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Monday, March 9, 2009

## Political response of parties to killings must be tough and uncompromising Northern Editor



PSNI forensic officers examine a car outside Massereene barracks in Antrim following the shooting.

Photograph: Stephen Davison

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GERRY MORIARTY

**ANALYSIS:** The SF statement may have been dispassionate and lacking in empathy, but Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness's reaction that "the only way to defeat these people is to stick together and make the process work" goes to the heart of the matter

IT PERHAPS shows how far Northern Ireland has come in the past decade or more that the murder of the two young soldiers had the capacity to shock, to reawaken that terrible sense of dread and revulsion so much part and parcel of everyday life here for so long.

Time was people were almost inured to such shocking events.

Aside from the horror, cruelty and waste of life, the killings carry security and political implications. They raise the questions: just how serious a threat do the dissidents pose, and will they succeed in their aim to cause political instability?

Two young men taking a pizza delivery gunned to death; finished off while they lay on the ground. One of the delivery men, a Pole, seriously injured, three others also injured. It was clear, as Northern Secretary Shaun Woodward said, the gunmen weren't particularly discriminating in who they shot. As long as they got the soldiers, that was what mattered, that was what was going to catapult them on to the local and international news.

The soldiers were due to travel to Afghanistan just hours after the attack so they would have been feeling a sense of excitement and apprehension. But they would hardly have felt any fears about their station in Antrim. The shock, grief and horror experienced by their families and of the families of those injured must be deep and profound.

The murders put last week's controversy over the deployment of special British army personnel to assist the PSNI in meeting the heightened threat from the dissidents into perspective.

Security service MI5 and the PSNI, and the Garda, have been closely monitoring groups such as the Real IRA (RIRA) and the Continuity IRA (CIRA). That's clear in that we knew last week of the increased danger of an imminent murderous attack. PSNI chief constable Sir Hugh Orde reiterated what he has been saying for several months, that the dissidents were planning to kill people.

The general view though was that the targets would be police officers. There was a view too that the likely target area would be somewhere close to the Border such as Derry, Strabane, south Armagh or Newry because that was where the dissidents were strongest.

The attack in the unionist heartland of Antrim town was not anticipated and neither was the attack on a British army base. Under the terms by which they operate this was a propaganda coup for the dissidents.

Orde and Garda Commissioner Fachtna Murphy who discussed the killings and the security situation yesterday have made clear for some time now that they take the dissident threat seriously. Jonathan Evans, head of MI5 which has the lead intelligence role in tackling the dissidents in Northern Ireland, was equally forthright about the threat when he did a number of newspaper interviews in January.

Mr Evans said MI5, which has a large new base in Holywood, outside Belfast in Co Down, was dedicating considerable resources to tackling the problem. But as MI5, the Garda, the PSNI and the Independent Monitoring Commission have pointed out dissident republican groups are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their operations. Just how serious is their intent was indicated by the 300lb bomb abandoned near Castlewellan, Co Down, in January – the target believed to be the British army base 12km (eight miles) away at Ballykinlar, Co Down.

One senior British anti-terrorism source said security forces would be on high alert against the dissident threat for the foreseeable future. Of the Antrim attack he said: "It is disappointing but not entirely surprising that something terrible like this should happen." He said there had been successes against the dissidents, adding, "but this is difficult work. You are talking about small numbers of people, operating in a geographically fragmented way. That makes it difficult for everybody".

An added complication is that there are so many of the groups, some of them overlapping, operating under titles such as the RIRA, CIRA, the INLA, Óglagh na hÉireann, and the Irish Republican Liberation Army.

Politically, all the main parties were at one in deploring the killings, but time was also given on the airwaves in Northern Ireland to the initial rather clinical response of Sinn Féin.

It was noted that while all the parties had statements of condemnation issued in and around midnight on Saturday night, that the first Sinn Féin response, from party president Gerry Adams, did not arrive until 11.30am Sunday. He described the killings as "wrong and counter-productive", which some observers viewed as dispassionate, and not corresponding with the public mood of disgust and sympathy with the dead and injured.

The previous day Adams had been railing against Orde's decision to ask for the use of British army special forces personnel to tackle dissidents, so finding a balanced response to the killings was perhaps awkward for Sinn Féin.

In the statement following the killings Adams said: "Sinn Féin has a responsibility to be consistent. The logic of this is that we support the police in the apprehension of those involved in last night's attack. The police also have a responsibility to give leadership and to behave at all times in a transparent and accountable manner. The British government has a duty to uphold the new political arrangement and the peace process."

It came across as rather laboured and over qualified and lacking in fellow human feeling, although Sinn Féin politicians were slightly more forthcoming in the manner in which they condemned the killings.

Still, you couldn't help but wonder was this an opportunity lost?

Should First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness – who have not been seen much together in public of late – have gone together to Massarene barracks in Antrim just as their predecessors, David Trimble and Séamus Mallon, did when together they visited the relatives of Philip Allen and Damien Trainor shot dead by loyalists in Poyntzpass, Co Armagh 11 years ago? That could have had an emotive and powerful impact.

At least in terms of regular politics, if we can use that phrase, Robinson and McGuinness used the right language. They postponed their trip to the US for a day or so but equally insisted the dissidents would not achieve their goal to derail the powersharing political process. Adams and Robinson are due to make statements in the Assembly today where they are expected to reaffirm their commitment to the powersharing institutions and to declare, as Robinson did shortly after the murders, that the dissidents "will not succeed".

McGuinness also had strong words: "The only way to defeat these people is to stick together and make the process work."

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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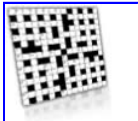
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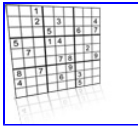
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