



CNI

COMMENT - Want to know what is the IRA now? It's a trust fund

Newton Emerson writes -

In February this year, following media reports of IRA fuel and cigarette smuggling, Sinn Fein TD Padraig MacLochlainn wrote to newly-appointed Garda commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan for her assessment of the allegations.

Gardaí had no evidence or intelligence that the IRA maintained its military structure, O'Sullivan replied, citing a 2009 report from the Independent Monitoring Commission.

There was widespread derision the following month when the commissioner's response came to light, as the dogs on the border know the IRA is smuggling on an industrial scale.

At her first appearance before the Oireachtas justice committee, O'Sullivan was asked if the IRA remained active.

She embarked on exactly the sort of evasive finessing since displayed by the PSNI regarding the murder of Kevin McGuigan.

It is only since that murder that the sniggering has stopped and O'Sullivan has begun facing serious criticism in the Republic. This southern foreshadowing of our present northern crisis involved only money, after all.

What is forgotten in that casual moral judgement is that money is the root of all evil.

Over the past two weeks a lot of questions have been asked about what the IRA is now, with answers ranging from an old comrades' association to a lobby group for “peaceful, political republicanism”, according to the PSNI chief constable.

But what the IRA is at its most basic level is a trust fund. If the fund did not exist, the remaining structures of the IRA might indeed “whither away”, as the Independent Monitoring Commission promised in its key report on the IRA leadership in 2008.

But the fund does exist and so the IRA remains, to grow and protect its financial interests.

As those interests increasingly clash with a violent new generation of criminal gangs, murders are likely.

With the authorities north and south strongly signalling that the McGuigan murder will be peace processed, further murders are increasingly likely.

Assessing the extent of the IRA's wealth is clearly felt to be, as Sinn Fein might say, speculative and unhelpful.

In the last official estimate of the IRA's property portfolio, predating the Northern Bank robbery, the Irish Department of Justice gave a figure of €400 million worldwide.

This seems a little conservative, given that Gerry Adams's "good republican" friend Thomas 'Slab' Murphy controlled £30m worth of properties in Manchester alone in 2005.

The property market has since crashed but the IRA has since diversified, according to the Wikileaks cables, in which (rather embarrassingly for O'Sullivan) senior gardaí are quoted telling the US Dublin embassy that the IRA has turned to "apparently respectable businessmen" to raise funds.

A 2012 report for the House of Commons estimated total cross-border fuel and tobacco smuggling to be worth up to £6 billion a year, with up to 180 criminal gangs involved in Northern Ireland, including new entrants from Eastern Europe and Asia bringing new activities like people-smuggling.

The danger of the IRA's money is rarely ranked above the health and safety problems of amassing it - toxic waste from fuel laundering, poison from counterfeit cigarettes and so on. This is a laughably superficial focus.

The primary risk, as the US embassy elaborates in the Wikileaks cables, is that: "IRA funds acquired through sophisticated investments are seeping into resources available for Sinn Fein's political activities in the Republic of Ireland."

If that fails to deliver 'peaceful, political republicanism' on Sinn Fein's terms, the subsequent risk is that the IRA would resurrect its military structures from the virtually limitless funds at its disposal.

London and Dublin seemed more attuned to these risks 10 years ago, when Irish justice minister Michael McDowell said decommissioning and disbandment were

meaningless without emptying the IRA's "war chest".

Why the risks have apparently been downplayed is a question for both governments to answer, although there seems little hope of that while they are blatantly downplaying a murder.

One possibility is that the authorities believe rich, retired provos will not rock the boat. If so, they have misjudged their opponent.

It is true that many IRA figures were pensioned off with nest-eggs, most of which were sunk into the vulgar little buy-to-let empires now breaking up traditional republican communities (a fascinating study in itself).

But there is little evidence of serious personal enrichment among the remaining trustees, apart from relatively modest second homes and holidays.

What the fund holds in trust is the strength of the IRA. If it is allowed to grow, while Sinn Fein's political fortunes inevitably peak, it can only make the case for its own use louder.

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