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Extract from TONIGHT

The Republicans

Recorded from transmission 2300 (BBC-1)

15 December 1977

DENIS TUOHY: In Belfast this morning security forces raided the main Belfast office of Provisional Sinn Fein and in a series of arrests in Belfast and Lurgan rounded up fifteen suspected IRA supporters. There arrests are but the latest evidence of an intensive crack down by the army and the police on the IRA which seems to be meeting with increasing success in terms of arrests and convictions. So have the republican gunmen lost the battle? Is their military capability at an unprecedented low ebb? And perhaps more important in the long run, how far have they lost the support of the Catholics which they need for survival?

The collapse of the IRA has been anticipated before and the anticipation has been ill-founded. So to evaluate the present situation we decided to examine the various movements involved and analyse the motives of the politicians who direct the activities of the gunmen. Because of the importance of the subject we are devoting the whole of tonight's programme to it. Jeremy Paxman reports.

JEREMY PAXMAN: Fewer people have died in Northern Ireland this year than in any year since 1970. It is whispered quietly but with increasing frequency that the violence may at last be coming to an end. The optimism is based upon the impersonal indices of the state of the war, the statistics measuring the number of dead and injured every year since the troubles began. Unless there is a major provisional offensive this month the toll of violence this year will have been lower than in any year since 1970. Shooting incidents have dropped from a peak in 1972 of 10,000 to a projected total for this year of less than 1,200. The number of terrorist explosions is down from 1300 in 1972 to 230 this year. The weight of explosives has dropped from 79,000 lbs to 6,000 lbs this year. From a total of 322 civilian deaths in 1972 civilian deaths this year are down to 80. And even though the number of police and army casualties is running at the same level as last year, even that figure is hardly more than a third of the total five years ago. It is upon these figures that the present tentative optimism is based. The figures and the growing belief that men of violence are losing the support of the civilian population upon whom they depend, a dependency recognised by the provisional leadership themselves.

GERRY ADAMS: (At conference) At present in the war zone itself necessity, if nothing else, forces the republican movement into a complete and utter reliance upon the people's support. We could not survive almost eight years of war unless people wanted to billet us, look after us, drive us about, unless they wanted to support us.

PAXMAN: These pictures of an IRA active service unit training in the Lower Falls area of Belfast were taken within the last three

weeks. Of themselves they prove nothing beyond the fact that there are still both men and guns available to the provisionals and that they can transport both around sympathetic areas of Belfast within half a mile of British army barracks. As long as the provisionals have supplies of either they can if they choose continue the war. But the real battle now is for the hearts and minds of the those in the Catholic ghettos on behalf of whom they claim to be fighting. On a Tuesday evening in the embattled Lower Falls area of Belfast the locals gather for a night of singing and drinking. Whatever the political theory about Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom the evening begins with a rendition on mouthorgan of the Soldier's Song, the national anthem of the Irish Republic.

The spiritual impetus which leads these people to profess their allegiance to the Irish Republic is the same force which gives the passive support enabling the provisional IRA to continue their campaign. The songs they sing glorify the activities of the provisionals and a two fingered gesture indicates their support for the provisional IRA's second battalion. The provisionals regard themselves as the legitimate inheritors of the tradition of violent resistance to British rule which reached its peak at Easter 1915. It was then that a group of rebels against British rule in Ireland published a proclamation of an Irish Republic which was to become, and still remains, the creed of the IRA. Declaring themselves the legitimate government of Ireland they saw the British as an occupying power and violence as a legitimate tactic in removing them. The present campaign has taken that belief in an ideology of violence to its most brutal and extreme point yet. In Northern Ireland 1,800 people dead and thousands horribly maimed in the last eight years. It is the knowledge of so much apparently endless brutality that may be behind the supposed turn against the IRA and a possible end to the war. The last IRA campaign between 1956 and '62 ended in a shambles when it became clear that there was no prospect of it forcing the British to withdraw from Ulster. By 1962 the IRA could muster no more than a hundred men throughout Ireland and a major rethink began.

THOMAS MacGILLIA: Arising from that analysis we set our faces against any further military campaign. This idea of military campaigns was sheer nonsense because our objective was not just to get the British troops out of Ireland but to end imperialism in Ireland and that includes the neo-colonial position of the south of Ireland where during the military campaign of the 1950s we saw 60,000 people a year emigrating. Thousand of unemployed sitting down in the streets of Dublin but republicans weren't doing anything about that they were concentrating on getting the British out of the.....

PAXMAN: As a military organisation by the middle 60s the IRA had virtually disappeared. Guns were put into storage and quantities of gelignite intended for the struggle in Ireland were given to the Free Wales army. But the eruption of a civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland aimed at getting Catholics a fair share in government had, by 1969, led to a violent Protestant reaction. As a massive retreat began in the Catholic ghettos many looked to the IRA to protect them. Committed to a political role they lacked the guns or the will to do so. IRA came to represent 'I ran away'. Tension within the republican movement developed rapidly.

SEAN MacSTIOFAIN: We were involved in it because we wanted civil rights and we were supporting the civil rights struggle on that basis and that

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basis alone and did want, not only did we not want a military campaign but we did not want the constant confrontations with the police at that time.

RORY O'BRADY: I for one saw that even a moderately successful civil rights campaign could produce the circumstances that would be advantageous to a new campaign. I knew that the civil rights education would frighten the right wing unionist element and that there would be a predictable reaction from them and this would produce the circumstances favourable to a renewal of the armed struggle.

PAXMAN: In December 1969 the militarists under the leadership of MacStiofain left the IRA to form the provisionals. The members of the old IRA became known as the officials.

MacGIOLLA: They turned aside from the revolutionary path into the path of reform and they denied the armed struggle and that is actually what happened. They wanted to work through the institution set up here in 1921 at Stormont in Belfast, House in Dublin and also through the Westminster parliament. We felt that these institutions were designed to frustrate the will of the Irish people towards complete freedom. The major reasons that they left were our opposition to militarism and our dedication to socialism, both of which were taboo to Rory O'Brady.....

PAXMAN: You are suggesting that the real reason they left was because they were right wing militarists.

MacGIOLLA: Absolutely, yes.

PAXMAN: The provisionals began immediately to ship guns and explosives into Northern Ireland. Whatever they may say now about having abandoned militarism for a further two and a half years the official IRA continued their own campaign. But much of it was completely bungled. In January 1972 British paratroopers shot dead thirteen unarmed civilians during a civil rights march in Londonderry. In retaliation the official IRA bombed the paras Aldershot headquarters. The explosion killed five women canteen workers, a gardener and a Catholic padre.

In May 1972 after shooting dead a soldier on leave from the army, local hostility forced the officials to call a ceasefire. Since the ceasefire the energies of the official republican movement have been directed at the establishment of a radical working class which will eventually overthrow the present political system both north and south of the border. With unemployment running at 9% in the Irish republic and 11½% in Northern Ireland they believe they can create a revolution by constitutional means, a daunting task in a Conservative Catholic country with an existing democratic government. Their main outlet is their newspapers of which they print 40,000 copies for distribution at the Labour Exchanges. They operate from headquarters at a four storey building in central Dublin and the party has been renamed, Sinn Fein, the workers party. They claim a total membership of 3,000, about a third in Northern Ireland. Although criticised as Stalinist they claim the socialist state they want will be free.

Basically it will be a country which would have

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control of its own resources, which would have strong international relations, which would be aligned with the left-wing progressive countries throughout the world and which would have a strong united people with high standards of living at home.

PAXMAN: The political views of the provisionals were formulated only after the formation of their breakaway military organisation. Even now the emphasis in their newspapers is almost entirely on the military campaign.

O'BRADY: : The second phase conveyed message number two, that when the British leave both states erected here in 1921 must be dismantled and replaced by an entirely new Ireland.

PAXMAN: This year's annual conference of the provisional's political wing, Sinn Fein, looked at first sight much like any other political gathering. Provisional Sinn Fein is still a legal party both in Britain and Ireland but among those attending were both the man whom British Intelligence believe to be in control of all IRA operations in Northern Ireland and a number of members of the provisional IRA army council. Although formed originally by military minded veterans at previous IRA campaigns, many of whom would be equally at home in many of the organisations on the right in Britain, the party now includes within its ranks as well many young leftists who would find a home in any of Britain's fringe left wing groups. Although publicly committed to a federal socialist state the conference contained motions both that there be no place for private enterprise in their new Ireland and that they publicly dissociate themselves from Communism. On almost any contentious issue the decision was referred to the leadership which is still dominated by militarists.

DAVID O'CONNELL:we are a revolutionary movement. We employ revolutionary means. The Algerian revolutionists had a formula that armed action plus political action equals revolutionary action. In our struggle in facing direct British aggression armed action has been employed and will be employed.

ADAMS:we are either for the people or we are opposed to them. I think it must be a basic principle of republicanism that we fight on behalf of the people, we fight because the people want us to fight and we struggle for a situation, for their welfare and benefit, they will be left in control of their own destiny.

PAXMAN: Is it conceivable that a policy could be endorsed by provisional Sinn Fein without it being supported by the provisional IRA?

O'BRADY: Well naturally if two organisations are walking towards a common objective some measure of consultation would be necessary, that would be so.

PAXMAN: Liaison between provisional Sinn Fein and the IRA is not generally a problem. Rory O'Brady, president of the provisional Sinn Fein was twice IRA chief of staff. Formerly both imprisoned and interned. Also prominent in the political wing is Joe Cahill the former Belfast commander

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of the provisional IRA, interned in the 50s and imprisoned in 1973 for smuggling guns from Libya. David O'Connell, now the vice-president of provisional Sinn Fein is a former IRA adjutant general, although contrary to popular opinion he has never been chief of staff.

MacSTIOFAIN: We have spelled out in our policies and have charted in much greater detail than any other political grouping in this country where we wish to see our country going. The fact that the greater part of the media are prevented from allowing our message to reach the public in no way diminishes the claim we make. We invite those who wish to deny us to examine the records.

PAXMAN: It could be said of you that your only ideology is belief in the use of force.

O'BRADY: That isn't true at all and we have made very clear in our political programme what our policy is, what kind of Ireland we want to see. We have said that we want a federal and democratic socialist republic in all of Ireland and we have spelled this out in six policy documents.

PAXMAN: On whose authority, Mr O'Brady, is the military campaign waged?

O'BRADY: On the authority of history to begin with, the traditional right of resistance against foreign oppression, the people who are engaged in this struggle look on themselves as the direct lineal successors of the Fenian organisation and of the men of 1916, and of the men who fought against the black and tans. There have been lulls. There have been periods of uneasy peace for eight or nine or ten years but other than that there has been a continuous armed struggle against British occupation in Ireland.

PAXMAN: But you have no mandate from the people have you?

O'BRADY: The men of 1916, of Easter week, did not hold an election before they occupied the centre of Dublin, neither did the Fenians, and yet they secured retrospective endorsement by the people.

PAXMAN: Do you think that people have ever really understood what republican political policies are?

O'BRADY: No I don't. No, I don't think the movement has had the opportunity to present them properly to the people.

PAXMAN: It could be because you've been too busy shooting people.

O'BRADY: Well in a revolution there is always a need for two wings, the military wing and the political wing, and possibly the reason is this: that the Sinn Fein Organisation has merely regarded itself as a separate organisation that supports the objective of the IRA but nevertheless its activities have been largely confined to distributing

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SONG:

We're on the one road, sharing the one road
We're on the road to God knows where
We're on the one road, its maybe the wrong road
But we're together now who cares

men, South men, Comrades all

Dublin Donegal

We're on the one road
Singing the Solders' Song.

MIRIAM DALY: We would regard ourselves as a truly socialist party. We are fully committed to the integration of the armed struggle in Ireland, or the struggle for national liberation and the class question.

DAILY: Well our objectives are to establish as quickly as possible, and I would say in the here and now or in my lifetime, a thirty two country socialist republic in Ireland.

DALY: Well I think in timescale and obviously in the means that would be used, I think there would be considerable difference and I think we would think that this is a revolutionary objective and that one must use all legitimate means. Our prime purpose as a political party is obviously to organize and to build up our strength first as a party then obviously education by which we mean first the education of our members, an onward going analysis of the situation because we believe that you can't have sound policies if you haven't got a correct analysis of the situation, and obviously dissemination of this through papers, through public meetings, through conversation, through every means that we have.

DALY: I believe that it is when you have an armed presence in a country.

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PAXMAN:

What makes each of these organisations significant beyond their political views is that whatever any of them may say about having no military wing, three separate military organisations do in fact exist. The official IRA have more or less maintained a ceasefire with the exception of bank robberies and inter-factional feuds since the summer of 1972. The activities of the provisional IRA, like this bomb, are only too well known. The IRSP, however, while maintaining that they have no military wing are in fact linked to an organisation calling itself the Irish National Liberation Army. It is small, armed and extremely dangerous.

INLA SPOKESMAN:

We of the INLA see only one way of freeing the country. That means to attack the British administration by armed force, after all armed force has been their answer to Ireland for 700 years.

PAXMAN:

You are socialist revolutionaries.

INLA SPOKESMAN:

That is correct.

PAXMAN:

Would you deny that there are members of the Irish National Liberation Army operating within the IRSP?

DALY:

I do not know and I really do not feel that that is the sort of question it is reasonable for you to ask me.

PAXMAN:

Why not?

DALY:

Because it is, as we would say, felon searching.

PAXMAN:

But however strong the commitment of the IRSP the real initiative in whether or not the violence is to continue still rests with the men behind the provisional IRA campaign. Seamus Twomey, until his arrest ten days ago, was still the provisional's chief of staff. A former bookie, former Belfast commander of the provisionals Twomey was also in charge at the time of the last London bombings. His place is believed to have been taken by Billy McKee another former provisional commander in Belfast. McKee has been active in the IRA since 1938. Joe Cahill, another Belfast man, former provisional commander there, believed now to be their adjutant general. J.C.O'Hagan, the provisional quartermaster general, responsible for supplies of guns and explosives. Martin McGuinness, the so-called commander of the provisional IRA in Derry. David O'Connell, another founder of the provisionals now their head of propaganda. And Gerry Adams, former intelligence officer in the Belfast Brigade, released from prison earlier this year and thought to be the main person behind moves to force the organisation into a more Marxist line.

Now more than at any time during the past eight years the struggle is focussed on a handful of hardline republican areas on the border and in Belfast. Ballymurphy in the heart of Catholic West Belfast is the base for the second battalion of the provisional IRA. Before the present troubles began there were four active republican families in the entire estate. Now there are forty men in jail alone. But it remains true that even in Ballymurphy times are changing. In the week that we spent there the army carried out only eight arrests and seven house searches. Funds from transatlantic sympathisers have

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dropped to a trickle. The explosives needed to manufacture large scale bombs have been cut off at source and the success of the police in arresting IRA volunteers is concrete proof that even in areas like Ballymurphy erstwhile sympathisers are turning informers. Mao likened the guerrilla fighter to a fish in a frenzied sea. Increasingly the provisionals are finding the water distinctly hostile. The only category of violence that has increased this year is the number of disciplinary shootings carried out upon dissident provisionals. Now, late in the day, the provisional leadership is attempting to pull the people behind them.

ADAMS: And we can tell you.... that our organisation is very slow in involving itself in community affairs and sometimes I think that perhaps we have to free the people whether they want to be freed or not.

PAXMAN: Number 178 Falls Road is the provisionals main centre in Belfast. Here the propaganda war is fought in telexed messages while provisional sympathisers work a referral agency handling the problems of local people in everything from housing to what they consider harrassment by the army.

: Your husband was arrested yesterday?

: No, the day before.

: And they took him to where?

: Road.

:section ten probably.

: Yes. He took the two children with him.

: He took the children with him?

: Yes. One's four year old and the other one's a year old.

: We get solicitors for people. We can help people at a time when they are thoroughly confused and don't know what is happening. We try and solve their problems for them with regard to harrassment by the British army.

PAXMAN: What do you do about case, for example, o vandalism, housebreaking and so on? Do you tell the police?

: Oh no, no, we have nothing to do with the RUC.

PAXMAN: But whatever the hostility towards the Ulster police, directly outside the provisionals Belfast headquarters in the middle of the Falls Road a solitary policeman stops cars and checks driving licences. Even a couple of years ago it would have been a virtually unimaginable sight. In areas like this there is still a heavy army cover but slowly the Ulster police are getting back into areas where for years they have been almost unable to operate. Military intelligence puts the present

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active of provisional IRA at no more than 150. But this is a war that cannot be won in simple military terms because to destroy the provisionals you have to destroy a belief as strong almost as a religious faith. The provisionals know that and they have a short way with dissenters. The campaign of the last seven years has given them the martyrs around which to focus an increasingly desperate struggle.

MacSTIOFAIN: We must continue the struggle because those in jail are fighting for you and for me, fighting for a situation whereby in Ireland the people of Ireland....

PAXMAN: At republican rallies like this one in Derry the talk now is of a protracted war of attrition but the people are weary of battle and nowadays the rallies attract only a fraction of the support they could have drawn three or four years ago. In the minds of the men behind the violence, however, there is now a seriousness of intent, a desperate determination, to continue the war somehow. As they attempt to consolidate their hold on Catholic districts they focus the struggle around the men already imprisoned for their part in it. Each week sixteen buses leave Belfast alone taking the relatives of imprisoned IRA men to visit them in Ulster's three main jails. Each family of an imprisoned IRA man receives £5 a week from the republican prisoners' charity making the best part of £250,000 a year. If the war were to end they fear the supply of funds would simply dry up and they know that as long as there are men imprisoned for the cause then the cause itself will survive.

SONG: Now all you Irish people
No matter where you are
Remember our brave rebels
In Long Kesh this year
And by civil disobedience
Or any other way
Let's make a stand until the day
Each one of them are free.

PAXMAN: Inside the jails there are still over 800 men kept in what they consider to be prisoner-of-war status, kept not in cells but in special compounds where they wear their own clothes, organise themselves for periods of drill and training and from which they will eventually emerge better trained and more highly politicised than they ever were before conviction. 230 prisoners are serving life sentences. To the men behind the violence to call off the campaign now would be to betray them and the hundreds of others who face the next ten or twenty years in jail, a prospect for the government has repeated said 'There will be no amnesty'. Present government policy is that all convicted terrorists should be treated as ordinary criminals, kept not in compounds but in what is called H-block inside Ulster's main prison. Nearly 250 republican prisoners are refusing criminal status, refusing prison rules and prison clothing. They spend 24 hours a day naked but for a blanket inside their cells at the prison. The heating bill comes to over £700 a week. Some of them have now been 'on the blanket' as it's called, for over a year and there is no sign that the government is likely to relent. There comes a point in an apparently interminable guerrilla war where the guerrilla army, far from being the defenders of the people, come to be seen as their oppressors. There are many people who believe that is the reason the police are now getting the

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information upon which the present conviction rate depends. It remains true, however, that the organisers of the violence are still at large. We, for example, have been able to talk to them. There is a tradition among those men that whatever happens in any particular military campaign the important thing is to keep the flame alight, pass the torch on to the next generation. The question is whether, after seven years of violence, the provisionals are prepared simply to pass on the torch and whether if they did that torch could ever pass the fire next time.

The ferocity of the fire this time has resulted in the deaths of over 1800 people, 1340 civilians, 360 soldiers, over a hundred policemen. It has led to fear, suspicion, hatred and a drawing apart of Catholic and Protestants from which it will take years to recover. The hope in the minds of the thousands of the bereaved is that soon it may all be coming to an end. But for the IRA it is the deaths of over 170 provisionals in the present campaign, commemorated in a small plot inside Belfast city cenetry, which will determined whether or not the campaign is to continue.

This summer one of their leaders stated publicly that there was no evidence that the British were withdrawing from Northern Ireland. It was in effect an admission that the campaign had failed in its major objective. But to call it off now would, in their eyes, be to say that the IRA men had died for nothing. To continue it, however, they need the support of at least a section of the people. While the outward signs of that support are now harder to find the resolution of the ideologists is apparently undiminished.

MacSTIOFAIN: I have absolutely no doubt of the determination of the republican rank and file to continue the struggle for as long as necessary. It seems to me at this point of time that there will be a longer struggle, that the struggle is going to be much longer now, than what it need have been.

PAXMAN: But Mr O'Brady surely your objective is no nearer now than it was in 1969.

O'BRADY: I wouldn't agree with that at all. I would say that we have had eight years of struggle. We have had people who come through an awful lot of suffering and distress, much grief and loss, and this has hardened people. They are not prepared to see that go for nothing.

MacGIOLLA: The..... imperialist campaign has been set back possibly ten, fifteen years but we believe it can be rebuilt. Undoubtedly the military campaign of the provisionals and the sectarian campaign of the provisionals have driven workers apart when they should be united for the tremendous battle that they have now with the colossal unemployment in the North and in the South.

MacGIOLLA: The question is wide open. We believe that events and time is on our side because we believe that those who are opposed to us will not be able to deliver and we look forward to filling the vacuum, the political vacuum.

PAXMAN: Is there in your view any possibility of

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the military campaign being called off in the foreseeable future?

MacGIOLLA: I think that is a question best addressed to a military spokesman, to an Irish republic army spokesman, but I know of no indication.

TUOHY: In the course of making that film Tonight approached the provisional IRA for a film interview. The invitation was declined although they were prepared to talk off the record they wouldn't put up a spokesman for interview face to camera, perhaps because they don't have the kind of answers they want to publicise. On the broader front and despite current security crack down the problem remains. There is little the British government can offer the IRA for them to justify them calling off their campaign and the prospect for a longterm ceasefire are not good.

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