

The EU helped to end the armed campaign of the Provisional IRA

*The role of the European Union in the ending of the armed campaign of the Provisional IRA should not be underestimated, argues **Darren Litter** (Queen's University Belfast). The historical indispensability of the EU to the UK and Ireland's ability to strike the delicate balance that is the Northern Ireland peace process must be considered in the months and years ahead.*

Beginning in 1969 following its split from the Dublin leadership of the 'official' IRA, the Provisional IRA engaged in a near 30-year campaign of armed action against the United Kingdom's constitutional involvement in Northern Ireland. Whatever its justification, this would result in the death of nearly 1700 people – [just under 50% of all fatal casualties](#) in the conflict (exponentially more than the second most prolific actor in the loyalist UVF – though the latter were more unscrupulous in their targeting of civilians) – and billions upon billions worth in economic damage. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement brought a de-facto end to this campaign; de-facto in that although military action against the UK state ceased after the second PIRA ceasefire of 1997, Sinn Féin did not explicitly accept the outcomes of the Agreement, and the PIRA only formalised the [end of its campaign in 2005](#).

Much has been written about why it was that the “Long War” mentality that defined the PIRA suddenly became susceptible in the early 1990s to UK and Irish intergovernmental efforts to draw the Provisional Republican Movement (PRM – encompassing both the PIRA and Sinn Féin) into a political framework. The emphases here range from the analysis and agency of the republican leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness; the [influence on their thinking](#) from people like John Hume, Fr. Alec Reid, Brendan Duddy/Michael Oatley, and Jonathan Powell; UK-PIRA ‘military stalemate’; and conversely, the increasing sophistication and success of the UK security services’ efforts to penetrate the PRM.

Whichever one subscribes to, it is clear, at least, that there was a change in republican thinking; and a factor which has not been properly demonstrated here is the aspect of European integration. This is essential for understanding why it was that the EU and UK devised the Northern Ireland Protocol, the part of the Brexit treaty which has [created a quasi-GB-NI border](#) (quasi in that it is limited to a specific set of economic arrangements), so that there would not have to be a north-south one.



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The acceleration of European integration and its impact on the PIRA's self-perceived capacity to perpetuate its war

The PIRA's overall *raison d'être* was to forcibly remove the UK government from any remaining involvement in the governance and administration of the island of Ireland. Its ability to garner support for this – as well as recruit personnel willing to carry out its military plans – substantively relied upon its capacity to make a compelling territorial distinction between the 'occupying' east (Great Britain), and the 'just', partitioned west (Ireland). With the [introduction of the Single Market](#) on 1 January 1993 however – and notwithstanding the continued British military presence there on account of the PIRA's campaign – the most potent symbol of this – the Irish north-south border – thereafter ceased to be. There grew an increasingly prevalent sense from this – as Lord Paul Murphy (Minister of State for Northern Ireland [during 1997-99](#)) tells me – that "What do borders mean anything – what's the significance of it?". This, in his view, "was the biggest single contribution that Europe made to the peace process... the attitude toward the border... [it] was less than it ever was."

The importance of this deepening integration between the UK and Irish member states was captured just after the introduction of the Single Market/signing of the Maastricht Treaty in a March 1993 [exploratory UK \(or more specifically, MI5\) meeting](#) with the republican leaders Martin McGuinness and Gerry Kelly. The Sinn Féin minutes from this meeting – which the veteran BBC reporter Peter Taylor deems to be at least broadly accurate – attributed a series of highly significant remarks to “Fred”/Robert McLaren, the MI6-turned-MI5 officer [tasked with maintaining an official channel of contact](#) with the PRM. These were as follows: “The final solution is union. It is going to happen anyway. The historical train—Europe—determines that. We are committed to Europe. Unionists will have to change. This island will be as one”.

Whether this was a genuine analysis or mere persuasion tactic – and for republicans, it was “taken to be a message from the British Government” – the accelerating integration precipitated by the events of Maastricht was being widely interpreted as a challenge to the nationalistic platform upon which the PIRA fought its war. The increasing involvement of the Clinton administration in the ‘Northern Ireland problem’, for instance, was informed by the [assessment of the National Security Advisor](#), Tony Lake; a key part of which was that the PRM was rethinking its strategy due to the EU’s relative negation of the UK and Irish sovereignty issue. Michael Oatley – the (by then retired) MI6 officer who laid the groundwork for the PIRA’s transition through his self-pursued 1991 dialogue with Martin McGuinness – affirmed this evaluation. In a [1999 letter to The Sunday Times](#) critiquing the preoccupation with decommissioning, the former wrote that “McGuinness and Adams recognised that the political atmosphere in Ireland and on the British mainland had changed through the development of the European Union, and saw a new way to attract serious attention to their cause.”

Brexit and the dangerous restoration of territorial markers

The EU dimension fatally weakened the tenability of physical force republicanism, and part of the logic of the Northern Ireland Protocol is to try and emulate this by satisfying the need for a border by placing it in the Irish Sea. Contrary to what some might suggest, this was a very necessary consideration, with the ‘New’ IRA – an amalgamation of armed republican groups that [continues to be dangerous](#) even after a successful MI5 bugging operation in 2020 – [declaring that Brexit](#) had enhanced their recruitment by putting the border “back on the agenda again”; and that “it would be remiss of us not to capitalise on the opportunity”.

The difficulty here is that whereas the effects of the EU on the sustainability of nationalistic violence were general and automatic; the EU and UK have had to [explicitly signal with the Protocol](#) that they are, in effect, trying to prevent the reoccurrence of a specific form of violent nationalism. This, has in turn, spurred competing violent nationalist traditions (namely Ulster loyalism), who are wondering why it is that their [capacity for violence has been so underestimated](#) that they are now faced with territorial markers they equally oppose.

Tony Blair [wrote in 2019](#) – and the 1993 Downing Street Declaration negotiator, Lord Robin Butler, informs me that he agrees with him – that without the Single Market’s creation of an open border in Ireland, “there would never have been a peace agreement”. This speaks to the indispensable importance of the EU to the UK and Ireland’s ability to strike the delicate balance that is the Northern Ireland peace process. The inevitable outcome of Brexit was that there would be [some form of rebordering](#) within the British and Irish Isles, and [events have shown](#) that there is no way to do that without adversely impacting this equilibrium.

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