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The road to peace that led from an atrocity

10 August 2008

Brian Feeney examines the political journey travelled by the North's politicians since Omagh's awful day.

While in jail in 1966 for public order offences, Ian Paisley passed the time writing a commentary on St Paul's epistle to the Romans. Forty years later, people remarked that Paisley's sudden agreement to share power with Sinn Féin in 2007 was the most dramatic conversion since Paul's on the road to Damascus.

Indeed, some critics in his own church accused him of going against his own reading of St Paul by agreeing to be "unevenly yoked together with unbelievers". Republicans' transformation process was more torturous and vulpine, but equally astonishing.

Nevertheless, the single most important factor in establishing the present Northern assembly and executive was Ian Paisley's acquiescence in the concept of power-sharing at St Andrews in October 2006.

Without Paisley's compliance, there would have been no point in holding assembly elections in March 2007, because no executive would have been nominated.

The scenes in Stormont in spring 2007, with Paisley sitting beside Gerry Adams at the apex of two carefully arranged tables, and Paisley walking down the marble staircase to the Great Hall in Stormont beside former IRA chief of staff Martin McGuinness, were unimaginable only weeks before.

A decade earlier, what hopes there were rested on David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party and John Hume's SDLP, the so-called centre ground. The DUP and Sinn Féin were not in the reckoning.

It is a measure of the distance the North's politicians have travelled since the horrendous Omagh bomb in August 1998, that both the UUP and SDLP have been eclipsed and, in an astounding

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political revolution, men who were reviled for decades as dangerous extremists now administer the North.

It is worth recalling that only six months before the Omagh bomb, and just over a month before the Good Friday Agreement, Sinn Féin had been expelled from political negotiations after the IRA shot a member of the UDA. The bewildering speed of events in 1998 concealed the fact that deep suspicions and tensions remained undiminished.

True, the Good Friday Agreement was endorsed by referendums in both parts of Ireland, but just over 50 per cent of unionists supported the Agreement, compared to around 90 per cent of nationalists.

The IRA remained intact and fully armed and was strenuously resisting all demands for decommissioning: 'not a bullet, not an ounce', the graffiti read. Using the nom de guerre Red Hand Defenders, the UDA continued to kill Catholics at random.

There was a genuine and justifiable fear on the part of the Irish and British governments that the huge toll of the Omagh atrocity - 29 men, women and children and two unborn twins dead, and dozens maimed and disfigured, could derail the fragile political deal.

Ian Paisley's denunciations of the Agreement carried more weight after Omagh, because many unionists did not make any distinction between the IRA and the Real IRA. It is only with hindsight that it can be seen that the few optimists were correct, namely, that the horror of Omagh finally extinguished any case for a renewed campaign of violence.

It took some time to realise it, after 30 years of shooting and bombing, but what was different after 1998 was that the stand-off between the UUP and Sinn Féin, which lasted until 2005, produced a series of political crises, not terrorist crises.

Perhaps it required that period to become accustomed to the change. The stand-off was this: Sinn Féin insisted that David Trimble establish an executive as the Agreement required.

Trimble insisted that the IRA decommission as the Agreement required. In repeated negotiations, which British prime minister Tony Blair on one occasion referred to as 'Groundhog Day', the question boiled down to: who would jump first?

During this lengthy seven-year period, David Trimble repeatedly set up an administration, set a deadline for its termination, and then walked out when his deadline passed without movement from the IRA.

Unfortunately for his own party and the SDLP, Trimble's refusal to work with Sinn Féin except on his own terms provided ammunition for the DUP. It asked if Sinn Féin was so bad, why was Trimble going into an executive with it?

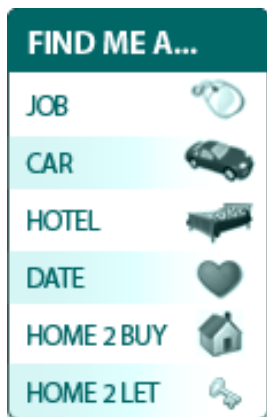
Paisley's DUP stayed on the outside, untainted by association with Sinn Féin, and its position derived credibility from each IRA escapade, such as the €37million Northern Bank robbery in December 2004.

The SDLP was powerless and looked increasingly marginalised and irrelevant in this endgame between republicans and unionists.

While David Trimble's party haemorrhaged votes to Paisley's DUP, in election after election nationalists swung behind Sinn Féin: each community sent its toughest negotiators to the table.

Finally, in the British general election in May 2005, Sinn Féin and the DUP emerged as the decisive winners on each side. David Trimble lost his seat as the UUP collapsed from nine seats to one. Sinn





Fé in emerged with five Westminster seats to the SDLP's two.

The consequence was clear, and the Irish and British governments put it starkly to both the DUP and Sinn Féin. Do a deal or we will abolish the assembly, make you redundant and the two governments will run the North together. It was time to put up or shut up. Both Adams and Paisley showed that, in poker parlance, they knew there's a time to hold 'em and a time to fold 'em.

Two months later, in July 2005, the IRA announced it was standing down. In September, the IRA decommissioned its weapons. What the IRA had said it would never do, it did, but did for a political purpose.

The DUP was left isolated, with huge pressure bearing down from the British government. If the DUP did not agree to talks, the assembly would close on a date set by the British government.

After intense negotiations over Christmas 2006, Sinn Féin finally agreed to the last piece in the jigsaw: support for policing - a DUP requirement. Even so, only Ian Paisley could have brought his party into an executive with Sinn Féin.

His personal standing in the unionist community was enough for most unionist voters, unhappy though they were at the prospect. Many in Paisley's own party were deeply dismayed, and remain so. What was the alternative? Paisley said it was more "Dublin rule".

After a year of joint DUP Sinn Féin administration, it is clear that whatever strains there are - and they are often visible - the two former antagonists have a working arrangement which has so far overcome all major obstacles. On September 1, it will be announced that the IRA army council has disbanded.

Why? So that policing and justice can be devolved. It's true that sharp exchanges about planning and how green the DUP environment minister is have crackled around the assembly, and that the UUP and SDLP bitterly resent the way Sinn Féin and the DUP run the executive as their own fiefdom, but that's politics. Who would have thought ten years ago that there would be an outbreak of politics in the North?

Brian Feeney is a commentator and author of Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years



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