

---

## Original Article

# Terrorist innovation and international politics: Lessons from an IRA case study?

Richard English

Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, School of International Relations,  
University of St Andrews, The Scores, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9AX, Scotland, UK.  
E-mail: rle2@st-andrews.ac.uk

**Abstract** Despite the understandable attention devoted since 9/11 to international terrorism,<sup>1</sup> the causes and dynamics of most terrorist campaigns remain primarily local. This article addresses a key challenge in international politics – the issue of how states can best respond to non-state terrorist innovation – and it does so by focusing on the particular realities of, and potential lessons from, one major non-state terrorist innovation: the Irish Republican Army’s (IRA’s) attack on UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984. It is argued that international responses to terrorist innovation would be more effective if the implications of this local case study were heeded, and if seven inter-linked principles were respected when states responded to non-state terrorism: learn to live with it; where possible, address underlying root problems and causes; avoid the over-militarization of response; recognize that intelligence is the most vital element in successful counter-terrorism; respect orthodox legal frameworks and adhere to the democratically established rule of law; coordinate security-related, financial and technological preventative measures; and maintain strong credibility in counter-terrorist argument. *International Politics* (2013) **50**, 496–511. doi:10.1057/ip.2013.18; published online 26 April 2013

**Keywords:** terrorism; counter-terrorism; Northern Ireland; Irish Republican Army (IRA)

---

## Introduction

Post-9/11 global politics have been substantially determined (some would argue, *over-determined*) by responses to al-Qaida’s terrorist innovation of September 2001. The War on Terror, the formal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the extraordinary levels of expense and effort devoted to combating actual and presumed terrorist threats domestically and internationally have between them played a decisive role in shaping early twenty-first-century international politics



(Bergen, 2011; Burke, 2011). Some scholars have argued forcefully that the effort and resources devoted here have been disproportionate to the risks faced and to the achievements actually won by such enormous expenditure (Mueller and Stewart, 2011); numerous people have pointed out that post-9/11 figures for terrorist incidence have been depressingly high, despite the collective international efforts at counter-terrorism in recent years (Stepanova, 2008, pp. 2–4; Berman, 2009, p. 1); others again have suggested that post-9/11 counter-terrorism has been too little informed by historical experience and by first-hand intimacy with the nature and dynamics of non-state terrorist groups themselves, and that it has suffered greatly as a consequence (Roberts, 2005; English, 2009).

This article takes as its premises: that international state responses to terrorism have historically proved extraordinarily significant in determining the shape of global politics and international relations; that those responses are likely to be shrewder the more that they draw on lessons from the long history of terrorism and counter-terrorism; and that that history is more fully understood the greater our intimacy with the detailed, precise dynamics of terrorists and their politics and achievements in local context. The article analyses one important pre-9/11 case of terrorist innovation – the Irish Republican Army's (IRA's) attempted killing of UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984 – and it does so with a view to understanding wider patterns of state response to terrorism, and to suggesting how international actors might best react to terrorist innovation in the future. It is based on first-hand research into this one case study, but with an eye to the wider dynamics of global politics in relation to terrorism.

The early twentieth century and the early twenty-first century both witnessed international politics being bloodily defined by state responses to terrorist violence. This article argues that recognition of the limited and usually localized danger normally inherent in terrorist innovation would allow for more proportional and less counter-productive policies, and for a more effective containment of terrorism within global politics in the future. If we are to respond successfully to step changes in non-state terrorist violence then we need to understand the dynamics of terrorist innovation and effect as they have operated in the past, and to do so on the basis of close readings of particular historical episodes, as seen through the lenses of first-hand research (Cronin, 2009; English, 2009; Crenshaw, 2011).

## Analysis

On 15 September 1984, IRA man Patrick Magee and a colleague checked into the Grand Hotel in Brighton, Sussex, England. During their stay, they planted a bomb in the bathroom of Room 629. This was within anticipated range of

where UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher would sleep the following month during the Conservative Party's Annual Conference. Set on a long-delay timer, the bomb duly exploded at 02:54 hours on Friday, 12 October and it did so with terrible personal effect. Mrs Thatcher survived ('Those who had sought to kill me had placed the bomb in the wrong place', as the Prime Minister herself later put it (Thatcher, 1993, p. 380)), but the bomb did kill five people (Anthony Berry, Muriel MacLean, Jeanne Shattock, Eric Taylor, Roberta Wakeham) and it injured over 30 others. It was 'a night of devastation which I shall never forget', as Thatcher's cabinet colleague Lawson (1992, p. 307) later phrased it. Another cabinet minister, Tebbit (2009, p. 2), was himself injured, while his wife Margaret was left permanently paralysed: 'Sinn Fein/IRA terrorists almost murdered us both and left her crippled'.

Patrick Magee<sup>2</sup> was arrested in June 1985 in Glasgow and was to serve 14 years (1985–1999) in prison for his part in the Brighton attack. The bomb had been intended to kill most of the British cabinet (especially Thatcher herself), together with other leading Conservatives, and it formed a salient episode in the Provisional IRA's long war of attrition against the UK state.

This article will ask four central questions in relation to the IRA's Brighton bomb, before offering wide-angled, concluding reflections about frameworks for state response to terrorism. First, did Brighton embody innovation? Second, what were the preconditions necessary for this particular episode to have occurred? Third, what were the precise causes behind the Brighton attack? Fourth, were there preparatory behaviours that could have been noted and interpreted in such a way that the Brighton bomb might have been prevented? The aim is to analyse this one high-profile, very significant terrorist attack, in the hope of illuminating themes of wider importance in global politics.

*First, did Brighton embody innovation?* How new was this attack in terms of the target and the method? All terrorist innovations contain elements of continuity, and this IRA attack is no exception. In the early 1970s, the IRA had sent a letter bomb to 10 Downing Street and had also apparently been drafting plans to try to kill the then inhabitant, Prime Minister Edward Heath, on a visit to Ireland. In December 1974, the Provisionals did bomb the home of Heath, who was by then the former Prime Minister (Ziegler, 2010, pp. 485–486). In August 1977, the IRA had attempted to kill Queen Elizabeth II on her silver jubilee visit to Northern Ireland, at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine (an attack that also deployed a timer device (Oppenheimer, 2009, pp. 262–263)). In May 1981, the IRA again attempted, without success, to kill the woman whom they referred to as 'Queen Elizabeth', this time in the Shetland Islands (English, 2005, p. 219).

On 27 August 1979, the Provisionals succeeded in killing the Queen's own cousin, Louis Mountbatten, a figure who was both personally close to the monarch and also symbolically at a very high level indeed of the British



establishment (a great-grandson of Queen Victoria, no less) (Knatchbull, 2009, p. 17). Moreover, Mountbatten had long been considered a possible target by the IRA, not least because he had for years taken holidays in Ireland, where he was in fact killed. Three years earlier, in July 1976, the IRA had killed the UK Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, in Dublin.

Thus, high-profile political targets at the heart of the British establishment, and spectacular attacks, were not in themselves new as a means of trying to advance the IRA towards the realization of their objectives. If one broadens the matter out to incorporate other contemporary Irish republicans then the point is reinforced (with, for example, the Irish National Liberation Army's killing of leading Conservative politician Airey Neave with a car bomb within the precincts of Westminster in March 1979. Pre-echoes of Brighton were reasonably strong here, given both that Neave was a close friend of Margaret Thatcher and that the attack happened in England). Yet again, the long pre-Provisional IRA history of militant Irish republicanism involved attacks planned and carried out on high-profile political figures (English, 2007, pp. 213, 312), and Patrick Magee himself certainly saw the Provos as following directly in a long tradition of Irish republican resistance to English or British rule in Ireland (Magee, 2001, pp. 9–11).

A further line of continuity is reflected in the fact that Magee's pseudonym, when checking into the Grand Hotel in Brighton, was Roy Walsh. Walsh had been an IRA volunteer involved in a previous Provo spectacular in England, the 1973 bombing of the Old Bailey in London. And mention of that earlier campaign leads us to consider another aspect of innovation, or possible lack of innovation. That 1970s campaign in England was designed to have greater effect, precisely through its location and the choice of establishment target. As one of the then London bombers, Marian Price, herself put it to me in interview: 'It doesn't seem to matter if it's Irish people dying'; the IRA's armed struggle could only succeed if it were possible to 'bring it to the heart of the British establishment'. Hence, the choice of symbolic targets such as the Old Bailey and, later, Thatcher and the Conservative Party Conference in 1984 (English, 2005, p. 163).

Moreover, there was nothing new about the implied and serious political argument of the Brighton bomb. In 1984, as before and after, the Provisionals held that Northern Ireland was illegitimate and unfair and irreformable, that the only solution to the problem was an end to Irish partition, that it was necessary to use force to achieve this and that bombs on high-profile English targets were politically appropriate as well as strategically effective. Indeed, the IRA's public argument in 1981 was essentially the same as that offered in 1989 (English, 2005, pp. 212, 263), despite the fact that Brighton fell centrally between these two dates.

Thus, if innovation involves ‘something newly introduced’, ‘a novel practice, method’ (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (i), 1980, p. 1077), then it is hard to see Brighton *as it actually happened* in such terms. The Provisional IRA had previously bombed England, bombed leading politicians and establishment figures, planned or attempted to kill those who were or had been UK Prime Minister, deployed bombs using timer devices, and utilized Active Service Units working in Britain.

In contrast, had they actually killed Mrs Thatcher then dramatic innovation would unquestionably have been involved, as this would have been the first time that the IRA had killed a Prime Minister. And a strong case can still be made for considering the Brighton bomb to represent terrorist innovation. The decisive and telling innovation of Brighton (as of so many acts of innovative terrorist violence, including the 9/11 attacks themselves) lay in its representing one more step in an ongoing IRA process of constant updating, rethinking and adapting *in pursuit of* new and ever more effective means of achieving their objectives. Indeed, in this sense, Brighton was innovative in a manner that we need to acknowledge as enduringly characteristic of significant non-state terrorist groups throughout history and the contemporary world: namely, the sense that all serious terrorist groups are always innovating in this precise sense of constant updating, rethinking and adapting *in pursuit of* new and ever more effective means of achieving their objectives. The changes can often be those of degree (as here, the most serious attack ever waged by the IRA on a serving UK Prime Minister). But this fine-tuning, this in some ways small shifting of gears, can still potentially yield dramatically different scales of result. Hijacking planes for terrorist effect was not new in 2001; successfully flying them into symbolic buildings in New York City undoubtedly was. As in that (globally, far more significant) attack, so too at Brighton comparatively small changes in approach might have yielded extraordinarily higher impact – after all, the IRA very nearly did succeed in killing Thatcher and her cabinet; and it was in their desire for that effect, coupled with the narrowness of their missing their central targets, that the IRA were strikingly innovative in 1984.

*Second, what were the preconditions necessary for this innovative episode to have occurred?* Clearly, all such terrorist operations require certain organizational capacities (leadership, commitment, strategic and tactical decision making, sustained planning, acquisition of material and intelligence) as well as key dimensions of individual and technical capability. Centrally, the role of someone like the undoubtedly talented Magee himself was utterly crucial, hence the importance to the state of lengthy incarceration of such key operatives. (And here there is one key difference between activists such as Magee, and figures such as 9/11’s Mohammed Atta, with the latter choosing to die in their attack.) Indeed, the main lesson from Northern Ireland regarding prisons is probably that it matters less to the state how one designates terrorist



prisoners once they have been incarcerated than that large numbers of people engaged in terrorism should be credibly imprisoned for lengthy terms as part of a containment strategy. (Another point worth noting in international responses to terrorist innovation and threat.) Patrick Magee himself was not very easily replaced. Highly intelligent and experienced, deeply committed to the IRA's political and politically violent cause, and very ingenious in his republican career, Magee exhibited many of the qualities required for such major operations. These qualities remained evident later on too. Magee studied at undergraduate and postgraduate level while in jail after Brighton, and saw even that process as part of the republican struggle. Regarding IRA education in jail, Magee told me: 'You worked to be able to articulate better your political perspective, and I saw education as a means to an end' (Magee, 2002). The fascinating book emerging from his PhD thesis represented another stage in his articulation of the IRA's political argument, and was based on his own version of jail struggle: 'The reading and research for this book began while I was in Maghaberry and was completed in the H-Blocks' (Magee, 2001, p. iv).

The technology required for the Brighton attack was comparatively simple and small scale, given the easy availability of long-delay timers from video recorders, and this meant that the possibility of planting the bomb became greater, as it could be installed well before the Conservatives arrived for their Conference. The IRA did not have insuperable difficulty in procuring materials for their campaign by the 1980s, not least because of Libyan support. As a broader reflection here, it might be noted that international relations of no directly immediate relevance to one struggle can yet have the most practical of effects upon it at local level: the fact that the IRA and Colonel Gaddafi shared an enemy in Margaret Thatcher meant that the Provisionals received considerable practical help from the Libyan leader.

Organizationally, what was required for innovation? The IRA exhibited a mixture of top-down authoritarianism with local-level leadership and autonomy (Moloney, 2007). As in previous IRA campaigns, small numbers of able, determined zealots could wage a sustained campaign against the UK state, changing the world (albeit not entirely as they had intended). And this combination of high-level centralization with locally autonomous initiative probably maximized their capacity for sustained activity and varied local achievement and constant attempts at innovation. There are those who claim that for years the IRA leadership was scaling down the organization's armed struggle with a view to political engagement of a Sinn Féinish kind (O'Rawe, 2005; Moloney, 2007; McIntyre, 2008), although this probably overstates both the completeness of control held by the Gerry Adams leadership, and also the anticipatory consistency of purpose and single-minded planning for a political future on the part of Adams himself and those around him (English, 2005). What is clear is that, well into the 1990s, the IRA was both able to carry out

and prepared to carry out very major operations, including devastating ones in England (English, 2005, pp. 278–279, 292), and that their organization was therefore able to move fast enough in response to state counter-terrorism to ensure the continuation of their campaign, albeit at lower level than they would have preferred. Likewise, finance was not a great problem, both because particular terrorist campaigns were comparatively inexpensive (another lesson of wider, international applicability), and also because the IRA had by the 1980s developed a sufficiently strong foundation of financial backing and infrastructure. These politically violent entrepreneurs therefore possessed the commitment, the technology, the finance, the organizational suppleness, the personnel and the materials to engage in the would-be innovative attack of Brighton.

*Third, what were the precise causes behind the Brighton attack?* There were two main ones (and it is always vital, in such cases, to be honest and clear in assessing what they actually are). There was the fundamental, political–ideological case that drove and justified the IRA’s war, namely, that an illegitimate, unjust denial of Irish national self-determination by the British state in creating and sustaining partition had to be countered by a Clausewitzian struggle, which would make the war more painful for London than it would be for London to grant the IRA what they sought (namely, British withdrawal from the North, and therefore a united Ireland). In this sense, Brighton fitted the same pattern as very many other IRA attacks, and the underlying republican theology remained unchanged before and after the bombing. At the root of such theology was a conviction regarding the justness, efficacy, necessity and unavoidability of violence in pursuit of republican goals. Force was essential. ‘There was nothing else I could have done’, Magee (2002) himself told me: ‘At one time that was all we *could* do, that was the only avenue open to us, was to engage in armed struggle’. And he and his colleagues were confident that their violence would, in the end, yield victory. Immediately after Brighton, an IRA spokesperson outlined the organization’s thinking starkly: ‘Our objective ... is to wear down their political resolve ... Britain clearly, after fifteen years, cannot defeat us, so her occupation of Ireland is going to keep on costing her dearly until she quits. They would have said “we lost Airey Neave, Lord Mountbatten, Margaret Thatcher etc. – is it worth it?”’ (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 18 October 1984).

But there was also a Thatcher-specific cause behind the Brighton attack. The Prime Minister was held not only to be (in general) a committed opponent of Irish republicanism but also (in particular) the person most responsible for the painful deaths of 10 republican hunger strikers in jail in 1981. Even before the end of the hunger strike, the IRA had decided to try to kill Margaret Thatcher, and thus the revenge, hitting back, combined here with Clausewitzian strategy in their long war. There is no doubt about the level of hatred that republicans felt towards the Conservative leader (‘that unctuous, self-righteous fucker’, in



republican Danny Morrison's rich phraseology, 'the biggest bastard we have ever known') (English, 2005, p. 207). During the 1981 hunger strike itself, IRA prisoners had been angry that their comrades on the outside had not escalated their violence in response to the prison war with more major strikes against the enemy. When Patrick Magee was sent to England in 1983 with a view to bombing military targets, he was himself clear that the war had to be taken to England; and when he attacked Mrs Thatcher at Brighton there was a revanchist element to the IRA's thinking too, with the IRA's Fanonist rage being directed at a personal target with extreme, focused anger.

In this sense, the causes for the Brighton attack were necessarily both internally (the IRA's argument and politics and strategy) and externally contingently generated (UK government policy towards the prisons, presided over by one particular Prime Minister). Vital here is the frequent pattern that counter-terrorist policies can stimulate and provoke that which they are supposed to extirpate: the attempt to undermine the IRA by casting their prisoners as criminals generated a hunger strike, Thatcher's attitude towards which partly prompted Brighton. Yet again, there are loud and important echoes on the international, contemporary stage from this very local conflict.

*Fourth, were there preparatory behaviours that could have been noted and interpreted in such a way that the Brighton bomb might have been prevented?* Put another way, are there lessons from this episode for contemporary and future counter-terrorism, in regard to observable behaviours on the part of a terrorist organization once it has decided upon an innovation? The probable answer is that while no counter-terrorist surveillance can be uniformly successful the Northern Irish experience suggests that much (perhaps most) terrorist activity can be contained if police-led, intelligence-driven counter-measures are adopted. A wealth of evidence now exists suggesting that the UK state eventually managed not to defeat the Provisional IRA, but to put a ceiling on the level of their activities, such that many of their planned attacks were thwarted (Holland and Phoenix, 1996; Collins, 1997; McGartland, 1998; O'Callaghan, 1998; Moloney, 2007, 2010). This did not mean that every operation could be prevented, and nor were there signs that could always be identified in each case or planned operation.

But there were patterns of behaviour by the state, which could ensure that terrorist behaviour was at least substantially mapped. As one ex-Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) Special Branch officer with extensive anti-IRA experience put it to me regarding the Provisionals by the end of the Northern Ireland Troubles, 'They were being contained. .... It became stalemate' (Ex-RUC Special Branch Officer, interviewed by the author, County Down, Northern Ireland, 23 February 2010). How was this kind of result achieved? Partly through the very extensive use of bugs (the importance of such devices, in the words of one who planted many of them, being 'massive. It was absolutely



crucial to it' (Former RUC Headquarters Mobile Support Unit Officer, interviewed by the author, Belfast, 25 March 2010)). But the turning of people into informers and agents was at least as vital as was the calm pursuit of normal police procedures regarding evidence and prevention. Fingerprint evidence was what facilitated the conviction of Patrick Magee (just as police work and painstaking professionalism regarding forensic evidence helped to convict Lord Mountbatten's central killer and another key IRA bomb-maker, Thomas McMahon) (Knatchbull, 2009); and it is possible that more thorough police professionalism before the Brighton bomb might even have prevented it. It appears that the Sussex police (the people responsible for the security of the Conservative Conference in Brighton) did not take warnings of an IRA threat to political figures as seriously as they might have done, and that their resulting casualness regarding security precautions made the IRA's job more manageable (McGladdery, 2006, p. 126). The profound intelligence failures pre- and post-9/11 provide, of course, a much more globally significant example of precisely the same dynamic – albeit one with far greater potential for damage in international relations.

There were no preparatory behaviours in this case which meant that the authorities would necessarily have anticipated and prevented Brighton. But there are some clear lessons for the future nonetheless. Professional, police-led counter-terrorism can, even against as ingenious and talented an opponent as the IRA, contain most of the terrorist organization's activity; and calm, careful attention to warnings can prevent many attacks from occurring in the first place, provided that the state's intelligence operation is extensive and robust.

## Conclusion

What, then, are the most important lessons of Brighton for contemporary and international counter-terrorism? I have argued elsewhere (English, 2009) that an historically informed response to terrorism would be based on seven crucial and inter-linked principles: learn to live with it; where possible, address underlying root problems and causes; avoid the over-militarization of response; recognize that intelligence is the most vital element in successful counter-terrorism; respect orthodox legal frameworks and adhere to the democratically established rule of law; coordinate security-related, financial and technological preventative measures; and maintain strong credibility in counter-terrorist argument. In this Conclusion, I will suggest that the specific case of the Brighton bomb reinforces these broad points, and serves as a valuable and sharply focused way of demonstrating their lastingly high importance for international responses to contemporary and future terrorist innovation and threat.



Learn to live with it. Brighton might have been prevented, had greater care been taken in preparing security for the Conservatives' Conference, but it painfully demonstrated that, despite the state's already deep penetration into the IRA, it is impossible to prevent all terrorist attacks (and so the unfolding of an effective peace with the IRA depended on a far more complex process of negotiation and compromise (Cox *et al.*, 2006)). Even now, years after the Provisional IRA formally ended their armed struggle, other Irish republicans continue a violent campaign (albeit at lower level) while fatal loyalist violence remains a problem too in Northern Ireland. Thus, we need to admit that even the most effective state counter-terrorism will have serious limits to what it can achieve, and that even those terrorist groups whose campaigns will eventually end may take many years before they reach that point (there were 10 years between Brighton and the first IRA ceasefire and another 11 before the Provos formally ended their campaign).

As states live with terrorism, however, they can take telling comfort from the fact that even an attack like Brighton – still one of the IRA's most spectacular efforts – did not derail the state (or even the Conservative Party Conference, which continued defiantly despite the bomb). States have to live with terrorism, but they can adapt, endure and survive. Contrary to the IRA's preferred argument, bombs in Britain did not actually prompt British people to demand that their government give the IRA what they wanted; in fact, Northern Ireland rarely became a powerful issue in British politics at all (English, 2005, p. 357; McGladdery, 2006). As elsewhere (Moyano, 1995, p. 1), spectacular, violent operations frequently *failed*, in fact, to generate popular support for those who carried them out. This lesson has been applicable in the case of al-Qaida too, whose cause and popularity have frequently suffered rather than been enhanced by their appalling violence (Burke, 2011; Bergen, 2011).

Moreover, when the Northern Ireland conflict did eventually end, the emergent deal was arguably far closer to what the British had argued for all along than it was to what the IRA had been killing and dying for, and this again is a reassuring lesson for states from the Brighton case study. Contrary to Alan Dershowitz's argument (Dershowitz, 2002), it is in fact vital that, where possible, we do address the underlying root problems and causes behind terrorism. But states can take comfort that it is sometimes possible (as in Northern Ireland) to address these problems to the satisfaction of the vast majority of people from the terrorists' supposed constituency, and even on a basis far short of what the terrorists themselves demand. Thatcher (1993, p. 383) claimed that, 'Terrorism is the calculated use of violence – and the threat of it – to achieve political ends. In the case of the IRA those ends are the coercion of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland, who have demonstrated their wish to remain within the United Kingdom, into an all-Ireland state'. Though retaining their firm commitment to long-term

political ambitions (Tonge *et al.*, 2010), the IRA ended their campaign without actually having achieved this central goal; in that sense (and despite the undoubted political momentum that they had acquired), they – and their violence in Brighton in 1984 – could be presented as having failed in its central objectives (English, 2005, 2007, 2009; Alonso, 2007). Moreover, this follows a wider pattern. In her extensive research on the ending of terrorist campaigns, Cronin (2008, pp. 26, 35, 37) has concluded that, ‘Terrorist campaigns rarely achieve their initial goals’, that ‘Instances of success are rare, especially when judged against a group’s stated strategic aims’ and that ‘Very few terror groups achieve their stated strategic aims’. Her assessment of 450 terrorist groups’ campaigns resulted in her judging that 87.1 per cent had achieved none of their strategic aims, that 6.4 per cent had achieved a limited result, that 2.0 per cent had achieved a substantial component of their aims and that only 4.4 per cent had succeeded in the ‘full achievement of [the] group’s primary stated aims’ (Cronin, 2009, pp. 215–216). Recognition of how ineffective terrorist violence has tended to be in achieving its central goals provides a vital context within which to respond proportionately and calmly to its challenges, even at moments of frightening innovation.

Before terrorist campaigns end (and in pursuit of that ending), there is a need for states to avoid the over-militarization of response, for them to recognize that intelligence is the most vital element in successful counter-terrorism, for them to respect orthodox legal frameworks and adhere to the democratically established rule of law and for them to coordinate security-related, financial and technological preventative measures. How does Brighton fit in here? Police primacy has emerged in the twenty-first century as an important element in international counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency (Jones, 2008), just as it was in the late twentieth century (Aust, 2009), and it is important to recognize here, as noted, that it was careful, traditional police work that led to Patrick Magee’s capture and that MI5 cooperated closely with Special Branch in tracing him: police-led professionalism, cooperation between different wings of the state and adherence to methodical, normal practice ensured Magee’s capture, conviction and lengthy incarceration, and these should be exemplars for the appropriate response to much terrorism across the world (Roberts, 2005, p. 109).

Indeed, I think the point can be broadened. Magee himself claimed that ‘the Brighton bombing destroyed the notion of containment’: ‘Until Brighton we were not being taken seriously by the British political establishment. We were trapped in the acceptable level of violence strategy and it’s important to remember that the only way we could have lost the war was to be trapped in indefinitely fighting it’ (McGladdery, 2006, pp. 131, 133). Magee (2000) has also argued that this bombing decisively pushed the British government towards negotiations with the IRA, and ultimately towards the 1990s peace



process itself: the Brighton bomb gave the IRA ‘more political leverage’; ‘After Brighton, anything was possible and the British for the first time began to look very differently at us’. After Brighton, ‘I think there was a recognition that we weren’t going to go away .... We had to get that message across. If they thought they could continue to contain the struggle or perhaps in some long-term defeat it then of course they were going to go in for that. So the British establishment *had* to understand that we were there for the long haul and we weren’t going to go away’ (Magee, 2002).

But an alternative argument could be put forward. The British had recognized long before Brighton both the IRA’s lengthy commitment and also the impossibility of militarily defeating them. Indeed, the IRA had themselves recognized that long before Brighton the British had acknowledged the IRA to be unbeatable. In the wake of their killing of Lord Mountbatten in 1979 the Provos had stressed that ‘The British Army acknowledge that after ten years of war it cannot defeat us’ (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 1 September 1979). Moreover, despite Magee’s articulate claims about bursting out of containment, containment is arguably what ensued during the following years as the British state managed, not to defeat, but to put a ceiling on the level of violent activity of the IRA. And this – effectively, the stalemate thwarting of the Provos – was a necessary foundation for a peace process, which ended the IRA’s campaign, and which did so far short of what the Brighton bomb had centrally been intended to achieve. Intelligence-led police work, the avoidance of transgression against normal legal practice and successful cooperation between different wings of the counter-terrorist community contributed towards the thwarting of a serious and ingenious terrorist opponent. This is arguably the true practical lesson from Brighton. Again, states may have to live with terrorism, but as they do so they can contain and minimize the threat if they follow this above pattern of behaviour, rather than adopting unrealistic notions of extirpating terrorist groups, relying primarily on inappropriate military mechanisms of response, or adopting Draconian and unnecessary extensions of legal power (English, 2009).

Finally, the state needs to maintain strong credibility in counter-terrorist argument. Brighton is particularly telling here, given that the origin of the Thatcher-specific cause of the IRA’s bombing lay in the republican prison protest culminating in the hunger strikes, and that this had involved a self-damaging, *incredible* argument by the state. Effectively, the UK government of the Labour Party and then of Thatcher’s Conservatives presented the IRA as being criminal and therefore illegitimate, rather than political and – by implication – legitimate. Hence, the struggle in the jails over whether IRA and other paramilitary prisoners should conform to normal prison rules rather than being treated – as they had been before, and as they eventually were to be again – as a special category of inmate. It was, of course, perfectly understandable

from the state's point of view to try to delegitimize their IRA opponent. The trouble was that many who would not have supported the IRA's violence would (and, in voting for hunger striker Bobby Sands in 1981, temporarily did) support the IRA against Margaret Thatcher in an argument about whether the IRA were political or merely criminal. By denying the undoubted political dimension to the IRA's war, the state lost credibility among a crucial constituency – those within the nationalist North who were inclined not to support the IRA – because it established an implausible dichotomy. (A perfectly reasonable alternative surely existed: namely to admit, yes, that the IRA were political, but to stress that not all politically motivated groups use legitimate methods.)

The key point is that here, as so often in fighting non-state terrorism, there is in fact no need for states to misrepresent their opponents' arguments and character, as a calm, patient, accurate depiction of reality will work much better. Patrick Magee and the Brighton bomb are illuminating here. I do not think it is true, as Magee himself has strongly claimed, that there was no other way but the bomb by means of which Irish nationalists could pursue their rights and goals. Most Irish nationalists – in Northern Ireland, Ireland and internationally – overwhelmingly did not support the Provisional IRA's violence (English, 2007, pp. 382–383) but preferred to adopt constitutional and peaceful methods instead. More tellingly still, even the IRA itself eventually came to recognize that more could ultimately be gained in terms of progress and momentum by giving up the kind of violence practised at Brighton and opting for a more constitutional approach (English, 2005). In part, one might argue, this was because the IRA's argument all along had been less credible in some key respects than that of the UK state, and that the Provisional leadership came to recognize important aspects of this (regarding the true nature of political attitudes in London and in the Irish Republic; regarding economic realities and their implications for Irish unity; regarding the fact that the main obstacles to Irish unification lay in Ulster rather than in England and so on), and decided wisely to change their strategy as a consequence. In practice, the IRA's violence did not protect the Catholics of the North, effect a British withdrawal, bring socialism to Ireland or lay the foundation for a post-sectarian society.

Thus, the argument behind Brighton, and the subsequent claims made by some republicans about its effects, echoes an important point for our wider assessments of terrorism internationally: that terrorists' arguments are very frequently (from Andreas Baader to Ayman al-Zawahiri) rather implausible and unpersuasive on serious reading. Despite the IRA's claims to the contrary, the Brighton innovation probably changed comparatively little, and the central reason for this was that the political argument on which it rested was in some ways seriously flawed. Magee (2001, pp. 2, 39, 66) clearly held that Britain was



‘the problem’ in Northern Ireland and also that republican violence and struggle would yield victory; moreover, these views were widely shared by his IRA comrades during the Provos’ lengthy campaign. But arguably (and without denying the damaging role in the Northern Ireland conflict often played by Britain), the major obstacles to Irish unity lay not in Britain but in Ireland, and that remains the case today: recent opinion poll evidence, that a mere 18 per cent of the people of Northern Ireland favour Irish unity as the best long-term policy for the North, strongly reinforces the point (Irish Political Studies Data Yearbook, 2010).

If the IRA’s violence did not win them their central goals, and if their underlying analysis was indeed seriously flawed, then the central lesson from the IRA’s innovation in Brighton in 1984 (and from many terrorist innovations elsewhere in history) is in fact to emphasize the lack of credibility in their overall argument and strategy. Strong cases have been made previously for integrating Northern Irish experiences of violence into wider understandings of international politics (Cox *et al*, 2006, especially pp. 427–442). This article suggests that close interrogation of episodes within that Northern Irish past might encourage less hubristic, and more proportionate, responses to terrorist innovation; and that lessons from such episodes might help generate more shrewd and effective policies towards terrorism in the future, than we have so frequently seen in international politics in the past.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr Maria Rasmussen and Dr Mohammed Hafez, who invited me to deliver a Lecture at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, in which a first version of the argument of this article was adumbrated.

## About the Author

Richard English is Bishop Wardlaw Professor of Politics in the School of International Relations and Director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews, UK. He is the author of six books (including the award-winning *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2003) and *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (2006)) and the co-editor of a further five. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, and his most recent book *Terrorism: How to Respond* was published in 2009 by Oxford University Press.

## Notes

- 1 My definition of ‘terrorism’ recognizes that states as well as non-state actors can be judged to use such violence, and that the term is best used analytically rather than with necessarily pejorative intention (English, 2009). In this article, my focus is on non-state terrorism, and on state responses to it.
- 2 Patrick Magee: born Belfast 1951; family moved to England when he was a small child; he returned to Belfast permanently when 20; joined IRA aged 21; interned 1973–1975; had an IRA grandfather, but his own arrest and beating up at the hands of the British Army probably played a more significant role in his joining the IRA: there was ‘a sense of anger. Real anger. I felt I just couldn’t walk away from this, and I did join up’ (English, 2005, p. 123).

## References

- Alonso, R. (2007) *The IRA and Armed Struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Aust, S. (2009) *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the RAF*, 2009 edn. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bergen, P.L. (2011) *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and al-Qaida*. New York: Free Press.
- Berman, E. (2009) *Radical, Religious and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Burke, J. (2011) *The 9/11 Wars*. London: Allen Lane.
- Collins, E. (1997) *Killing Rage*. London: Granta.
- Cox, M., Guelke, A. and Stephen, F. (eds.) (2006) *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement*, 2006 edn. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Crenshaw, M. (2011) *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*. London: Routledge.
- Cronin, A.K. (2008) *Ending Terrorism: Lessons for Defeating al-Qaida*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Cronin, A.K. (2009) *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dershowitz, A.M. (2002) *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- English, R. (2005) *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, 2005 edn. New York: Oxford University Press.
- English, R. (2007) *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*, 2007 edn. London: Pan Macmillan.
- English, R. (2009) *Terrorism: How to Respond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holland, J. and Phoenix, S. (1996) *Phoenix: Policing the Shadows*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Irish Political Studies Data Yearbook 2010. (2010) Irish Political Studies Data Yearbook 2010. *Irish Political Studies* 25(2): 256.
- Jones, S.G. (2008) *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.
- Knatchbull, T. (2009) *From a Clear Blue Sky: Surviving the Mountbatten Bomb*. London: Hutchinson.
- Lawson, N. (1992) *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical*. London: Bantam Press.
- Magee, P. (2000) Brighton bomber says he started peace process. Quoted in *The Guardian*, 28 August.
- Magee, P. (2001) *Gangsters or Guerrillas? Representations of Irish Republicans in ‘Troubles Fiction’*. Belfast, UK: Beyond the Pale.



- Magee, P. (2002) Interviewed by the author, Belfast, 5 March.
- McGartland, M. (1998) *Fifty Dead Men Walking*, 1998 edn. London: Blake.
- McGladdery, G. (2006) *The Provisional IRA in England: The Bombing Campaign 1973–1997*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Academic Press.
- McIntyre, A. (2008) *Good Friday: The Death of Irish Republicanism*. New York: Ausubo Press.
- Moloney, E. (2007) *A Secret History of the IRA*, 2007 edn. London: Penguin.
- Moloney, E. (2010) *Voices From the Grave: Two Men's War in Ireland*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Moyano, M.J. (1995) *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle, 1969–1979*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Mueller, J. and Stewart, M.G. (2011) *Terror, Security and Money: Balancing the Risks, Benefits and Costs of Homeland Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Callaghan, S. (1998) *The Informer*. London: Transworld.
- Oppenheimer, A.R. (2009) *IRA: The Bombs and the Bullets: A History of Deadly Ingenuity*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Academic Press.
- O'Rawe, R. (2005) *Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-Block Hunger Strike*. Dublin, Ireland: New Island.
- Roberts, A. (2005) The 'War on Terror' in historical perspective. *Survival* 47(2): 101–130.
- Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (i). (1980 edn), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stepanova, E. (2008) *Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tebbit, N. (2009) *The Game Cook: Recipes Inspired by a Conversation in My Butcher's Shop*. London: JR Books.
- Thatcher, M. (1993) *The Downing Street Years*. London: HarperCollins.
- Tonge, J., Shirlow, P., McAuley, J. and McGlynn, C. (2010) *Abandoning Historical Conflict? Former Paramilitary Prisoners and Political Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Ziegler, P. (2010) *Edward Heath: The Authorized Biography*. London: Harper Press.