



CNI

Comment - Exit McGuinness, plaudits hiding the blood

It is an indicator of Northern Ireland's curious trajectory that with the definitive retirement of Martin McGuinness, a former leader of the Provisional IRA, pundits are lamenting: "Who on earth are the Democratic Unionists [DUP] going to deal with now?", writes Jenny McCartney in The Sunday Times.

Who indeed? For the former deputy first minister had carved out a unique position in Northern Ireland, balanced by his long history at the heart of the IRA and a pragmatic ability to maintain relationships with the Democratic Unionists in government.

In 1973 he told a Dublin court that he was "very, very proud of" his membership of the IRA. Yet as long as he was deputy first minister, the more restless elements of Sinn Fein were containable while the DUP remained willing to engage with

the only IRA man to have won the endorsement of the Rev Ian Paisley, the DUP's late founder.

Wags called Paisley and McGuinness "the chuckle brothers": neither man ever seemed so jovial as when in the other's company, as though the sheer incongruity of their friendship leaked out laughing gas. There was something disturbing about it, like watching two rival arsonists high-fiving: both had stoked the blaze of conflict in their different ways.

On the day that McGuinness resigned from the Northern Ireland executive, clearly in failing health, a picture of him was taken through the rain-lashed window of his car. He looked momentarily dazed and something about his expression recalled that famous photograph — also taken through a car window — of Margaret Thatcher in 1990 as she left Downing Street for the last time.

Thatcher was, of course, perceived as the arch-enemy of Irish republicanism and barely escaped with her life from the rubble of the IRA's Brighton bomb in 1984. Yet all political careers come to an end and the ebbing of such power, for those who have tasted it, feels sudden and strange.

He believed that the IRA had the right to end the life of anyone who stood in the way of a 'United Ireland'

It may be of some comfort to McGuinness, in his retirement, that nowhere does sentimentality like Northern Ireland. The country in which I grew up is quick to anger but ready to spring to tears at a picturesque moment. I recognise a trace of that in myself, but also that such sentimentality can prove toxic to the truth.

As McGuinness departs, wreathed in plaudits, he has been warmly praised by Ian Paisley Jr as someone whose “remarkable journey” not only “saved lives” but also “made the lives of countless people better in Northern Ireland” because of the government that the DUP and Sinn Fein worked in together.

From the republic, the former taoiseach Bertie Ahern paid glowing tribute: “No doubt he was a hard man, if 10% of the stories are true. But as a negotiator, he believed in his cause but he was also courteous; you could have some fun with him.”

“Some fun”? Ahern might wish to consider that in 1990, when McGuinness is widely reported to have been head of the IRA’s Northern Command, armed and masked IRA members took the family of a Londonderry man called Patrick “Patsy” Gillespie hostage. They then strapped him into a van carrying a 1,000lb bomb and forced him to drive it to a British Army checkpoint. There the IRA detonated the bomb remotely, killing Gillespie as well as five British soldiers. Gillespie, a Catholic father of three, had worked in the canteen of the local army base: he was described in the IRA statement as “part of the British war machine”.

In 2013, at an Oxford Union debate, McGuinness refused to condemn the Gillespie attack and argued that the IRA could have caused even more civilian carnage than it did. The Social Democratic and Labour Party politician Alex Attwood retorted: “The IRA killed nearly as many people than in the entire Irish War of Independence . . . yet Martin McGuinness seems to want us to thank him and the IRA that it was not even greater.”

Indeed so. Although it may puncture the feelgood factor, the past holds certain realities that it is

criminal to ignore. Chief among them is that the IRA, and its loyalist counterparts in the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association, regularly carried out murders so appalling that their recollection can still chill the blood.

Society forgets the worst details: we are collectively programmed to forget — and perhaps that is a necessary thing. But the relatives of the numerous victims of their atrocities cannot forget. They are left to struggle on through life with the constant ache of loss for a mother, a father, a teenage son, a pregnant wife.

Now it seems as if we are doing more than forgetting: we are putting in place a falsely romantic narrative of the Troubles. This has taken root in certain parts of the British Establishment and the media, though less so, I think, in ordinary British and Irish people who remember the bombings.

The misty-eyed talk of McGuinness as “a man of war who embraced peace” has begun to set my teeth on edge.

What kind of “war” was this? The IRA pursued its “war” in a manner routinely designed to outrage every aspect of the Geneva conventions. The Troubles were a squalid sectarian conflict, arrogantly perpetrated by a violent minority in opposition to the declared wishes of the majority of Catholics and Protestants.

Last week McGuinness’s statement described pre-Troubles Northern Ireland as “an apartheid Orange state”, adding that he was “privileged to be part of the generation that broke that apartheid state apart”. It was back to the old dogged self-justification.

Regrets? Too few to mention. Yet post-partition Northern Ireland, for all its flaws and wrongs, was not an “apartheid state”. The Derry socialist and civil rights campaigner Eamonn McCann rightly described it as “insulting to black South Africans to imply the experience of Soweto was much of a muchness with growing up in the Bogside”.

It was paramilitary terror that later drove Catholics and Protestants into ever more segregated enclaves. Meanwhile, those brave Catholic Irish nationalists who stood up to the IRA were met with threats, abuse and worse.

When history contemplates McGuinness, it may certainly note that he was strategically astute and — in his later years — personally cordial. But it must also record that he consistently believed that the Provisional IRA had, for nearly 30 years, the essential right to end the life of anyone who stood in the way of a “united Ireland” and also others who counted as “collateral damage”. If we don’t recognise the moral enormity of that position, we’re telling ourselves soft lies that may some day nourish a new generation of gunmen.