

A Consensus on Crowing

The destructive pasts of Sinn Féin and the DUP are disappearing in a frenzy of self-congratulation

Glenn Patterson



THE RECENT ASSERTION by Gerry Adams that Ian Paisley ‘radicalised a generation of young people’ like himself might have raised eyebrows elsewhere, but in Northern Ireland – which on 10th April marked the 10th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement – it was another example of a remarkable consensus emerging between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party: a consensus about the past, not the future.

After decades disputing whose voters were more deserving of the title Most Oppressed People Ever, Sinn Féin and the DUP have spent the past 10 months patting themselves – and each other – on the back for forging the Most Successful Peace Process Ever-ever-ever. The casual observer could be forgiven for thinking that both parties had had their eyes on the prize of a power-sharing executive at Stormont all along: that conflict had been no more than the preamble to conflict resolution, the Troubles a vast hoarding erected on the rubble of the 70s and 80s: “We apologise for any inconvenience caused in the preparation of a brighter tomorrow ...”

That it took nine years from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement to get the two parties into government together has not lessened the self-congratulation or the crowing over their rise to pre-eminence at the expense of their rivals. The Social Democratic and Labour party has been rechristened by republicans the South Down and Londonderry party in view of its dwindling electoral base and, by implication (the use of Londonderry), its alienation from nationalist public opinion.

Seamus Mallon, the former SDLP deputy leader and former deputy first minister of Northern Ireland,

famously described the Good Friday Agreement as ‘Sunningdale for slow learners’. He might have said ‘for Slow Negotiators’ (the 1973 Sunningdale power-sharing deal was hammered out in weeks), or even ‘for people with short memories’: Jonathan Powell, whose book *Great Hatred, Little Room* has been serialised in the *Guardian*, claims in an interview that there were ‘no serious negotiations’ in the 70s and 80s, by which he means no negotiations that included the republican movement; not by the front door anyway.

He, too, belittles the SDLP’s influence: “Seamus Mallon’s complaint is that we talked to Sinn Féin because they had the guns. My answer to that is: yes, and your point is?” His point, Jonathan, is that at the time Sinn Féin did not have the majority of even the nationalist vote.

In *The Trouble With Guns*, published in the year of the agreement, Malachi O’Doherty summarises Sinn Féin’s tactics: “Republicans would talk us all into a clear linkage between two things that were not necessarily part of each other: constitutional agreement and peace. What satisfied most people in both communities might not be enough to satisfy republicans. Linking agreement and peace would put all parties under a moral onus to find not the best compromise between their different positions, but an agreement that could include Sinn Féin”. In other words, every IRA bomb sent the same petulant message: “Look what you’re still making us do”.

Only a fool would be sorry that they had finally let themselves be persuaded to stop doing it, and that Paisley had been dissuaded from marching men up any more hills. But it would be a bigger (Blair-sized?) fool who argued that just because we are where we are, there wasn’t a shorter way. A way, say, that didn’t take in the theft of £26.5m from the Northern Bank or the murders of Robert McCartney and Paul Quinn.

As for that consensus on the past, there remains one small matter of semantics to be resolved. To Sinn Féin, the quarter century from 1969 to the IRA’s 1994 ceasefire was a war. Not so to their partners in government. Sinn Féin might advance its argument if it could come up with a catchy name, though I wouldn’t recommend Ireland’s earlier 20th-century history for guidance. Applying the 1919-21 war of independence’s model of end results would give us the war of devolution with a north-south dimension, while any analogy with the Irish civil war (1922-3) would take us into the tricky territory of, well, territory – a Northern Irish civil war being as unacceptable to republican grassroots as a six-counties war would be to unionists. (For practical purposes most people in Northern Ireland/the Six Counties agree to call this ‘here’).

Perhaps republicans could borrowing from Our Wee Country, a website for fans of Northern Ireland’s football team, to create Our Wee War - whose initials, OWW, would give voice to our past pain, lest we were to forget our debt to the people who delivered the Most Successful Peace Process etc. After years of using ‘conflict’ (see opening paragraph), I am coming back round to Troubles (see same paragraph). Those were very, very disturbed times, Seriously Fucked Up in fact. There’s an acronym to conjure with: SF*dUP, anyone? □

Glenn Patterson, who was born in Belfast in 1961, is the author of *Fat Lad*, *Black Night at Thunder Mountain* and *Lapsed Protestant*, among other works. His new novel, *Once Upon a Hill: Love in Troubled Times*, will be published in September.

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