



RETURN OF THE TROUBLES?

Timothy Compston considers the threat posed by dissident republican terrorism after the murder of a journalist.

The tragic shooting of 29-year-old journalist Lyra McKee by a masked New IRA gunman while she was covering rioting in the Creggan area of Derry/Londonderry back in April from behind police lines – an action that has been roundly condemned by all sides of the political spectrum – has raised some fundamental questions about the prevailing security situation in the Province and, crucially, what the future may hold there.

Over the past two decades for the outside world, at least, Northern Ireland has fallen largely off the radar with many assuming that any underlying issues had been resolved and that peace had firmly taken hold following the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement (GFA) in 1998 and the IRA and Loyalist paramilitary ceasefires. Certainly, there were a series of developments in the early days, which gave cause for optimism. The end of the terrorist campaign of the IRA – for example – was mirrored by a massive draw-down of military personnel and the dismantling of

Police secure the area where Lyra McKee was shot in the Creggan part of Derry

much of the counter terrorism infrastructure including everything from watchtowers to checkpoints.

Added to this – in the context of normalising the situation in the Province – there was the spectacle of power sharing in action (in the Northern Ireland Assembly) with the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) and their arch enemies Sinn Féin – the political wing of the IRA – going into Government together following the St Andrews Agreement and the Assembly election in 2007. In fact, the DUP's Rev. Ian Paisley as First Minister and Martin McGuinness – a former IRA member – from Sinn Féin as Deputy First Minister had such a good rapport that they even came to be labelled as the 'Chuckle Brothers' – something that would have been unthinkable at the height of The Troubles

STUTTERING PROGRESS

Despite the positive groundwork, progress on the political front has stalled somewhat in recent years. A series of events have, sadly, conspired to turn up the temperature here leading to the collapse of devolution, a vacuum that paramilitary groups – especially dissident republicans – are all too happy to take advantage of. The controversy around the handling of a multi-million pound RHI (Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme) – which is estimated to have cost £480 million – did not help and, more fundamentally, since the Stormont House Agreement of 2014 a stalemate over things like an Irish Language Act, has resulted, ultimately, in the breakdown of power sharing.

Moving ahead, the murder of Lyra McKee is a stark illustration that there are terrorist elements – albeit smaller than before – who are intent on harking back to the bad old days to achieve their aims and, most worryingly, are quite happy to draw in a new generation of individuals to engage in rioting – or worse – who were not even born during The Troubles. The first suspects taken in for questioning under the Terrorism Act in relation to the events in Derry fitted this pattern with both being very young – 18 and 19 – although they were later released.

Two older men – aged 51 and 38 – were subsequently charged with rioting, petrol bomb and vehicle hijacking offences. In the days after Lyra McKee's death the so-called New IRA admitted that one of its members fired the fatal shot, insisting that it was an accident and that they were targeting police officers who they labelled "Crown Forces". Prior to the rioting, which appeared to be orchestrated by dissident republicans, the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) had moved into the area as part of a raid looking for munitions.

THREAT ON THE GROUND

So how great is the threat on the ground from paramilitary groups like the New IRA who advocate the use of violence in pursuit of their vision of a united Ireland? As a backdrop to current developments it is true that, from a security perspective, Northern Ireland today is still a far cry from 1972 when the murder rate soared to 476. The latest Police Recorded Security Statistics bulletin from the PSNI covering March 2018 – February 2019 – which was published prior to Lyra McKee's murder – offers some reassurance on the wider level of violence as there were only two security related deaths compared with

three in the previous 12 months. The PSNI figures also show a decrease in the numbers of bombings, shootings and paramilitary-style attacks. Specifically, there were 15 bombing incidents compared with 24 in the previous year; casualties of paramilitary style assaults were down from 67 to 56 and shootings dropped from 52 to 37. There was a slight rise in the number of firearms found – 45 compared with 39 – and the quantity of explosives.

Returning to the New IRA, this dissident Republican group, which refers to itself as 'the IRA', is reported to have emerged in 2012 when Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) and other small republican groups merged with the Real IRA. At the time the PSNI estimated that the new group had about 250 to 300 activists. One of the first major incidents involving the New IRA was the murder

AS BREXIT LOOMS IT IS GOING TO BE VITAL THAT THOSE INVOLVED TEMPER THEIR LANGUAGE

of a prison officer – David Black – in November 2012 as he drove to work at Maghaberry Prison, he was the first officer to be killed for nearly 20 years. Another prison officer died in 2016 following injuries sustained when a booby trap device went off under his car. More recently in July 2018 the New IRA claimed responsibility for automatic gunfire and petrol bomb attacks targeting police officers during rioting in Derry/Londonderry, a scenario very similar to that which led to the tragic death of journalist Lara McKee in April.

EXPLOSIVE DEVICES

At the start of this year suspicions were also raised that the New IRA was behind a car bomb attack on the courthouse in Derry. In addition, the Irish News reports that, using a recognised code word, the New IRA claimed responsibility for four explosive devices posted to Waterloo Station, buildings near Heathrow and London City airports and the University of Glasgow. A fifth device was found at a postal depot in Limerick. Added to this, in the week before the Lara McKee shooting a horizontal mortar tube and command wire were found on the other side of Northern Ireland near Castlewellsan, County Down, although in this case no group has been tied to the find.

Ultimately, there are mixed signs where the security and political landscape in Northern Ireland is concerned. Those supporting violence remain a very small minority with many Republicans now willing to follow a peaceful path to achieve their aims. As part of this strategy we have witnessed a renewed push by Sinn Féin and its new president Mary Lou McDonald for a border poll. It was encouraging to see in the wake of Lyra McKee's death that political leaders were able to put their differences aside and issue a rare joint statement saying that they were united in rejecting those responsible: "They have no support in the community, must be brought to justice and should disband immediately. We reiterate our

support for the PSNI, who while carrying out their duties were also the target of last night's attack. We call on anyone with any information to bring that forward to the police and assist their inquiries. This is a time for calm heads." After Lyra McKee's murder a reward of up to £10,000 for information was offered by the charity Crimestoppers and to date the PSNI says that it received help from more than 140 people with the investigation, an impressive figure given that Creggan is a known Republican stronghold. Friends and supporters of Lyra McKee staged a protest at the offices of Saoradh — identified by police as the New IRA's political wing — by leaving red handprints in paint on the building's wall.

REKINDLED OPPORTUNITIES

At the funeral of Lyra McKee in St. Anne's Cathedral in Belfast there was a standing ovation when the priest, Father Martin McGill, looking at all the political leaders gathered together in front of him said: "Why in God's name does it take the death of a 29-year-old girl to get to this point?" More recently church leaders met with the parties and British and Irish Ministers recently at Stormont — the NI Parliament — and reiterated this point. Speaking to the media, the Church of Ireland Primate, Archbishop Richard Clarke, said: "One of the messages we tried to send today is that, in a vacuum, other forces will move into that vacuum and take control of it." He added that was why there was a huge need for normal political life to start again. Thankfully, the talks process between the main

political parties in Northern Ireland has been rekindled by the NI Secretary and the Irish Foreign Minister with progress set to be reviewed at the end of May.

On a more ominous note, despite graffiti initially appearing on the 'Free Derry' wall in the Creggan area of Derry/Londonderry saying "Not in our name, RIP Lyra" now signs are being put up once again threatening that those who cooperate with the police will be shot. This shows that there is still a long way to go to eliminate the terrorist threat, and fear generated by groups like the New IRA and their ardent supporters within the community. Beyond this as Brexit looms it is going to be vital that community representatives and politicians temper their language so as not to add fuel to the flames being stoked by other parties — like the paramilitaries — who are simply not interested in engaging in the political process. There is also the concern that terrorist groupings may use any sign of additional infrastructure along the border as an excuse

THE SO-CALLED NEW IRA ADMITTED THAT ONE OF ITS MEMBERS HAD SHOT AT LYRA MCKEE

to ramp up their violence. This of course is part of the reason why the PSNI has put on hold the sale of police stations near the border — such as Warrenpoint — and has been given an additional £16.5 million in funding from the UK Treasury to recruit 308 additional officers and staff by April 2020 ●

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Despite condemnation of McKee's killing, threats are being made to those that offer to help police

