



Poll appeal: Fighting elections can be a drain on funds and personnel

Bullets Before Ballots

The killing of eight members of the Provisional IRA as they attacked a police station in the Protestant village of Lough Gall has been hailed as a brilliant success for the security forces in Northern Ireland and a devastating defeat for the IRA.

There's no doubt that the 'Lough Gall Massacre', as it is already known in Catholic areas, was a severe blow in personal as well as political terms for the Provisionals. But the IRA is an organisation which learned long ago how to turn its defeats to its own long-term advantage. Already the fact that the eight men were shot without warning in a carefully-planned ambush, when they almost certainly could have been apprehended with much less violence, has helped to turn them into martyrs for whom ballads will be sung for years to come.

Lough Gall happened at a time when the IRA was riding high after a string of terrorist successes, culminating in the murder of a

senior High Court judge. Many Catholics in Northern Ireland see Lough Gall as a straightforward reprisal for the killing of Sir Maurice Gibson and his wife.

This upsurge in IRA violence has provoked speculation that the Provisionals have virtually abandoned politics as a means of pursuing their objectives of British withdrawal and a united Ireland.

There have been suggestions in the media that Sinn Féin's disastrous showing in the general election in the Irish Republic has unbalanced the relationship between the political leadership of the Republican movement and the militarists, and strengthened the position of the latter. But Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and the others have never tried to distance themselves from the IRA's campaign of violence. On the contrary, they have been explicit that British withdrawal from Northern Ireland is their first priority and that this can only be achieved by 'the cutting edge of the IRA'.

What Republican theorists do admit is that there is a different emphasis to the campaign at different times. Partly this is a question of

resources. Fighting general elections takes a lot of money and skilled personnel, so does waging a guerrilla campaign. Often the resources aren't adequate for both. It is also true that the poor showing by Sinn Féin in the general election in the Republic had a serious effect on morale at grass roots level particularly for the prisoners in the North.

More than most political parties, Provisional Sinn Féin subscribes literally to the dictum that politics is the pursuit of war by other means. Its leaders want to win seats in parliamentary elections primarily for propaganda reasons, and for a series of platforms from which they can argue the case for British withdrawal from Ireland. In Britain and on the international circuit Gerry Adams is taken more seriously because he is an MP. If the Provisionals had done well in the Southern election, it would have become much more difficult for the Irish government to maintain the ban prohibiting Sinn Féin from appearing on television and radio. It would also have put pressure on Charles Haughey to adopt a more aggressive stance towards the British.



The draw of the gun: An IRA mural in a Catholic ghetto

Instead, the Provisionals have had to retrench and rethink. In these circumstances the safest thing to do politically is to return to the proven methods popular with the rank and file, of conducting the war by way of the bomb and the bullet. Its recent successes in Northern Ireland show that the IRA has been able to reorganise its resources with considerable skill and ingenuity. Lough Gall was neither clever nor ingenious - that, almost as much as the loss of eight men, will be a cause for much heartsearching within the IRA. The problem of informers has not been solved and this could lead to ugly reprisals. However it has access to weapons and explosives and has recently been training new recruits almost nightly in attacks on police stations and army posts. More important, though this may seem relative in Britain, it has shown that it is capable of a quite new ruthlessness in terms of what it now regards as legitimate targets and in the methods it uses. So far it has faced serious problems in mounting a campaign in mainland Britain but Republican sources say that it is only a matter of time before 'the right people' are found or come forward to organise such a campaign.

Whatever the successes and failures of their campaign, it is essential for the Provisionals to retain the support of

the Catholics living in the ghetto areas of Derry, Belfast and in their rural strongholds. Here they have been helped almost inevitably in recent months by British government policy. From the start, the Anglo Irish agreement which was signed at Hillsborough in November 1985 was aimed at winning the support of the moderates in Northern Ireland. On the Catholic side that meant bolstering support for the constitutional methods of the SDLP and cutting away at Sinn Fein. There is evidence that this has been achieved, but at a cost. While the Sinn Fein vote may have declined in elections, the agreement has left ghetto Catholics living in areas of high deprivation and unemployment more isolated than ever, particularly the disaffected young who feel that only Sinn Fein speaks for them.

The mother of one of the young IRA men who was killed at Lough Gall had this to say about his death: 'He had been picked up and harassed by the police since he was 15 years old. There was one policeman in particular who used to just kick him. That was a part of it. He wanted to get his own back on them.' Seamus Donnelly was 19 when he died. He was born in 1968, the year the present troubles started in Northern Ireland. The ghettos are full of teenagers like him. •

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