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Thursday, August 14, 2008

Omagh atrocity tilted political balance toward peace process



Omagh three weeks after the 1998 bombing in which 29 people died. The bombing prompted a wave of revulsion given voice by politicians and governments as it created a new political context.

Bomb shifted climate against paramilitaries, writes **Dan Keenan**, Northern News Editor

OMAGH CHANGED the political climate in Ireland against the paramilitaries in much the same way that September

11th shifted the mood globally against international terrorism.

The bombing prompted a wave of revulsion given voice by politicians and governments in keeping with the scale of the horror.

However, statement after statement by key elected representatives, both pro- and anti-Belfast Agreement, placed the atrocity firmly in a political context.

Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams said: "I am totally horrified by this action. I condemn it without any equivocation whatsoever." Martin McGuinness branded the Real IRA attack "indefensible" and added: "Those responsible are aligning themselves with the forces opposed to a democratic settlement of the conflict here."

SDLP leader John Hume said: "It is clear the people who carried out this terrible deed are not only appalling murderers, they are undiluted fascists."

DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson used the occasion to attack the Ulster Unionists under David Trimble who had backed the Belfast Agreement.

"It is the Northern Ireland Office who spawned the process of buying off the terrorists and encouraging the gun," he said.

Mr Trimble deflected some of that criticism by saying the atrocity "would not have happened if the IRA had handed over its weapons and explosives. Sinn Féin cannot escape its responsibility in this bloody atrocity".

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The British and Irish governments emphasised the need for the guilty to be caught and the peace process to be maintained.

Bertie Ahern promised his government would "ruthlessly suppress those responsible for the attack . . . We will continue to work in dealing with this particular group, with the RUC and gardai".

Tony Blair said: "There is total determination to bring the perpetrators to justice but an equal determination that they will not be allowed to destroy the [peace] process." The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) agreed.

The demand for justice posed difficulties for Sinn Féin which, according to a BBC report at the time, stood back from supporting the RUC in its investigation. However, it was also reported that Provisional IRA members had pressed dissident republicans in the Real IRA, which was responsible for the attack, to end their campaign.

Within three weeks, Gerry Adams announced: "Sinn Féin believes the violence we have seen must be for all of us now a thing of the past - over, done with and gone." His words fell short of the war-is-over statement demanded by unionists, but it was arguably as far as he could have gone at the time. McGuinness's moves in the direction of the arms decommissioning body were seen as beefing up the Adams claim.

This in turn gave David Trimble sufficient room for manoeuvre to meet Adams for talks - which they did within days - and for plans finally to form an Executive to be discussed. It also sweetened the atmosphere for the arrival of US president Bill Clinton.

The bombing gave anti-agreement unionists an opportunity to alienate further "ordinary" unionists from the Ulster Unionists. They had a strategy of wrecking the Trimble leadership, portraying him as a "pushover" leader.

By targeting Trimble they targeted the agreement in the hope that it could be renegotiated to reflect their own views.

A decade later, the British and Irish governments, the pro-agreement parties and the US administration have hailed the new stability fostered by the accord.

For the DUP, that accord has been supplanted by the St Andrews deal, a new name and a refashioned agreement. Not for the first time in Northern history both sides can claim victories of sorts.

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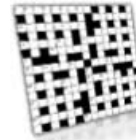
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