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Paisley told — stay away from victims' service

(by Suzanne Breen, *Sunday Tribune*)

Victims of one of the North's worst IRA bombings have told the Rev Ian Paisley to stay away from next month's commemoration to mark the 30th anniversary of the atrocity.

Some of those injured in the La Mon explosion said the DUP leader's "cosy relationship" with Sinn Féin meant he was no longer welcome at their service. They questioned how the DUP, who had long demanded an independent inquiry into the explosion and Gerry Adams' alleged involvement in it, could be in government with Sinn Féin.

Billy McDowell, who with his wife Lily suffered horrendous injuries in the February 1978 blast, said: "Paisley should stay away from our commemoration. He'd probably want to bring McGuinness with him if he could. Seeing them chuckling at Stormont turns my stomach."

Twelve people were killed and 30 injured when the IRA firebomb swept through the La Mon hotel, on the outskirts on Belfast. The victims were attending the Irish collie club's annual dinner dance. Hugh McGucken, then collie club vice-chairman, said: "If Paisley comes to our commemoration, I'll walk out."

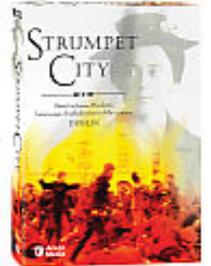
A short service will take place in Castlereagh Council offices on February 17, followed by a wreath-laying ceremony by the bereaved and injured.

Speaking under parliamentary privilege in the House of Commons in 2003, DUP MP Iris Robinson said police were certain the attack was "sanctioned and approved" by Gerry Adams. The Sinn Féin president strongly denied the allegation. One of 25 people arrested following La Mon, he was charged with IRA membership but the charges were later dropped.

In February 1978, Adams was IRA chief-of-staff. An ex-IRA member told the *Sunday Tribune* that the devolution of authority within IRA ranks meant he wouldn't have had prior knowledge of La Mon. But the source believed a relative of Adams', who was Belfast Brigade commander, knew in advance.

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The bomb was on a 58-minute timer. However, the phone box the IRA had planned to use for the warning had been vandalised. When the unit eventually reached west Belfast and made the call, there was an inadequate nine minutes left.

An ex-IRA member said: "The whole operation was flawed from the beginning. I'd suspect the person who suggested it was a British agent." Another ex-IRA member said: "If the IRA unit's car had broken down, they'd have kicked in the door of a house, demanded car keys, and hijacked the vehicle so they could get home safely.

"When the phone was vandalised, why didn't they burst into a house and use the phone there, ensuring lives weren't lost? It was a crowd of thick c***s on the operation."

Although the IRA apologised for La Mon, the leadership didn't discipline those involved. Robert Murphy, given life imprisonment after pleading guilty to manslaughter, was nicknamed 'Cinders' in jail. Eddie Brophy was acquitted of the bombing. In a west Belfast club where he drank, some customers would jokingly ask: "Eddie, have you got a light?"

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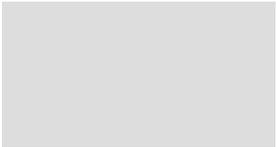




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