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## After 37 years, Martin McGuinness at last reaches point of no return

By Ed Curran Monday, 16 March 2009

The first time I laid eyes on James Martin Pacelli McGuinness was in a back street of the Bogside in 1972.

I had gone there to gauge the mood and report on what was then Northern Ireland's most infamous trouble spot.

There were no soldiers or police on patrol. Young men manned barricades and drove around the rock-strewn streets in hijacked cars. Up on the ancient walls of the city, over-shadowing the Bogside, troops peered down through their binoculars

Martin McGuinness. I had been told, was the man to meet because he was in control of these dangerous streets. As I walked towards the Brandywell Inn, notebook in hand, an old battered Ford Cortina drew alongside me. A group of youths jumped out and ordered me into the vehicle.



The muzzle of an American carbine protruded from under the driver's seat. I sat in the front and behind me the youths examined the contents of my wallet.

I said I was going to see a Mr McGuinness but mention of his name seemed to make no difference to their threatening mood as we drove around and around the dilapidated neighbourhood.

Half an hour elapsed and then the car swung into a street of old terraced houses. Ahead, through the windscreen, I could see a young, curly-haired man, dressed in a soiled Aran sweater

He was lolling up against the wall but sprung to attention as my captives drove up and spoke to

"This is Martin McGuinness," said the driver, beckoning in the direction of the young man who was already disappearing through a doorway. "You can get out and go in. Martin will talk to you

I remember not being able to take in how youthful Martin McGuinness was. At only 22 years,

That day, in 1972, I listened to his trenchant denunciation of the RUC and British Army and his vow that they would never walk the streets of the Bogside again.

There was no doubting his republican credentials and revolutionary zeal. He had piercing eyes and a chilling determination in his voice.

His message was dour and uncompromising, so much so that I remember feeling distinctly uncomfortable in his presence

Fast forward 37 years to the steps of Stormont last week as 58-year-old Martin McGuinness denounced dissident republicans to the media with these words: "These people, they are traitors to the island of Ireland. They have betrayed the political desires, hopes and aspirations of all of the people who live on this island and they don't deserve to be supported by anyone.

The message from his lips was very different from that which I had heard all those years ago on a May afternoon in the Bogside but the determination in his voice was still the same

Standing there alongside the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, it was a defining moment for this community, and

How far, I thought, had he and every one of us travelled in the 37 years since our paths had



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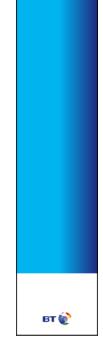
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first crossed? The young man of violence in 1972 has become a defender of peace in March 2009. In saying that, I am mindful of the dreadful deeds with which he and his cohorts were associated for so long.

The terrible tragedy for all of us is that he directed his undoubted leadership qualities for so much of his own life, and ours, in such a negative, destructive manner just as Ian Paisley too did for so long with his language of intransigence.

The past week's events have galvanised people across Northern Ireland as never before. The deaths of two soldiers and of a police officer have focussed our minds on the importance of preserving and nurturing political agreement.

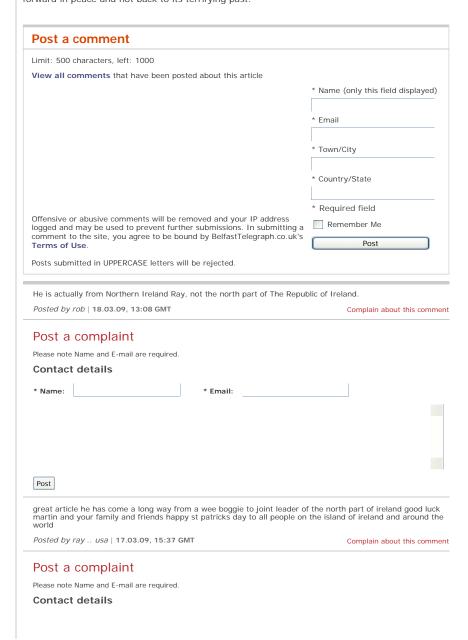
These murders were meant to drive a wedge between us but instead they have pulled us closer together. They have given a new meaning to the old slogan: 'United we stand, divided we fall.'

The side by side appearance of Peter Robinson, Martin McGuinness and the Chief Constable on Stormont's steps may well turn out to be the point of no return on the long road to a lasting

First there was Paisley and now there is McGuinness. From 1972 to 2009, what road to Damascus they have trodden.

How relieved and thankful every one of us should be that human nature can change and that politics can be made to work.

There is surely no better proof of that amongst us at this moment than James Martin Pacelli  ${\tt McGuinness,\ the\ Deputy\ First\ Minister\ of\ a\ new\ Northern\ Ireland\ --one\ that\ is\ desperate\ to\ go}$ forward in peace and not back to its terrifying past.







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