

Paisley: Enigmatic Convert

Brian Lennon SJ

Ian Paisley steps down today as First Minister of the devolved government in Northern Ireland, having spent more than forty years as the most prominent and vocal opponent of power-sharing. Irish Jesuit, Brian Lennon, assesses how far Dr Paisley has travelled and why – and what challenges face Northern Ireland now.

Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness together hosted a major investment conference in Belfast in the week ending 9th May. The event coincided with the first anniversary of the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland, itself a remarkable event, when you consider where Paisley and McGuinness have come from.

McGuinness was leader of the IRA in Derry on Bloody Sunday in 1972. He was close to Gerry Adams whose group took over the IRA from others who wanted to move towards politics. The traditional IRA view of politics was that it led to compromise, negotiations with the devious British, and ultimately defeat. Adams' group led the IRA throughout most of the Troubles and were therefore party to the terrible violence of the most destructive period in the history of Irish nationalism.

Paisley has had a long and chequered career as an anti-Catholic bigot. Jesuits have figured prominently in his statements. In his *The Jesuits, Their Start, Sign, System, Secrecy, Strategy* he uses the following quote from Nicolini, whom I presume – he does not give the reference – is G. B. Nicolini, author of the *History of the Jesuits* (London, 1854):

The Jesuit is the man of circumstances - despotic in Spain, constitutional in England, Republican in Paraguay, bigot in Rome, idolater in India. He will assume and act out in his own person all those different features by which men are usually distinguished from each other. He will accompany the gay woman of the world to the theatre, and will share in the excess of the debauchee. With solemn countenance he will take his place by the side of the religious man at church, or revel in the tavern with the glutton or sot. He dresses in all garbs, speaks all languages, knows all customs, is



present everywhere, though nowhere recognized - and all this, it would seem (oh, monstrous blasphemy), for the greater glory of God. Ad majorem [sic] Dei gloriam. (p. 12)

He has had a long history of protest, including, in 1963, at the lowering of Belfast City Hall's flag at the death of John XXIII. In 1964 his demand that the police remove an Irish Tricolour from Sinn Féin's Belfast offices led to two days of rioting. In 1966 he demonstrated against the ecumenism of the Presbyterian Church. This was prompted by their temerity in meeting Irish Jesuit Michael Hurley whose 'Jesuitical cunning was demonstrated by his success in obtaining for his book introductory messages by...[the four Church leaders]' (*The Jesuits...*, p.2). The same year he protested when Thomas Corbishley, the prominent British Jesuit, preached in Westminster Abbey. In November 1967 during his televised speech at the Oxford Union he took out a Communion wafer and mocked those who believe in transubstantiation. In 1988 he called John Paul II 'the antichrist'. In 1966 he was one of the founders of the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee, which was tied in with the loyalist paramilitaries.

So what factors led to the unlikely outcome of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness sitting down in Government together and earning themselves the nickname over the past year of 'The Chuckle Brothers'?

Factors in the peace process

The most important was the EU, which the UK and Ireland joined in 1973 (then the EEC).

The UK joined initially for trade reasons. When they did, Ireland had to follow because over 70% of its trade was with the UK. Further, colonialism had left a mark of inferiority on the Irish. Joining the EEC changed this. Ireland was now an equal partner with 11 other countries. It was able to diversify its trade, but it also built a more diverse political relationship with the UK, as civil servants, farmers, industrialists, trade unionists and others learned how to work together on a variety of issues.

Other EEC countries raised the Northern Ireland Troubles with successive UK governments and so a problem, which from a UK point of view was not a major one, took on a greater significance. This was helped by the fact that apparently President Reagan - who was not dependent on Irish-American votes - raised the issue at all his meetings with Margaret Thatcher.

These pressures, and some skilful diplomacy, gradually led to a revision of both the British view that the conflict was simply an internal UK matter, and of Irish nationalism. In 1985 the two governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In it they changed their analysis of the conflict to one of a double minority.

A double minority

Nationalists were always seen as the minority in Northern Ireland because they were the smaller group numerically, had less power and status, had been discriminated against, and had been cut off from their fellow Nationalists in the 1921 settlement.

But the double minority thesis argued that Protestant Unionists were also a minority. Their group's power and influence on the island as a whole had progressively declined since 1800. This also happened within Northern Ireland since 1969 as Protestants moved out of border areas in response to IRA attacks, and demographic patterns meant they gradually lost their majority status in Belfast. Physically this meant a withdrawal towards the north-east of the island. Next to that is the Irish Sea. This combined with their sense of being surrounded by the IRA and threatened by the Catholic Church

(which many saw as a monolithic international organization dedicated to the destruction of their community) and the fact that they depended on the British Government for protection, all helped to maintain the Protestant sense of being under siege.

As well as adopting this analysis, however, the 1985 Agreement also committed the two Governments to work together on the conflict. This meant that their clients within Northern Ireland could no longer play one over against the other. This helped transform megaphone diplomacy into a remarkable degree of shared understanding between the Governments.

Finally, the 1985 Agreement made abundantly clear what was already a political reality: there could be no devolved government in Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority of both Unionists and Nationalists.

Military stalemate

Peace processes tend not to be all rosy. An important factor was the military stalemate: the British army and the IRA could not defeat each other. This did not stop them trying. The IRA killed members of the security forces and also a long list of other people whom at various times they decided were 'helping the British war machine', ranging from a female census collector to businessmen and people who provided services for the security forces.

For their part the British engaged in what is euphemistically referred to as a 'shoot-to-kill' policy. They also ran agents at a very high level within the IRA and these agents committed serial murders and colluded with Loyalist attacks both on IRA members and uninvolved Catholics. These actions completely undermined the image the British Government liked to present of itself as the ring-master, with the two 'tribes' slugging it out inside the ring. The reality is that the Government was as much part of the conflict as any other group.

The outcome was stalemate. In itself this would not have led to much progress without the IRA response, which was helped by two other factors.

The IRA response

The first was that the IRA saw a new alternative to violence in the early 1980s. (There had always been an alternative to violence - politics - but unfortunately the IRA had not been able to see it). The emergence of this new alternative was helped by an unlikely source: Margaret Thatcher. It was Thatcher's absolute resistance to the demands of the 1981 IRA hunger strikers which greatly increased the sympathy for them in the wider nationalist community. Up to this point the majority of the nationalist community had always opposed violence, but 100,000 attended the funeral of Bobby Sands. This opened up new political possibilities for Republicans.

The second factor was that the Adams leadership decided to seize these political possibilities and showed great skill in so doing and in surviving. This should not be taken for granted - look at the barriers to peace moves in Spain, partly caused by failures among the ETA leadership to take political opportunities.

Movement in the IRA and in the Ulster Unionists eventually led to the multi-party Good Friday Agreement of 1998, subsequently endorsed in referenda North and South.

All this shows to some extent how and why Republicans were brought into the peace process. But what about Paisley's DUP party?

The DUP response

The DUP response to all events was simple: NO! This brought them dividends: in the 1996 elections the UUP won 30 seats, the DUP 24. In 2007 the DUP got 36 seats, the UUP 18. (The greatest political struggles in Northern Ireland are within, not between, the traditions).

Yet within a few months of defeating their Unionist rivals the party which had made progress on the basis of a No vote went into government with Sinn Fein.

They faced a simple choice: did they want to

continue with direct rule from Westminster, with many decisions left unmade as the UK Government waited for developments, or did they want to take the opportunity to go into government themselves? If the latter, there was only one way to do it: accept Sinn Fein as partners. The pressure point of the 1985 Agreement finally bore fruit and the long-standing No party said Yes.

Paisley's role was crucial. If he had said No again, power sharing would eventually have happened, but it could have taken a long time. What could not have been predicted a year ago is that Paisley and McGuinness would get on so well together, much better than their predecessors, David Trimble from the UUP and Seamus Mallon from the SDLP.

Nonetheless Paisley, as he retires this week, is leaving before he wanted to. Two pressures contributed to his downfall. First there were questions raised about his son's business deals. Then there was the 'Chuckle Brothers' image.

DUP supporters may have agreed with Paisley's decision to go into government with Sinn Fein, and indeed pressed him to make it, but they took no pleasure in seeing their leader in a daily alliance with what to them were IRA murderers. So Paisley chuckling with McGuinness was a bridge too far for many. It is highly likely that Paisley's successor, Peter Robinson, will be much more dour, in public at least, in his dealings with Sinn Fein.

Other factors

The peace process was greatly helped at different points by the involvement of skilled and committed negotiators, among them Tony Blair, Bertie Ahern, Bill Clinton and Albert Reynolds. Tony Blair, in particular, distinguished himself by giving far more time to the issue than any previous British Prime Minister, with the possible exception of Gladstone.

The negotiations were slow and seemingly interminable. Thirteen years elapsed between the 1985 London-Dublin agreement and the multi-party agreement of 1998. A further nine were to pass before the DUP and Sinn Fein finally entered government

together in 2007. This emphasizes a point which may seem obvious but is often overlooked: getting an agreement is one thing; implementing it is often much more difficult.

As well as the much publicized public negotiations there was a good deal of back-room work in which various parties shuttled between the protagonists. Some of this was useful as it slowly built confidence and dispelled some wild assumptions.

There was also useful work done in the community sector. This was important because it was working-class areas that experienced the greatest impact of the violence. Our Jesuit community - "Iona" - in Portadown, in which British Jesuit Michael Bingham has been a member for many years, was involved from the beginning in local justice work, ecumenism and the dispute over Orange parades going through the Drumcree area.

My own work for the past ten years has mainly focused on dialogue groups in which we brought together Republicans, Nationalists, Unionists, and Loyalists. In these it was striking how people found they had much more in common than they realized, and also that their enemies were not the all-powerful, monolithic group they had expected, but instead had divisions and doubts similar to themselves.

Churches

Many Church people played an honourable role in the negotiations, often behind the scenes. Now the task is to deal with the continuing divisions: to challenge imperialism by either tradition, to overcome continuing tension on issues such as parading, to help understanding between different denominations, to witness to the unity to which Christ calls us. We need, with others throughout Europe, to address key questions about how faith can usefully challenge political identities to help them become more inclusive. And we may – possibly –

have some helpful things to say to groups in other countries stuck in conflict.

Perhaps also we need a more critical theology of reconciliation, which has often been applied simplistically to the conflict. The result has tended to be greater pressure on victims to forgive, with little examination of what forgiving means and little apparent understanding of the dreadful journey so many victims have to make, or that the first part of that journey often involves separation from, not reaching out to, the perpetrator.

Conclusion

Addressing the US Congress in one of his last appointments as Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern said: 'After so many decades of conflict, I am so proud, Madam Speaker, to be the first Irish leader to inform the United States Congress Ireland is at peace', sentiments echoed by both Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness.

It is in many ways a remarkable outcome. There are of course outstanding problems. Segregation in housing is today apparently at least as great as it was in 1998. Racism has increased as new immigrants have arrived. The economy remains heavily dependent on the public sector. But it is a far cry from the atrocities in Enniskillen, the Shankill Road, Loughin Island, Greysteel and Omagh, to name but a few.

Thank God for the change.

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