tugwell, "Terrorism and Propaganda," paper delivered at University of Aberdeen International Academic Conference on Terrorism, April 1986, p. 6.
34. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 14 May 1987.
35. *Republican News*, 9 October 1971.
36. *An Firme*, (Belfast, Provisional Sinn Fein, 1971), no. 14.
37. S. O'Riain, *Provos - Patriots or Terrorists?* (Dublin: Irish Book Bureau, 1975), p. 45.
38. *Irish News*, 13 October 1984.
39. *Observer*, 14 October 1984.
40. *Irish News*, 22 August 1981.
41. Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, op. cit., p. 100.
42. *Republican News*, 6 May 1975.
43. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 7 November 1985.
44. *Irish Times*, 11 October 1980.
45. *Irish News*, 13 October 1984.
46. So compulsory, in fact, that failure to reach the required mark in Gaelic meant failure in the overall School Leaving Certificate.
47. *New Ireland Forum Report* (Dublin: Government Stationary Office, 1984), p. 8.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
50. For example, the only mandate Sinn Fein derived from the 1918 election was to take Ireland's case to the Paris Peace Conference. How does this then translate into a mandate for an all Ireland Republic? And what explanation can be put on the fact that on an all Ireland basis this election produced a total anti-Republic vote of 557,435 compared to the 485,105 polled by Sinn Fein? (This former figure includes 237,393 votes for the Nationalist Party which, while certainly not Unionist votes, were also not Sinn Fein votes. See R. Kee, *Ourselves Alone* (London: Quartet, 1976), p. 53. Also like so many other analyses, the Report ignores the strength of indigenous support for the British connection.
51. See O'Malley, op. cit., pp. 88-97.
52. Lynch quoted in C.C. O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 198.
53. "New Ireland Forum Report ... ," op. cit., p. 29.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
56. Haughey quoted in A. Kenny, *The Road to Hillsborough* (London: Pergamon, 1986), p. 45. (Emphasis added).
57. *Republican News*, 27:11:71.
58. M. Manseragh, Director of Research for Fianna Fail, quoted in O'Malley, op. cit., p. 48.
59. R.L. McCartney, *The Case for the Unionists* (Belfast: Official Unionist Party), 1981.
60. *Report of Inquiry into Allegations Against the Security Forces of Physical Brutality in Northern Ireland Arising out of Events on the 9 August 1971* (Compton) (London: HMSO, 1971), Cmnd 4823. It is important to bear in mind that the Army did not conduct the interrogations; rather, it trained the RUC, who carried them out.
61. *Report of the Committee of Privy Counsellors appointed to consider authorised procedures for the interrogation of persons suspected of terrorism* (Parker) (London: HMSO, 1972), Cmnd 4901, p. 14 (minority report of Lord Gardiner).
62. *Report Of An Amnesty International Mission to Northern Ireland 28 November - 6 December 1977* (Amnesty International, June 1978), (AI Index: Eur 45/01/78/) p. 70.

63. *Report of The Committee of Inquiry into Police Interrogation Procedures In Northern Ireland* (Bennett) (London: HMSO, 1979), Cmnd 7497. See also *Review of the Operation of the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1976* (Jellicoe) (London, HMSO, 1983), Cmnd 8803.
64. Kelley, op. cit., pp. 200-300, and L. Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War* (London, Pluto, 1984), pp. 51-67. Curtis also accuses the media of aiding the government cover up of torture.
65. J. Stalker, *Stalker* (London: Harrap, 1988). See also P. Taylor, *Stalker: The Search for the Truth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987).
66. *Stalker* op. cit., p. 9 and p. 92.
67. For a detailed discussion of these issues see P. Hillyard and J. Percy-Smith, "Converting Terrorists: The Use of Supergrasses in Northern Ireland." *Journal of Law and Society*, 11, no 3 (1984), pp. 337-55.
68. Thirty-eight people were put on trial on the word of Provisional IRA supergrass Christopher Black, and 40 on the word of Raymond Gilmore. Gifford states that of the 15 supergrasses granted immunity up to 1984, twelve retracted their statements and refused any further co-operation. (See T. Gifford, *Supergrasses: The use of accomplice evidence in Northern Ireland* (Great Britain: The Cobden Trust, 1985). The Provisional IRA kidnapped supergrass Raymond Gilmore's father and the INLA seized Harry Kirkpatrick's wife to put pressure on them to retract.
69. See for example, K. Boyle, T. Hadden and P. Hillyard, *Ten Years on in Northern Ireland* (London: Cobden Trust, 1980), p. 19. It needs to be recognized, however, that alternative classifications, such as combattant and POW status, might not suit either the British or the Provisional IRA, although for different reasons. Granting such status would imply that a state of war existed, something Britain has sought to avoid, since it would legitimise outside intervention (by the United Nations, for example) in what it regards as a purely internal matter. But it would also impose certain obligations on the PIRA - to abide by the laws of war - which would require some changes in the way it carries out its armed struggle, and might be to its disadvantage.
70. The so-called "Yellow Card," for example, is a restricted document.