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Fine leadership amid tragedy

Friday, 13 March 2009

At the end of a week in which Northern Ireland's tragic history was revisited through the murders of two soldiers and a police constable, a more positive historic moment was arrived at.

For the first time Sinn Fein sent a party delegation to the funeral of the PSNI officer, Stephen Carroll, to stand side-by-side with old foes in paying their respects. There should be no under-estimation of the impact of that image — republicans who have chosen the path of peace sending out the clear message to dissident republicans that their murderous actions will not deflect them from their political path.

Earlier in the week Martin McGuinness, the province's Deputy First Minister, went with First Minister Peter Robinson to the home of Constable Carroll to offer his condolences to his widow, Kate. Afterwards Mr McGuinness made the reaction of Sinn Fein to the murder crystal clear. The dissidents, he said, were traitors to the republican cause and he urged anyone with information about the killers to

give that to the PSNI. He and Mr Robinson have given a powerful example of leadership at a time when prevarication or equivocation could have produced a political crisis, the doubtless intention of the dissidents. The leadership should not be diminished, as some have tried to do, by petty point-scoring comments about the need for Sinn Fein to go further.

The actions of Sinn Fein are the greatest possible signal of the utterly changed political climate in Northern Ireland. What party members have said and done in the past week would have been unthinkable just a few short years ago. They are representing the views of the vast majority in the nationalist and, particularly, republican communities who do not want any more echoes of past conflict. It is evident that Sinn Fein is sufficiently confident of the support within its heartland to move in this decisive way to isolate the dissidents even further.

Mr McGuinness and Mr Robinson are now in the United States, following a well-trodden path to the White House for the traditional St Patrick's Day celebrations. While the killings of the past week sent shock waves throughout a world which had be

lieved — as we did ourselves — that such horrors were behind us, the new Obama administration cannot fail but be impressed by the mature reaction of politicians in Northern Ireland.

The killings have put Northern Ireland back on the White House agenda and the influence of two members of the new administration, Hillary Clinton and George Mitchell — both well versed in the nuances of our politics — mean that the new President will be well briefed on recent events. There is an opportunity for Mr Robinson and Mr McGuinness to capitalise on the renewed political interest and also to encourage corporate America to consider the province as an investment location.

Our political progress depends not only on shared interests but also on economic stability and America still has an important role in cementing the peace. The First and Deputy First Ministers deserve praise for their leadership and it would be fitting if their trip secures potential investment. That would be another clear statement to the dissidents.

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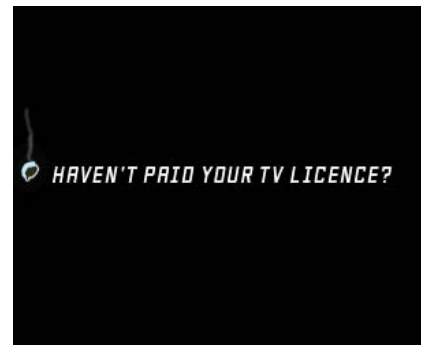
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