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News

Dealing with the peace

Sunday, March 18, 2007

Leading journalist Brian Rowan says Northern Ireland needs a Peace Forum to deal with the "unfinished business of conflict" including the future of loyalist and republican organisations

Listen to Gerry Adams encouraging people in the republican community to assist the police.

Hear the security assessment that says the change on the republican ground is "palpable" in terms of that community's response to the PSNI.

It has been seen and heard in the follow-up to the two recent murders in Belfast.

Then, listen to Ian Paisley begin to talk himself into a government with Sinn Fein and Martin McGuinness.

And hear the words of encouragement spoken in recent days by one of the most senior figures in the Ulster Defence Association - the loyalist leader Jackie McDonald.

Soon there will be a new government and Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness will be part of it.

It is the once unthinkable beginning to be achieved - working out in our political lifetimes, happening, when not that many years ago, it was the talk of never.

The things that have happened and are about to happen are of huge historic significance - the end of the IRA's armed campaign, the decommissioning witnessed by Harold Good and Alec Reid, those first republican steps into policing, and, now, the very real prospect of that political deal of all deals being achieved.

This is not the stuff of so what.

It is the making of the real peace and the ending of the old war.

And that's the difference.

The developments we can now expect will open up other possibilities - things that will consolidate the peace and create the space in which politics can work.

It is what the new Assembly needs.

In the waiting room, the loyalists - the UVF and associated Red Hand Commando - are preparing to have their say.

That long-awaited statement on "future intent" could soon be spoken as those organisations take another step away from the stage that was the war of thirty years and more.

But then what?

I believe some thought should now be given to a peace forum or conference of some description - a place to deal with the unfinished business of the conflict, a place well away from the political process.

This could cover a whole range of issues:

- The past and how it is settled;
- The marching controversy;
- The future of the loyalist and republican organisations;
- And how, after the war, those groups and their communities begin to live beside and in peace with each other.

The forum or conference could also be the mechanism for bringing the loyalist and republican leaderships and others together for a discussion or dialogue about the important things of yesterday and tomorrow?

That in itself would be a useful exercise - something worth doing.

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Elections are a research tool. And the one that has just passed has delivered a message that is clear. It has told us that the No of yesterday can be the Yes of tomorrow.

And it has set the direction for that new Executive that will include Paisley and McGuinness.

The people have spoken and, in many thousands of their votes, they have said not just what they want, but what they expect.

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