



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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1987: A year to forget for the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein?

1. It is unlikely that the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein will shed too many tears at the passing of 1987. A litany of major set-backs to both arms of the armalite/ballot box strategy have had a powerful impact and it is safe to presume - and the media have certainly suggested - that a serious re-think on the theme "whither now" is currently underway in the movement.
2. Before having a closer look at the implications of the year's developments, it might be useful for ease of reference to recap on the major landmarks over the months:

February: Sinn Fein poll poorly (1.9% of the total vote) in the General Election in the South. A painful reminder for the party of just how long and hard the long and hard slog to political progress in the South charted by Gerry Adams and Co. was likely to be.

March: Trouble flared between the RUC and mourners at the funeral of Derry IRA member Gerard Logue. The scenes were to be repeated at a number of funerals during the year, with the Provisionals seeking to maximise the propaganda value which accrued.

April: Senior IRA figure Laurence Marley shot dead by the UVF in Belfast. Again serious and widely publicised disturbances at the funeral.

April: The IRA assassinate Lord Justice and Lady Gibson. This operation regarded as one of the few IRA "successes" during the year.

May: Disturbances once more at funeral of IRA member Finbar McKenna in Belfast. (McKenna killed by own bomb).

May: Eight IRA members shot dead by the security forces at Loughgall. Major blow to IRA morale.

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May: David McKittrick carried a story in the London "Independent" claiming that the IRA had been supplied with a large quantity of explosives by Libya. Money, weapons and training also supplied.

June: Although Gerry Adams had the satisfaction of retaining his West Belfast seat in the Westminster Elections, overall the Sinn Fein vote dropped from 13.4% of the total in 1983 to 11%. (The SDLP vote, by contrast, increased from 17.9% to 21%).

October: The seizure by the French authorities of the vessel "Eksund" containing a major haul of arms, believed to be destined for the IRA. A number of IRA members arrested on board.

October: British Government publish a Consultative Document containing measures aimed at excluding Sinn Fein from the electoral process in Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein say they will circumvent.

October: Sinn Fein win 2 extra council seats in West Belfast by-election.

October: IRA members Eddie McSheffrey and Patrick Deery killed by their own bomb in Derry. Again major disturbances at their funeral.

October: Low-key Sinn Fein Ard Fheis in Dublin.

November: IRA bomb kills eleven Protestant civilians attending Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen. Major public outcry. Much, and unprecedented, criticism from within the movement's own ranks.

November: In the wake of Garda information to the effect that in 1985 and 1986 the IRA had landed 4 shipments of Eksund-style arms in Ireland, a major security operation launched by Minister for Justice, with co-ordinated action by British security forces north of the border. Many Sinn Fein members arrested.

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November: Government signals its intention to allow the Extradition Act 1987 to commence, but introduce Bill adding extradition safeguards. The commencement of the Act a serious blow to the Provisionals.

3. Because of the close inter-relationship between Sinn Fein and the IRA it is perhaps less than satisfactory to look at them in isolation, but for the purposes of this exercise, it is necessary to attempt to do so. We turn firstly to the IRA.

#### IRA

4. The two events of greatest significance for the IRA during the year were Loughgall and Enniskillen. The former, apart from administering a short, sharp shock to their "macho psyche", clearly raised a whole series of uneasy questions for them. Questions about "homework", professionalism and tactics; questions about whether the security forces had just "got lucky" or whether they had been tipped off and if so by whom and the implications of that; questions about the public reaction, or rather the lack of it, (one feels that it was not lost on the Provisionals that on this occasion there was no public hue and cry about shoot-to-kill policies etc. and that, overall, the general feeling among the wider public - certainly in private - was "fair cop"). Overall, therefore, there can be little doubt but that in the closed, tightly-knit world of the Provisionals, an event like Loughgall must have cut a very deep wound. A wound that would require a careful healing process. That was another reason why the events at Enniskillen on 8 November represented such a major disaster for them; at the very time when an "efficient", clinical and professional operation was called for from their point of view, they proceeded, as one of their own spokesmen put it, "to shoot themselves in the head".
5. On the other hand, there is no evidence to suggest that, despite the difficult year which they have had, the IRA are in any way a spent force. Although the "Eksund" affair ended in further failure for them, there is sufficient evidence available to suggest that the quantity of arms/explosives which they have succeeded in accumulating is very considerable. In addition to the explosives haul from Libya referred to by David McKittrick in May, we understand that the suspected other Eksund-style landing in 1985 and 1986 may have included up to 1,100

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rifles, and there can be little doubting that they have the fire-power necessary to continue for a long time yet. Their newly developed impact grenade, which has the capacity to pierce armour-plating, has proved an undoubted new headache for the security forces. They also appear to have the capacity and fire-power to sustain a hit-and-run mortar bomb campaign against RUC and British Army bases (although Loughgall will have given rise to greater "prudence" in that regard). These attacks have caused a lot of damage and their allied campaign of intimidation against civilian contractors, has seriously impaired the work of repairing this damage, with the consequent negative impact of this on RUC/Army resources and facilities.

6. Having accepted that the IRA may be down but by no means out, the question, however, remains as to where they go from here. We have reports from media and other circles of a major re-think at present and a major new campaign in the offing in 1988. It is not difficult to see the rationale behind either, from a Provo point of view. There is little or no hard information, however, as to the direction any new campaign might take. Certainly the "hawks" in the movement are likely to be pressing for a decisive push in the military arena, and, perhaps on a number of fronts. IRA confidence has undoubtedly been seriously dented by the debacles of Loughgall and Enniskillen. The spectre of "Murphy's law" ("if something can go wrong it will") badly needs to be dispelled. The "hawks" no doubt argue that this can only be done through the kind of efficient, clinical, military operations, that, for instance, Loughgall was not, proving that they still have what it takes. But in a sense this line of thinking brings its own pressure, even in purely military terms. Another "defeat" like Loughgall would be a disaster for them. So they have to tread carefully in choosing "targets". If they choose "soft" targets the propaganda spin-off is minimal, something they are well aware of. Commenting on press coverage of the Gibson killing, for instance, "An Phoblacht" tellingly, if somewhat cynically, noted that "a dead UDR or RUC man gets scant mention from the British media. A judge though....gets star treatment". If on the other hand, however, they now opt for spectacular, harder operations, the risk of failure is commensurately higher. And, as mentioned, further failures they can ill-afford in their own eyes, at this time. In addition, there must be ongoing concern in their ranks about security forces successes in

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intercepting bombs, uncovering arms dumps, etc, raising the question as to how tight internal IRA security is. Moreover, other counsel within the organisation, is likely to argue that politically also, after 1987, the stakes are higher and the margin for "error" smaller and that in that sense they must now proceed extremely carefully too. Loughgall and Enniskillen in different ways have proved that the band within which the IRA operates is diminishing rather than expanding. The unprecedented level of criticism of Enniskillen from within the ranks of the Provisionals themselves has conveyed its own message also. As Gerry Adams indicated in a recent interview in the "Irish Press", the IRA have a "major responsibility to ensure that the armed struggle is geared to attain its political goals. Its when the IRA, as in Enniskillen, omits to take this into account that tragedies take place". Overall, therefore, both politically and militarily, the limits within which the IRA must operate are probably narrower than at any time, certainly in recent years.

7. A campaign in Britain is one possible option. There has been little speculation to this effect, however, and there has been little evidence, post-Brighton, that they have any inclination towards conducting a sustained mainland campaign. On the other hand, a "republican source" was quoted in the media some time ago as saying that there was "no time" at which the IRA were not planning something on the mainland. (And there have been repeated hints about "finishing what we started in Brighton"). Certainly, by their own logic, a campaign on the mainland would be more likely to yield propaganda dividends. But it also carries the danger of counter-productivity. Instead of facilitating moves towards withdrawal, it might well rather stiffen the resolve of the British body politic not to be "blackmailed by terrorists". In this regard Mary Holland's article ("The political fallout from Enniskillen") in the "Irish Times" of 9 December is of particular interest. She refers to a Marplan poll taken in Britain 10 days after Enniskillen. It showed a 14% drop in the number of people favouring the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland compared to the results of a similar poll last January. It also revealed that, for the first time in many years, there is a majority in favour of keeping the Army in the North. Mary Holland went on to analyse the reasons for those developments. The net effect would appear to be that, despite - or because of - the "worst efforts" of the Provos, there is no indication whatsoever that a major shift in the thinking of the

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British public - much less the British Government - is anywhere in view. A mainland campaign by the IRA at present would be more likely to intensify rather than diminish that atmosphere. Overall, therefore, it would appear at present as an unlikely option, but not totally out of the question at this stage (given the Provo penchant for unpredictability).

8. What seems more likely is that they will concentrate on Northern Ireland itself. Some type of co-ordinated blitz, mixing military and commercial targets, but seeking carefully to avoid civilian casualties is certainly a possibility. Alternatively they may go for shot, sharp attacks on security forces targets, sustained but unpredictable in their location and timing. It cannot be ruled out, of course, that the "major action" reportedly being planned by the IRA will be held over for some time. They will be fully conscious that everybody - the security forces included - is waiting for them to make their move. There is probably a school of thought within the Provisionals which would counsel holding out for a while, thereby ensuring better preparation and a better chance of having the surprise element on their side. This would have the added bonus also of allowing the memory of Enniskillen to fade somewhat. In an interview in the "Irish Press" last April (after the Gibson killing), an IRA spokesman said that "lulls..... suit the IRA. They allow it to take stock, to build and to learn. And they tend to lead to the RUC and the Brits dropping their guard. They get careless and we come at them again". In the present circumstances, it is not difficult to see why holding off on any major offensive for a while further might well hold attractions for the organisation.
9. Whenever the major offensive might commence and whatever its nature, its general aim would be to demonstrate that, contrary to what Britain might be telling the world, (a) there was no return to normality in Northern Ireland and (b) the IRA was a long way from being finished. In the year of the Conference review and amid intense speculation that the British were anxious to bring the unionists in from the political cold, such a campaign would have the added effect of "keeping the pot boiling" and seriously hinder any attempts at progress at political level. The Provisionals would also be hopeful that the general effect on Anglo-Irish relations would be negative and certainly impede progress on internal reforms in Northern Ireland. The almost inevitably oppressive atmosphere which would result, with the overwhelming emphasis once more on "security" etc, would probably suit overall Provisional strategy nicely.



(As a "leading Sinn Feiner" told Eamon Mallie in a recent "Irish Times" article, "we can cope with repression and oppression, but we get it hard to cope with reform").

10. The IRA know that they cannot hope to win the overall military battle in Northern Ireland in the conclusive sense; instead, despite the logic of the recent Marplan poll, they will probably persist with the belief that if they cause enough difficulty and "hassle" - and perhaps kill sufficient British soldiers - they will gradually create the necessary sense of a "plague-on-all-your-houses"/"the-place-is-ungovernable"/"why bother" etc in Britain to pave the way longer-term for final withdrawal. There are good reasons for believing that that is the kind of 1988 the IRA have in mind. Their own efficiency and the effectiveness of the security forces in countering them will dictate to what extent they are successful. Not to mention the role of Lady luck. Carefully sketched scenarios about likely ways forward in Northern Ireland have a habit of being beached by surprise twists that nobody has foreseen! Who, for instance, could have predicted Enniskillen and the complex set of powerful ripples it released? (And if that sounds like bet-hedging then so be it!).

### Sinn Fein

#### In the South

11. For Sinn Fein too, it has been a turbulent year, particularly in the South. Gerry Adams' carefully constructed, post-abstentionism strategy of achieving Workers Party type progress here (on the basis that in the tight situation obtaining in recent elections even 3-4 seats could mean the balance of power and all that went with that) made a very inauspicious debut in the February elections. Enniskillen, of course, will have holed it even further and has certainly ensured that what was in any case going to be a long and difficult voyage will now be even longer and more difficult. This, one feels, will have been a particular personal blow to Adams, who has placed great store by making political inroads in the South. In his Ard Fheis speech, he once again devoted a significant amount of time to the theme. He was strongly critical of Sinn Fein's record as a one-issue party in the South and an issue at that which did not impinge to any great extent on people's daily lives here. Much greater identification was needed by the party with the "small

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ideas" of local grievances, protests and aspirations. Only from this would flow the "big ideas" of liberation, nationalism and independence. In other words, the long - and wide - road. The ongoing dilemma, of course, for Sinn Fein in the South, highlighted starkly by Enniskillen, is that they can produce as many credible and comprehensive policies as they wish on local, and even wider, issues, but as long as they remain the other side of the IRA coin they are extremely unlikely to find any real foothold here. The "cutting edge" of the IRA, undoubtedly a plus factor in Sinn Fein's rise in the North, is very distinctly a minus one in the South. Even by their own admission Enniskillen has set back their strategy in the South by "5 years". And it does not stop there. In a sense as long as the IRA continue their campaign, the spectre of another Enniskillen will always hang over Sinn Fein, with the capability of undoing in a matter of seconds, months, even years of hard slog on the ground.

12. The commencement of the Extradition Act on 1 December was another major disappointment for Sinn Fein in 1987. It was clear from the extensive and sustained coverage given to the issue over the months in "An Phoblacht" that this was something of major - and indeed fairly obvious - significance for the party. The commencement of the Act will have underlined for the party again just how difficult making any progress in the South is going to be for them.
13. Overall, therefore, the party's immediate prospects in the South look bleak, to say the least. While it is true that even 2, 3 or 4 seats could provide a major role in any Dail in the short-term future, there is no evidence as mentioned, to suggest that they have any hope of even that kind of a breakthrough. Nonetheless, they will certainly not throw in the towel. Adams' prescription of "slog, slog and more slog" on the ground will no doubt continue to be dispensed and they probably believe that (in a Southern context at least) they can afford to be patient. Section 31, of course, remains a serious obstacle and they will certainly continue the campaign for its repeal. Commentators have repeatedly suggested that the soil of the left in Irish politics is too arid to support another Dail party. However, Adams probably believes that, no matter the label, hard work on the ground eventually does pay off if you are patient enough. His hope would be that the dedication-factor would in the long-run offset the negative fallout from the association with the

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IRA. Even one Dail seat would be a huge fillip. And some inspiration to keep going has been provided by an unlikely source (certainly one which Adams would not wish to acknowledge in public!): what odds would one have got in 1977 that in 10 years Official Sinn Fein/The Workers Party would have 4 Dail Deputies?

#### Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland

14. As for the party in Northern Ireland, the British General Election in June - with the exception of Adams' retention of his own seat in West Belfast - brought little cheer. The juggernaut launched in a blaze of glory by the election of Bobby Sands back in 1981 and sustained through several elections in the interim had already shown signs of slowing down in the January 1986 by-elections. In June it finally went into reverse. On the other hand, the recent showing of the party in winning two council by-elections in West Belfast and thereby bringing its complement of district councillors up to 61, proved that, like the IRA, Sinn Fein is a long way from being a spent force.
15. There is no doubt but that the party has been hit hard by the Agreement ('we get it hard to cope with reform' etc). Nor has it been helped by some IRA actions. The latter's campaign against civilian contractors, for instance, has given rise to quite an amount of resentment in the nationalist community (what the SDLP have referred to as the 'kill-a-worker campaign'). Sinn Fein attempts to construct credible political policies on fair employment and job development have inevitably been made to look foolish and untenable when placed alongside IRA attacks of this nature. The same could be said of the policy document they produced during the year entitled "scenario for peace".
16. Enniskillen, of course, was the incident which brought Sinn Fein's dilemma in Northern Ireland most sharply into focus. Since the local elections in May 1985, which brought (59) Sinn Fein councillors into the chambers of district councils for the first time, a very new process has been at work. For the first time, on a broad basis throughout Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein has been actively engaged in the local democratic process. By many accounts, it has done so effectively and thoroughly in many instances. The ballot-box hand working well. But the ballot box has a dimension to it that the armalite does not - public accountability. For the first time in a real sense Sinn Fein is

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answerable to the general community in an unprecedentedly upfront way for its own actions and, more critically - even if only de facto - for those of the IRA. That was why Enniskillen - the first major IRA atrocity (of that kind) since Sinn Fein entered the District Councils - bit so hard. And that was, partly as least, why Sinn Fein squealed so loudly. [Of course, in a sense, this implies a clear-cut differentiation between Sinn Fein and the IRA - something which is probably not fully warranted by the facts ("each is the other" as Sir John Hermon recently put it). However, for the purposes of this exercise I am taking the public distinction between the two at its face value, which is probably not unreasonable given, as I say, that Sinn Fein has a clearly defined public role and accountability which the IRA does not]. Whatever the true nature of the demarcation, it is clear from Adams' recent remark about the "armed struggle" being "geared to attain its political goals", that greater account will have to be taken in determining future IRA actions of the fact that Sinn Fein, through its councillors, is now carrying the can for them publicly in a more immediate way than ever before. Time will tell what the impact of this constraint is on both organisations.

17. One of the other significant developments during the year was the handling by Sinn Fein of a number of republican funerals. The issue has clearly been ear-marked as one holding useful propaganda possibilities and while in no way in the emotiveness league of the hunger-strike, it is seen at least as a useful galvaniser of republican feelings and solidarity at a time of generally low morale. A lengthy article in a recent edition of the movement's magazine "IRIS" underlined this view of funerals. The funerals during the year of Gerard Logue, Laurence Marley, Finbar McKenna, Eddie McSheffrey and Patrick Deery saw significant developments in Sinn Fein use of these occasions in this way. The funerals of the Loughgall "eight" saw a temporary truce between the RUC and the movement on the issue, but this probably had more to do with the general air of trauma hanging over the latter after the killings than with the new "guidelines" introduced for those funerals by the RUC. Certainly, by the funerals of McSheffrey and Deery it was back to confrontation again and it seems likely that this will remain (covert) Sinn Fein policy for the foreseeable future.
18. A further development during the year was the question of British measures to exclude the party from the local electoral process in Northern Ireland. Ostensibly, Sinn Fein handled this in a generally



relaxed way. They indicated that they would simply sign any declaration requiring them to renounce support for violence. They clearly regard it as an issue with propaganda value also ("British move goalposts. Now seeking to disenfranchise a large section of the nationalist community" etc). However, with the changed political climate after Enniskillen, they may perhaps be less happy about being able to counter such moves with total success. Nonetheless, on balance, they probably remain confident that they will not be hurt by anything the British may come up with in this regard.

19. So "whither now" Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland? They undoubtedly see themselves as very much under threat at present. The heady days of electoral glory are over, for the moment at any rate. After the champagne of the 1985 local elections performance it is the bread and butter of routine constituency work which has become the staple diet. Having to answer for the actions of the IRA is, as indicated, proving a constant exercise in tight-rope walking. Enniskillen demonstrated that the danger of toppling over completely is very real. The Agreement and its standing in the nationalist community (even if not of a uniform nature) continues to erode support for the party. The next major hurdle will be the local elections in May 1989, now less than 18 months away. Between now and then the party has to find a way of consolidating the support it already has. They would probably argue that the June election result represents their bedrock support level and that there will be no further erosion. Realistically, that is probably about as much as they can hope for. The SDLP has gained on it at both elections (January 1986 and June 1987) since Hillsborough and the struggle to prevent that trend continuing in May 1989 will be a major one for Sinn Fein. This situation is clearly a major disappointment for Adams and the leadership. Their ambitions extend well beyond a holding operation, clinging to 30% or so of the nationalist vote. When they embarked on the present phase of their electoral strategy they had their sights clearly fixed on overtaking the SDLP as the major nationalist party. For a while it seemed a realistic goal. Now it seems very much less so. They are, of course, a long way from conceding the pitch. Their hope probably is that the general aura of "oppression", "security" and polarisation etc which would follow an intensification of the IRA's campaign, allied to continued hard work on the ground, would see Sinn Fein's fortunes rise again in the nationalist community. But Enniskillen has shown that the

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IRA has no carte blanche from even the republican community and any negative developments which were clearly attributable to the IRA might at the end of the day boomerang on Sinn Fein.

20. The party will undoubtedly seek to capitalise also in the months ahead on the upcoming Conference review process. They will step up pressure on the SDLP arguing, familiarly, that the Agreement has "increased rather than diminished the nationalist nightmare", that it has brought no real improvement in the lives of nationalists, that Catholics are still being murdered by Loyalist sectarian killer squads and that it has not succeeded in what they argue was one of its main aims, the political demolition of their own party. They are fully conscious that such a campaign will not be an easy one and that it would probably take a major upheaval such as a significant increase in the number of sectarian killings and a dramatic worsening of relations between the security forces and the nationalist community to provide any real credibility to Sinn Fein's line. Overall, therefore, the period ahead holds no great prospects for the party and it will take considerable skill on the part of the leadership - and not a little luck - if they are even to hold their support at its present level.

#### Conclusion/Overview

21. This paper has worked out rather longer than originally intended. However, it is undoubtedly a time of some (if not indeed major) significance in the history of the Provisional IRA/Sinn Fein and it seemed opportune to take a look at the issues in some depth (and this is in no way to claim that this particular look has been exhaustive!). The period since the Agreement has, on the whole, proved a difficult one for both Sinn Fein and the IRA. The question is whether Enniskillen - the nadir to date - will eventually prove to have been the bottom of the curve or a further, and powerful, impulse downwards. It is too early to say yet. What is clear is that both organisations are under severe pressure both from within and without. There are real fears that internment might be reintroduced in some form and we understand from a regular contact of ours that they may well have contingency plans already laid for such an eventuality. Even if the public message from both organisations is a defiant "the fight goes on", (Gerry Adams, for instance, appears to have ruled out the possibility of Enniskillen leading to an IRA ceasefire in the near future and there appears to be no

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mood within the movement in favour of any grand gestures of that nature), 1987 has undoubtedly triggered an internal crisis of confidence, about timetables and, in particular, about strategies. "An armalite in one hand and a ballot box in the other" used to sound like a slick and different way of saying "tíocfaidh ár lá". The last 12 months, however, have left it looking considerably more like what it probably essentially is: a contradiction in terms. As the "Andersonstown News" pungently put it recently, the armalite "might end up blowing the ballot box to pieces". Clearly, it is a dilemma which is receiving much attention during the current re-think within the movement.

22. As to concerns about timetables, these assume added significance at a time of sagging morale. Despite Adams' continued preaching of the long-hard-road message, we have had a recent report (Alan Murray) that there is increasing discontent about his strategy of a 15-20 year campaign, which is increasingly being viewed as too long. On the other hand, opponents of his strategy probably have to acknowledge that it is extremely difficult to see where any magical short-term solutions (satisfactory to the Provisionals) will come from. The far greater likelihood is that there is none. Which leaves Sinn Féin and the IRA struggling on, dishing out more of the same, but ultimately breaking no moulds. As mentioned, the Marplan poll has shown that any "Irish problem" fatigue there is in Britain, 18 years on, shows no signs of translating into a real impetus towards withdrawal. Indeed, Enniskillen may have provided Sinn Féin and the IRA with the first evidence that any fatigue around is actually more likely to appear this side of the water - in their own community. In a bitter year, that may yet prove to have been the bitterest lesson of all.



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15 December 1987.

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