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Dissidents hope that British are more stupid than them

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COMMENTARY - Brian Feeny

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People have been watching closely the way Sinn Fein has responded to the appalling murderous attack at

Massereene Barracks on Saturday night.

Some people have been trying mischievously, just as the dissidents want, to insert a wedge between Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson on the one hand and between Gerry Adams and Sinn Fein assembly members on the other, so far without success.

Perhaps more important for the success of politics here is how the British administration responds and again, so far, it looks as though they are not going to fall into the trap laid for them.

Some people have characterised the attack as 'senseless' and 'pointless'. Far from it.

The attack was carefully timed just before Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson were due to fly to Washington for a series of high-profile meetings including one with President Obama.

The killings were designed to accomplish a number of objectives – to embarrass Sinn Fein; to provoke a disproportionate response from the British; to cause division between Sinn Fein and the DUP and make it less likely that policing and justice will be devolved to northern politicians.

However, it is up to politicians here and in Britain to ensure that those objectives are not achieved and to demonstrate that dissident actions are seen to be futile.

It took British politicians a long time over here to realise that it was disastrous if their policy was driven by the politics of the last atrocity, that reaching for draconian military responses was exactly what not to do.

Let's be clear about what the Real IRA, one of the groups who claimed responsibility, want. They want the British army back on the streets mounting road checks, kicking down doors in nationalist districts and, ideally, meting out violence to nationalist youths who are then more likely to join RIRA. For people who call themselves Irish republicans to conspire to bring the British army back on to the streets shows how absurd the aims of RIRA are.

Secondly it should be remembered that the RIRA are tiny in number and that their actions are condemned by both republican and unionist communities, that in every election their proxies stood in they have received a derisory vote, below the one per cent mark. Republican dissidents are therefore faced with an insurmountable political obstacle in the north.

Always in the past we know that, even when Sinn Fein did not stand for election, they had a sleeping vote of around 100,000 and the IRA always had some degree of public support.

Now for the first time in the north's history we know there is no sleeping republican vote waiting to support dissidents. There are no nationalist grievances to exploit.

Why then do they imagine they can achieve more than the IRA after a 29 year campaign:

Why do they imagine they can

do anything different or anything the IRA didn't try?

The only hope they can entertain is that the British do something stupid, play into their hands with some over-reaction. Given the experience of the past 40 years and the British open acceptance that decisions like internment and the prisons policy were mistakes, such a hope is far-fetched.

Dissidents certainly have no chance of spooking Sinn Fein into rowing back from the policy they have followed which has led them into jointly running the north's administration. On the contrary, SF know perfectly well that the dissidents may call themselves the Real IRA but they are actually Sinn Fein's real enemy and as such SF are more determined to defeat them than either the British government or the unionists and it's about time unionists realised that.

The correct response to the shock and dismay of Saturday's murders is to pursue steadily and resolutely the present policies which so annoy and frustrate dissidents, not to announce any flashy security measures which would play into their hands but to proceed with all deliberate speed to devolve justice and security to locally elected politicians.

In other words to do exactly the opposite of what dissidents want. Only in that way can their real targets, Sinn Fein, show publicly that their strategies lead to political success and that the dissidents' murderous activities are not only futile but immoral.

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