

Sinn Fein's softly-softly approach to the peace talks has led to a mutiny in the ranks. It will take all the persuasive powers of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness to keep the process on track. Liam Clarke reports

The first item on the agenda was the split at Sinn Fein's meeting in Dundalk last Thursday evening. Malachy Foots, who acted as secretary, said: "It didn't last that long until they were walking out. The business of the previous meeting was discussed, the minutes were read and adopted, and then the resignations were tendered."

"They stood up and said they weren't happy with the direction things were going in, they could no longer play a part in it, and they resigned."

Owen Hamratty, the chairman, and Sinn Fein's candidate in the last general election, was sitting beside Foots and was the first to leave what should have been a routine meeting. He denounced the decision of Sinn Fein to sign the Mitchell Principles on non-violence, then walked around the room and shook hands with people, saying they were still friends. "I hope in the past 27 years won't go out to have been for nothing," he told The Sunday Times.

Foots is adamant that the organisation in Louth remains strong but the fact is 12 people out of less than 30 left in a single evening, and further defections are likely.

The local strength of the two sides will become clear today when Mitchell McLaughlin, Sinn Fein's national chairman, rallies the troops at the Edentubber Martyrs commemoration in Dundalk, which honours five republicans blown up in 1957.

The split is the most serious division in the republican movement since 1986, when a section of the Sinn Fein resigned in protest at the party's decision to contest parliamentary elections in the republic. For the first time in more than a decade, the IRA and Sinn Fein have washed their dirty linen in public and members have walked out to voice public criticism of the party leadership.

The fear for the top rank of the IRA is a feud of the type which erupted following the Official/Provisional IRA split in the early 1970s or of the type which have dogged the INLA throughout its history.

The lives of Adams and everyone else in the republican leadership would be on the line if that happened, and hitting back at dissidents would endanger Sinn Fein's participation in the peace talks at Stormont. Adams is already being protected from loyalist attack by a bevy of bodyguards while Sinn Fein offices in Northern Ireland are surrounded by high security.

But there are positive aspects as well. Historically, no IRA campaign has ever ended without a split. Walking away can be a means for people incapable of compromise to avoid uncomfortable realities. Adams and the leadership will try to exploit the schism in two ways. They will hope to use it to rid themselves of malcontents and will demand more rapid movement from the British government to stave off further defections.

FOOTS says the first he heard of the resignations was when a journalist phoned him on

Thursday morning to ask for his reaction; but he cannot have been taken entirely by surprise because the republican movement has been riven with splits and defections for weeks.

One of those who left the movement was the IRA's quartermaster general, who lives in a seaside town near Dundalk. The quartermaster is a small, stout, thickset man in his forties, with a bad temper and a piercing stare. Together with his girlfriend, he has been making the running as an upfront critic of the peace process since 1994. Gardai believe it was the quartermaster who made the phone call claiming responsibility for the Docklands bombing and who announced the end of the last IRA ceasefire.

One former IRA colleague describes him as "a tough little guy and a bit of a brute. He used to beat people up after an operation if they didn't carry it out the way he desired".

It was this same hot-headedness that allowed the leadership to push the quartermaster out of the organisation. His main source of power was his membership of the 12-strong IRA army executive. This body, elected by an IRA delegate meeting known as an army convention, appoints the seven-strong army council, overseeing the pace of the campaign.

Following a convention late last year, it was charged with reviewing any future ceasefire every four months. A final decision on the current ceasefire must be taken by another IRA convention in March 1998.

The next executive review is not due until around November 20 but the quartermaster was not prepared to wait. Instead he lobbied within the executive for an extraordinary convention. As soon as Sinn Fein, in the person of Gerry Adams, agreed to the Mitchell Principles as a condition for entering the Stormont talks on September 9, the quartermaster believed he had an issue around which he and his allies could orchestrate a return to violence.

Within three days of Adams signing, the IRA issued a statement disagreeing with the principles. The dissidents' main target was the fifth of the six principles which committed Sinn Fein "to agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of the outcome with which they may disagree".

This, the quartermaster argued, forced Sinn Fein to renounce the armed struggle, to accept the Unionist veto at talks and effectively committed it to accepting a com-

promise well short of Irish unity. He focused on the fact that Adams was a member of the IRA army council, as was Martin McGuinness, Sinn Fein's chief negotiator, and another key Sinn Fein strategist from Co Donegal. It was around this issue, of Adams's and McGuinness's alleged "betrayal" of their commitment as IRA volunteers and army council members, that the quartermaster lobbied for the executive to set in train the mechanisms for removing them from the council and the IRA itself.

If this coup had been successful, it would have cut the Sinn Fein leadership off from the IRA, forcing it either to resign or accept a decoupling of the two wings of the republican movement. The quartermaster's main allies were Kevin McKenna, a former IRA chief of staff still on the army council, and two other members of the executive, one the sister of an IRA hunger striker.

Adams and McGuinness calculated that they were strong enough to meet the challenge head-on. Their supporters on the executive went along with a motion which declared the Mitchell Principles to be against the IRA's constitution and referred Adams's actions in signing them to the IRA army council. The council said Adams had a special dispensation in his capacity as Sinn Fein president.

The executive responded by calling a convention, held last month in Gweedore, Co Donegal.

This acrimonious meeting left a compromise discomforting for the peace process. Sinn Fein is to achieve all it can in the talks, it will be allowed to take actions and give undertakings which are against IRA rules, but these will not bind the IRA. The IRA will take its decision based on the package which Sinn Fein offered it in March or April. "Adams and McGuinness were told: you don't tell us what to do, you show us what you have got and then we will decide," a Northern Ireland security source said.

The sting for the dissidents came with the election of the executive. The quartermaster, and not any of Adams's supporters, was thrown off after key delegations from South Armagh and Belfast voted against him. Stung, he resigned from the IRA and a close female friend also left the IRA and the executive in sympathy. Later, about eight people who had been delegates at the convention also resigned. It was the quartermaster, and not Adams, who stood isolated and alone. Most humiliating of all, the quartermaster was required to

give an undertaking that he would not disclose the location of arms dumps to outsiders and he was all but accused of leaking Semtex explosives to the breakaway Continuity IRA, something for which police believe another IRA member from Ballinalee, Co Cavan, is responsible.

Without the quartermaster's vote, and the vote of his female ally, McKenna was removed from the army council and replaced by Brian Gillen, the officer commanding the IRA's Northern command. Gillen, who was sentenced to 10 years in 1977 for blowing up an electrical store, had been a critic of the peace process in the early stages but now supports holding the line until the outcome of talks is known.

Police regard him as particularly ruthless. At the height of Belfast bombings in the 1980s, he told an interrogator who asked his occupation: "I make car parks."

McKenna, the former chief of staff, has not, so far, resigned from the IRA and remains an influential figure. Born in Aughnacloy, Co Tyrone, in July 1944 he now lives in Monaghan with his wife, Marcella. McKenna is one of the most dedicated figures to emerge from the IRA.

He uses his hobby of rabbit hunting as a cover for travelling the country to meet republican contacts. However, two people McKenna does not associate with are Adams and McGuinness. McKenna prefers to rely instead on Pat Doherty, a key member of the Sinn Fein talks team, who he liaises with regularly. A far shrewder man than the quartermaster, McKenna remains influential in the IRA and may get his chance to sit at the top table once more when the ceasefire is renewed in a few months.

Nor does the membership of the IRA army council give great cause for confidence about its long-term intentions. Besides the chief of staff, it includes Martin Ferris, the former gunrunner from Kerry and Brian Keenan, who organised the British bombings in the 1980s.

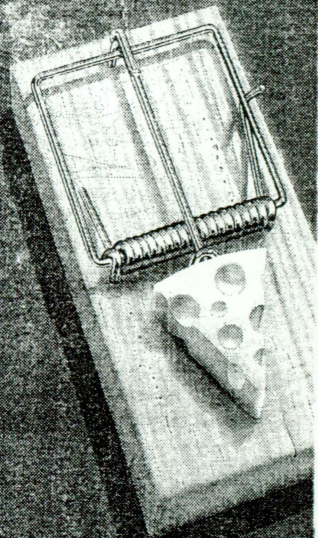
The dissidents have also been split thanks to the quartermaster's impetuosity. On the plus side, Adams and McGuinness, who went along with the ending of the last ceasefire for the sake of unity, have shown that they are now prepared to take some defections if that is the price of maintaining the ceasefire.



McKenna: waiting game

"He may sit at the top table again when the ceasefire is renewed"

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