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Northern Ireland: A land still troubled by its past

Saturday, 14 March 2009

In the week that the horror of sectarian violence returned, David McKittrick asks how much Ulster has really changed

The scene at St Therese's Catholic Church in Banbridge could have been an image from Northern Ireland 20 years ago. Silent crowds watching sombre lines of policemen marching behind the coffin of a fallen comrade. Grief-stricken members of the bereaved family comforting one another as the lone piper played a haunting lament.

But there was one big difference at the burial of PC Stephen Carroll yesterday. Two senior members of Sinn Fein were among the mourners, standing side-by-side with former loyalist paramilitaries. Behind the coffin walked the Commissioner of the Irish Garda alongside his counterpart from the PSNI. All gestures unthinkable just a few years ago.

Thus the violent death and symbolic funeral of PC Carroll underlines the contradictions of the new "peace" in Northern Ireland – which has been both profound and patchy.

Another of these contradictions can be found in Belfast. There, in a tough loyalist ghetto in the north of the city, many parents have taken to sending their children to a religiously integrated school some distance away. They used to go to the nearby Protestant school, but instead the Protestant children are, for the first time, encountering Catholic kids and being educated with them. Yet this is not altogether a good news story.

The parents opting for integration are not motivated by a new-found instinct for religious harmony. Rather they are acting because they see their nearby school as being dominated by parents affiliated to another Protestant paramilitary group. Their children may benefit from the integration but not through any sense of reconciliation on the part of their parents.

Although Northern Ireland has disappeared from the headlines in England because policemen and soldiers were not, until this week, being killed, low-level violence has continued. A large proportion of the killings of the past decade resulted from savage feuding between loyalist groups like the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force.

Some widows do not wish to share a school with families whose members – they know or suspect – actually killed their husbands or partners. And so they self-segregate. In other districts, the children of UDA and UVF families do go to the same schools. But the mothers cluster in little factions at either end of the playground, glowering at each other.

On the republican side there has been less internecine violence but the rise of the Real IRA and Continuity IRA and the killings this last week prove that the threat remains. In 2007, dissident republicans shot and wounded one policeman and tried to blow up another in a car bomb. Last year they left a coffee jar bomb near a west Belfast police station (it failed to explode), rioted in Craigavon and shot dead another republican in an internal dispute. The famous statement of the Provisional IRA – "You need to get lucky every time, we only have to get lucky once" – still stands.

Thus the deaths this week raise the question of how peace is realistically to be defined. Because while the province has been improved immeasurably, the Troubles still cast a long shadow. And history, ancient and modern, dictates that the peace will probably never be perfect.

A couple of centuries ago Belfast used to congratulate itself on being a reasonably peaceful little town, and on generally avoiding the sectarian disturbances which plagued Co Armagh. In fact Protestant citizens raised much of the money to pay for its first proper Catholic chapel: they even formed a guard of honour for the parish priest as he arrived to celebrate its first Mass. But things changed, partly because of those disturbances in Armagh. Protestant gangs

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there issued dire threats: "Now Teak this for Warnig, For if you Bee in this Contry Wednesday Night I will Blow your Soul to the Low hills of hell And Burn the House you are in."

Seven thousand Catholics fled, many of them taking refuge in Belfast. This influx disturbed the religious balance there, and conflict ensued when the growing Catholic population brought competition for jobs and territory. The first sectarian riot came in 1813. The years that followed brought many clashes, often at the exact locations where rioting broke out during the most recent Troubles. Those sporadic riots went on, every few decades, right through the 20th century, though the recent Troubles were the worst and most sustained ever seen.

The Troubles erupted in the late 1960s when Catholics took to the streets campaigning for improved civil rights. The reaction of the police was a highly divisive element. The Royal Ulster Constabulary was internationally condemned for over-reaction as its members wielded batons against peaceful marchers.

The memory of the decades of killings that ensued makes one wince, and huge problems persist. But 40 years on Northern Ireland can – miraculously – be described as a fair society.

Most of the initial civil rights demands have been dealt with to general satisfaction and are long gone from the political agenda. Effective laws mean that employers who discriminate are hit where it hurts most, in the pocket. The old bastions of Protestant employment no longer pose a problem – some, such as the famous shipyards, because there are hardly any jobs there any more.

Others, like the once unbalanced civil service, now have an equitable workforce. Professor Bob Osborne, of the University of Ulster, summed it up: "In many areas Catholics have caught up with or surpassed Protestants, and there is no longer consistent Catholic relative disadvantage to the same degree as in the 1970s and 1980s. It is unusual to find such a rate of social change within a generation – it is quite dramatic."

Protestant politicians such as the First Minister Peter Robinson are served by staff of both religions. And of course Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein is the number two man in government. During the past week things held together because the police service is no longer viewed as a Protestant preserve. Both sides can identify with it, which is why Mr McGuinness branded as "traitors" those who killed one of its members.

The PSNI has replaced the RUC, and policing has been given the most radical overhaul. The old system of segregation, where one community effectively policed the other, has ended. The PSNI now has many more Catholics in the ranks but more importantly it has been festooned with so many oversight bodies that it is described as possibly the world's most scrutinised police service.

Sometimes all this supervision is criticised as excessive, yet the value of the insistence on accountability was this week seen in a single image which will be remembered in Belfast as symbolising a huge turning point. This was when the PSNI's Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde was pictured walking down a flight of steps, flanked by Mr Robinson and Mr McGuinness. Nothing could have better illustrated the emergence of a new policing era with a service acceptable to almost everyone. A sense of common purpose emerged.

Reforms in policing have been tried many times before in the history of the north of Ireland, yet this is the first time they have actually worked to produce a system which commands support across the board. As this week showed, policing is no longer a source of contention but commands cross-community support. It used to be said of Northern Ireland that the centre cannot hold: this time it has.

But although one part of the age-old patterns has been transformed from a negative into a positive, many unfortunate features remain. There is still a level of violence which is non-terrorist but sectarian. In many places outside Belfast, people refer to "the Catholic end of the town", talk about "the other side", and inquire about religion by asking, "What foot does he kick with?" (Protestants are said to kick with the right, Catholics with the left.) Many people claim they can identify one of "the other sort" simply by looking at them.

Much of this can be relatively harmless but in some places it can be deeply unsettling and on occasion it can be lethal. The predominantly Protestant town of Ballymena in Co Antrim, for instance, has long had a reputation for sectarianism.

It has its attractions: outsiders flock there for the shopping and its old-fashioned little streets. Yet its recent history makes the point that in Northern Ireland peace is a relative concept. In this town of less than 30,000 people, police in one recent 12-month period recorded 133 sectarian incidents. For some of Ballymena's youth, skirmishes with "the other sort" are part of their lives.

Sometimes they can lose those lives. Three years ago, Michael McIlveen, a 15-year-old Catholic, was cornered in an alley by Protestant youths who battered him to death. A few weeks ago three young men, who had been teenagers at the time, were convicted of murder.

That incident took place in the post-Troubles era, yet it and many others make the unpalatable point that Northern Ireland has rarely been fully at peace. A glance at newspapers archives for supposedly quiet times reveals a picture of an intrinsically restless society. Many now hazily remember the pre-Troubles early 1960s as something of a golden age of peace and potential progress but in fact there were dozens of cases of riots, arson and street clashes.

An ice cream van at a Protestant rally was surrounded and attacked when a rumour spread that the driver was Catholic. A Unionist MP who made a speech advocating toleration was dragged from his platform and battered unconscious.

A Catholic woman, now in her 70s, recalled how, as a teenager in a small and predominantly Protestant Co Armagh town, she was asked by a local Protestant doctor why she did not play

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table tennis with young Protestants in the local Orange hall. When she said she did not believe she would be welcome he persuaded her to go along, saying: "Nonsense, you're being silly." She recounted: "I had a great evening but the next day the doctor came to me, all embarrassed, and said: 'I'm really sorry about this, but they've asked me to tell you not to come back.' He was shocked and embarrassed. I never forgot that."

The two communities worship apart and are generally schooled apart. An integrated education movement has been struggling gamely on for decades, but more than 90 per cent of children still attend separate schools. The universities look completely integrated but actually are affected by a degree of self-segregation. A senior academic who came in from abroad was dismayed to discover that Protestant students tended to congregate in one canteen, Catholics in another.

It is too early to say whether the peace process will counteract the tendency for many Protestant teenagers to go to universities in England and Scotland, and to find jobs there instead of returning home. The pattern has become so ingrained that it has generated its own jocular acronym, Nipples, standing for Northern Ireland Protestant Professionals Living in England and Scotland.

Yet as the revelries on the streets of the university area show, many of Belfast's students have the traditional undergraduate interest in sex, drink and rock 'n' roll. While this has led to quite a few mixed marriages, these are almost always conducted in conditions of secrecy due to social and indeed security difficulties. Since working-class housing is almost entirely segregated, the question of finding somewhere safe to live is a highly delicate one.

The same secrecy was recently outlined privately by a Catholic priest whose parish includes a large, entirely Protestant estate: at least everyone, including the priest, thought it was entirely Protestant. It was only when a parishioner died that he discovered some Catholics lived there. They were so cautious and discreet that, instead of going to Mass locally, they travel weekly to another church miles away to keep their religion unknown.

Since the killing rate has fallen there has been a huge sense of security easing: many have gone to places they have never gone to before. But no peacelines have come down and efforts to integrate housing are tentative. This is not an ideal way to live, yet life has been so much better than in the years of violence that most relished the improvement and in many ways settled for it.

This week, with the deaths of two soldiers and a policeman everyone re-checked their level of security. Police officers in particular are locking up their homes, checking their cars and reverting to the old ways of varying their routines.

No one knows if the republican dissidents who carried out the killings will strike again; no one knows whether loyalist extremists will exact revenge. But the new element in this, the latest of so many security crises, was that the body politic has so far proved cohesive, determined and united in asserting that the police are now everyone's police.

Mr Robinson and Mr McGuinness have gone for St Patrick's Day to the States, where they will meet Barack Obama and, standing side by side with him, produce another symbolic image of the new unity of old opponents.

Back home, it is evident that the society they represent remains physically divided, containing as it does two separate communities. Yet historic breakthroughs have been made. The police service has been successfully integrated into all of society, as it has never been over the centuries.

And politicians have achieved a striking measure of top-down integration: Mr Robinson and Mr McGuinness are both figures from the bad old days, but these one-time warriors have now turned into heroes of the peace process. The hope is that the model of cooperation they have established will gradually trickle down into the divided society, for in political terms they have displayed a degree of political integration most had never thought possible.

History and geography dictate that Northern Ireland is never going to be a tranquil, placid place. There is still much division around, but it coexists with hope and a determination not to return to the bad old days.

The prospects were once summed up in advice by the former US senator George Mitchell: "This has been centuries in the making; it will be years in the changing."

Source: Independent



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my father and mother's parents immigrated to america from Ieland. they used to pray that the troubles would end. reading about the latest killings it makes me sad to see the hatred continue. The post by canuck is correct.

Posted by alan collins | 15.03.09, 20:36 GMT

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Sectarianism won't go away as long as children are segregated from the age of 5 depending on their parents religious beliefs.

School should be completely secular and about eduction rather than religious indoctrination. Teaching kids about religion and other faiths is important, but I don't think school is the place for worship and ceremony. That's what church is for.

I firmly believe the divisions in Northern Ireland would vanish in a generation with a totaly integrated and secular education system.

And lets stop refering to kids as "catholic children" and "protestant children". You wouldn't refer to a "socialist child" or a "conservative child" would you?

Posted by Glen | 15.03.09, 17:10 GMT

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David McKittrick, joint author of the very significant book "Lost Lives", once more hits the nail on the head. As someone, born and bred in Belfast, I continually despair of the "goings-on", even to this day in the province. Last November, on a quick visit for a family funeral, the attitude to those who dared wear a poppy and mourners from the Republic of Ireland having to leave their vehicles outside Belfast, brought home the fact liitle had changed over the years. Parentage and the educational system is the root cause, sadly some parents, on both sides, to this day preach bigotry and regretably the influence of the Christian Brothers still prevails with a loathing to anything British. George Mitchell, an honourable man, is probably right, it will be decades before change will take place, if ever. Bigotry is a cancer and throughout Ireland it is endemic

Posted by Ulsterman | 15.03.09, 11:13 GMT

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The real tragedy of centuries of English misrule is that the latest charges, even if true, will never be believed; and if untrue, will require decades to disprove.

Posted by JerryF | 15.03.09, 04:35 GMT

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Sadly, as long as we have everything separate, including sport, teams, and schools, the sectarianism will never change. Remember, the system can still be challenged by the way parents bring up their children, and talk to them. It is mainly to do with upbringing, and nurturing a good child, so that he/she grows up to mix well with others and except differences. It is like black and white culture who grow separately, but grow up to respect and eventually mix with each other in all aspects of life. The people of N.I. deserve better, but everyone has to want it. Best wishes to all.

Posted by canuck | 14.03.09, 14:11 GMT

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