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Northern Ireland: A land still troubled by its past

Saturday, 14 March 2009

In the week that the horror of sectarian violence returned, David McKintrick asks how much Ulster has really changed

The scene at St Therese's Catholic Church in Banbridge could have been an image from Northern Ireland 20 years ago. Silent crowds watching sombre lines of policemen marching behind the coffin of a fallen comrade. Grief-stricken members of the bereaved family comforting one another as the lone piper played a haunting lament.

But there was one big difference at the burial of PC Stephen Carroll yesterday. Two senior members of Sinn Fein were among the mourners, standing side by side with former loyalist paramilitaries. Behind the coffin was the Commissioner of the Irish Garda alongside his counterpart from the PSNI. All gestures unthinkable just a few years ago.

Thus the violent death and symbolic funeral of PC Carroll underlines the contradictions of the new "peace" in Northern Ireland – which has been both profound and patchy.

Another of these contradictions can be found in Belfast. There, in a tough loyalist ghetto in the north of the city, many parents have taken to sending their children to a religiously integrated school some distance away. They used to go to the nearby Protestant school, but instead the Protestant children are, for the first time, encountering Catholic kids and being educated with them. Yet this is not altogether a good news story.

Thus Protestant citizens raised much of the money to pay for its first proper Catholic chapel: a haunting lament. And history, ancient and modern, dictates that the peace will probably never be perfect.

A couple of centuries ago Belfast used to congratulate itself on being a reasonably peaceful little town, and on generally avoiding the sectarian disturbances which plagued Co Armagh. In fact Protestant citizens raised much of the money to pay for its first proper Catholic chapel: they even formed a guard of honour for the parish priest as he arrived to celebrate its first Mass. But things changed, partly because of those disturbances in Armagh. Protestant gangs
Seven thousand Catholics fled, many of them taking refuge in Belfast. This influx disturbed the religious balance there, and conflict ensued when the growing Catholic population brought competition for jobs and territory. The first sectarian riot came in 1813. The years that followed brought many clashes, often at the exact locations where rioting broke out during the most recent Troubles. Those sporadic riots went on, every few decades, right through the 20th century, though the recent Troubles were the worst and most sustained ever seen.

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Most of the initial civil rights demands have been dealt with to general satisfaction and are long gone from the political agenda. Effective laws mean that employers who discriminate are hit where it hurts most, in the pocket. The old bastions of Protestant employment no longer pose a problem – some, such as the famous shipyards, because there are hardly any jobs there any more.

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The same secrecy was recently outlined privately by a Catholic priest whose parish includes a large, entirely Protestant estate: at least everyone, including the priest, thought it was entirely Protestant. It was only when a parishioner died that he discovered some Catholics lived there. They were so cautious and discreet that, instead of going to Mass locally, they travel weekly to another church miles away to keep their religion unknown.

Since the killing rate has fallen there has been a huge sense of security easing: many have gone to places they have never gone to before. But no peacelines have come down and efforts to integrate housing are tentative. This is not an ideal way to live, yet life has been so much better than in the years of violence that most relished the improvement and in many ways settled for it.

This week, with the deaths of two soldiers and a policeman everyone re-checked their level of security. Police officers in particular are locking up their homes, checking their cars and reverting to the old ways of varying their routines.

No one knows if the republican dissidents who carried out the killings will strike again; no one knows whether loyalist extremists will exact revenge. But the new element in this, the latest of so many security crises, was that the body politic has so far proved cohesive, determined and united in asserting that the police are now everyone’s police.

Mr Robinson and Mr McGuinness have gone for St Patrick’s Day to the States, where they will united in asserting that the police are now everyone’s police.

Back home, it is evident that the society they represent remains physically divided, containing as it does two separate communities. Yet historic breakthroughs have been made. The police service has been successfully integrated into all of society, as it has never been over the centuries.

And politicians have achieved a striking measure of top-down integration: Mr Robinson and Mr McGuinness are both figures from the bad old days, but these one-time warriors have now turned into heroes of the peace process. The hope is that the model of cooperation they have established will gradually trickle down into the divided society, for in political terms they have displayed a degree of political integration most had never thought possible.

History and geography dictate that Northern Ireland is never going to be a tranquil, placid place. There is still much division around, but it coexists with hope and a determination not to return to the bad old days.

The prospects were once summed up in advice by the former US senator George Mitchell: "This has been centuries in the making; it will be years in the changing."

Source: Independent

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Source: Independent
my father and mother's parents immigrated to America from Ireland. They used to pray that the troubles would end. Reading about the latest killings it makes me sad to see the hatred continue. The post by Canuck is correct.

Posted by Alan Collins | 15.03.09, 20:36 GMT

Sectarianism won't go away as long as children are segregated from the age of 5 depending on their parents' religious beliefs. School should be completely secular and about education rather than religious indoctrination. Teaching kids about religion and other faiths is important, but I don't think school is the place for worship and ceremony. That's what church is for.

I firmly believe the divisions in Northern Ireland would vanish in a generation with a totally integrated and secular education system.

And let's stop referring to kids as "Catholic children" and "Protestant children". You wouldn't refer to a "Socialist child" or a "Conservative child" would you?

Posted by Glen | 15.03.09, 17:10 GMT

David McKittrick, joint author of the very significant book "Lost Lives", once more hits the nail on the head. As someone, born and bred in Belfast, I continually despair of the "goings-on", even to this day in the province. Last November, on a quick visit for a family funeral, the attitude to those who dared wear a poppy and mourners from the Republic of Ireland having to leave their vehicles outside Belfast, brought home the fact little had changed over the years. Parentage and the educational system is the root cause, sadly some parents, on both sides, to this day preach bigotry and regrettably the influence of the Christian Brothers still prevails with a loathing to anything British. George Mitchell, an honourable man, is probably right, it will be decades before change will take place, if ever. Bigotry is a cancer and throughout Ireland it is endemic.

Posted by Ulsterman | 15.03.09, 11:13 GMT

http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland-a-land-still-troubl... 16/03/2009
The real tragedy of centuries of English misrule is that the latest charges, even if true, will never be believed; and if untrue, will require decades to disprove.

Posted by JerryF | 15.03.09, 04:35 GMT

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Posted by canuck | 14.03.09, 14:11 GMT

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