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McGuinness dons mask of Dev in history cycle

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By Patrick Murphy

14/03/09

Irish history teaches us that the surprising thing about this week's political developments is that so many are surprised by them. For 10 years we have been stuck in 1921. This week we entered 1922. The war against the

British is sporadic but the civil war has begun.

The pro-treaty Irish and the British are on one side. The dissidents (in 1922 they were called irregulars) are on the other.

The Omagh bombing (which has many unanswered questions for British intelligence) delayed this week's political showdown for 10 years. But the day had to come when Sinn Fein would be forced to stand firmly on the side of the British government.

In 1922 Liam Cosgrave did it, shooting 77 republicans to prove his point. Eamon de Valera hanged republicans to prove the same point in the 1940s. Both men responded to what might be termed dissident republican violence.

So when Martin McGuinness branded dissidents as traitors this week, he merely repeated history, word perfect and right on cue. Irish history does not do surprises, just tragic repetition.

At the same time, Westminster rushed through legislation giving Sinn Fein one hand on policing. Like Cosgrave and de Valera, they now have the armed power of the state to crush their opponents. The vast majority of people will

support them.

Sinn Fein can justify its actions by having been democratically elected and by claiming to defend what it negotiated in the peace process.

But the soft underbelly in the second part of its argument is that their power to negotiate came from violence.

This included, for example, the killing of three young Scottish soldiers in March 1971. They were lured by the chance of a drink. The two sappers in Antrim died for

a pizza.

Sinn Fein's argument is further compromised by matching its condemnation of dissidents with a defence of the Provisional IRA.

This implies that political violence can be wrong in its timing but not in its content. Gerry Adams said that in earlier days there was no peaceful or democratic way forward for those who wanted civil rights.

Their argument against dissidents is – our violence was justified, yours is not.

It claims dissidents have no support, no strategy and no chance of winning.

All three points are flimsy. The first suggests that high levels of support justify killing, thereby claiming

(wrongly) that morality is determined by majority rule.

The dissidents do have a strategy – to kill until their demands are met. It is the same dumb, barbaric strategy pursued by the PIRA for 30 years. Dissidents know they have no chance of winning, just as a relay runner in an early leg of the race knows he only has to pass on the baton.

A much simpler and stronger condemnation would be 'our violence was wrong, yours is too'. But to say that the PIRA would have to surrender its claim to the mantle of republican legitimacy, which has violence at its core. It was that claim which sparked McGuinness to call the dissidents traitors. Now the war is about republican purity.

It is a risky strategy for Sinn Fein. But it has the support of the British government which headed a queue, apparently without sin, only too willing to cast the first stone against this week's killers.

This government illegally invaded Iraq where countless hundreds of thousands died. It is a Labour government, which is heavily funded by trade unionists, organisers of our peace rallies.

The morality of violence appears to depend on who is doing it.

We need stronger moral and political arguments against violence. One would be an assembly which does not inevitably produce sectarian extremes and which governs us better.

Agriculture is well managed. Our roads network is improving. But education is a mess, environment is a joke and the economy is a mystery. Despite that, the assembly will be above criticism for the next six months.

If the DUP and Sinn Fein want to stand shoulder to shoulder, why not abandon their sectarian entrenchment over education? There exists a compromise which is far from ideal but which would provide for effective change.


Let them both agree on the Dickson plan, based on selection at 14. That would end the 11-plus and retain a form of selection.

Ireland has long been a land of rain, hypocrisy and armed republicans. The

best we can hope for is that the rain might ease off.

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