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North peace shaken, but not destroyed

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FIONNUALA O CONNOR

OPINION: Despite recent events, Northern stability can still lead to goodwill and compromise

IT IS an uncomfortable thought that nobody can know how safe the Northern peace is. The inclination is to insist that those who mean it ill are few and isolated, but that is more pious wish than assessment. The paramilitary threat may be limited: ill-wishers have always been numerous enough.

Two groups claimed the recent killings, the Real IRA and Continuity IRA, and others reacted with satisfaction. The language of the killers is familiar, their purpose incomprehensible – restarting the war will make the Republic want to absorb the North? Their numbers, and the proportion of experienced, hardened bombers, are unclear.

But for too many the first reaction was not that more lives had been lost, more families devastated. A disgusting number enjoyed noting that the killings vindicated their own diagnosis of a flawed peace.

Dissident republicans, some unionists and the right-wing English press share a resentment that the Troubles did not end in military victory. A sullen distaste for the powersharing Stormont with its guaranteed place for Irish nationalists and republicans has been the most handsome emotion from the armchair generals of two English newspapers, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

Where the facts of recent happenings fell short, they improved them. So Teddy Kennedy's friends were killing again, though Kennedy was an early and celebrated ally in John Hume's campaign to dissuade Irish-America from funding the IRA.

Meanwhile, by his range in Roscommon, hands folded on the good jacket and the kettle on the ancient hob, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh trundled through his repertoire for the *Observer*. Martin McGuinness, the turncoat, had abused words by calling the dissidents traitors.

Urging people to join the police was obviously going to put them in harm's way. It was still wrong to inform, still betrayal. As long as the British remain in a part of Ireland, the climate change that saw an English policeman flanked on Stormont's steps by McGuinness, and a Peter Robinson who at last voiced some leadership, leaves the likes of Ó Brádaigh untouched, in the certitude of the unthinking.

Those who can see that the PSNI, despite failings, is not the RUC, were glad to hear McGuinness say that if he had it, he would give information on the killings.

It was more surprising, and arguably as important, to hear Robinson talk of a political class as meaning all those who sit in Stormont, and a shared society as something worth achieving.

Fresh from the glamour of the Obama White House, will the First Minister heed his own eloquent words that the struggle for all of us continues every single day to rid society of violence and division?

Will he tell Nigel Dodds that since Catholics in north Belfast make up most of the waiting list for public housing, it is clear that houses must be built there? Rein in Gregory Campbell's insistence on insulting the Irish language?

Goodwill is of course also strained by Sinn Féin pronouncements that the dissidents lack a mandate to kill, and a strategy to achieve unification. Until the next election, it will be hard to tell how many republican voters are still believers and how many have been detached by the sight of the DUP rubbing Sinn Féin noses in one defeat after another. Nobody but republicans believed that McGuinness's IRA had a mandate to take almost 2,000 lives and grievously damage so many more.

But denying legitimacy to those who continue when the mainstream buys into the state ought to ring bells in the Republic, at any rate. It is how the Irish State was stabilised. Ugly, and effective.

Sir Hugh Orde says that there are only a few hundred dissidents, and intelligence is on top of them. Orde has sounded few bad notes and several good ones at a bad time, but that assertion rang hollow. Antrim army barracks had no intelligence that gunmen were on their way.

Constable Stevie Carroll got no warning to drive like fury away from a genuinely distressed woman and her broken window.

The past week tested nerves, taut with the knowledge that a series of ifs determined the immediate future.

So long as camouflaged soldiers in some Armagh ditch do not open up on a suspicious youthful figure who turns out to be an innocent; if loyalists stay inactive, as their spokesmen urged with a lavishness towards Sinn Féin that suggested a cheering confidence; and if arrests have been more than a round-up of the usual suspects, then a stability built on legalistic structures still has time to develop an underpinning of compromise and goodwill inside Stormont.

Small comfort to Kate Carroll, though her husband had a touching funeral, and no help at all to the families of two young soldiers, whose funerals, like those of their predecessors take place, the first yesterday in Birmingham – out of Northern sight, and out of mind to most on their own island.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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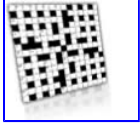
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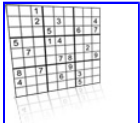
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