



PIVOTAL MOMENT: British prime minister Tony Blair and taoiseach Bertie Ahern sign the Good Friday Agreement in 1998

Out of chaos can come meaningful change

MIGHT I respectfully suggest to the incoming leadership of the DUP that they use the next few months before the departure of Arlene Foster, to read Brian Rowan's new book *Political Purgatory – the Battle to Save Stormont and the Play for a New Ireland?*

I suggest they do so because this book centres around 'chaos' as, ironically, the solid foundation on which the peace process was built. The big difference between the chaos the DUP has plunged itself into and the 'chaos' of peacemaking reflected in the book is the former appears not to be rational or have a plan attached to it, whereas the latter was about bringing an end to the war, and institutionalising peace and establishing the rules of political engagement – power-sharing, all-Ireland relations, the provision for constitutional change etc.

Chaos alone was not the instrument of change; political leaders with clearly defined objectives were. And the decisions they made which, when taken collectively and over time, resulted in the Good Friday Agreement, transcended partition and created the new society which all the people of Ireland are enjoying. Out of chaos came coherence. All the parties were compelled by the huge momentum towards peace to reach agreement – apart from the DUP, which joined the process later. But it was never an enthusiast.

Currently, it is reeling at the self-inflicted repercussions of Brexit, the resulting protocol and the Irish Sea border, which it gambled would be along the formerly militarised land border, psychologically deepening the union and demoralising nationalists.

When the north voted to remain in the EU, the DUP refused to modify its intransigent position. When it and unionism lost its overall majority it should have attempted to ingratiate itself with nationalists by even small

Jim GIBNEY



gestures. It refused.

And now it has panicked over an opinion poll showing that it will haemorrhage votes to the TUV and the Alliance Party; and because Arlene Foster did not vote against a resolution banning gay conversion therapy. Total chaos. And it is doubtful the plotters against Foster have thought the coup through.

Barney Rowan has an analytical mind which produces a style of writing imbued with forensic precision and microscopic detail.

He examines the many times when the future of the executive and assembly were on a knife-edge. He focuses on the collapse of these institutions in 2017 and the three years of political limbo – the 'purgatory' of the title – the people of the north lived through.

Back in 2017 Foster's arrogance misread the public mood on the RHI heating scandal and thought that Martin McGuinness would not

collapse the institutions.

Rowan commends the then tanaiste Simon Coveney and British secretary of state Julian Smith for the political acumen they brought to bear in restoring power-sharing. He says this was, "the most significant British-Irish initiative since the Blair-Ahern years of the 1990s – so significant, because this was Stormont's last chance".

Through the personal contributions of many of the key political leaders, who are household names and part of the political conflict for decades, the author reflects the constant tension and anxiety which swirls around them and the issues which need resolved, some still to be, like legacy and an Irish language act. I think this personal dimension of the book has special appeal.

Several chapters were engrossing: the ones which examine the legacy of Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, the 'Shadowy Figures' and the 'Union versus Unity' and in that chapter I suggest you read the important contribution from the loyalist Winston Irvine, especially his support for dialogue about all topics.

The chapter about Martin is thoughtful and the journalist Deric Henderson does justice to him. He described Martin as charming, on top of his brief, sharp on detail, a problem solver and unflinchingly courteous, no matter who was in the room.

Rowan asks rhetorically of Gerry Adams: "Why do we need to hear Adams say he was in the IRA? It is a distraction." And a diversion and a trap, to entangle the republican leader, without whom there would not have been peace, in litigation and prosecution.

This book is a chronicle of "fast moving events", to quote the author.

It is an important book because through the clarity of his logic Rowan helps us see through the chaos to focus on the bigger picture – unity or union. I hope you.

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ON THIS DAY

MAY 3 1971

RUC Men's Homes Attacked

FIVE explosions rocked Belfast late last night and early today, wrecking the homes of two senior RUC officers, badly damaging a downtown furniture store and causing slight damage to two other houses. The only casualty was Inspector Samuel Kyle who suffered slight facial injuries. His wife was treated for shock. Two heavy charges of gelignite exploded almost simultaneously about 11.30 p.m. outside the homes of Superintendent Ross Laird and Inspector Kyle, about a mile apart in North Belfast. Both officers were attached to the Special Branch. Superintendent Laird, his wife, their daughter Mary and Mrs Cecil Patterson, widow of Inspector Cecil Patterson who was shot by gunmen just over two months ago, were in the Laird residence when the explosion blasted in the front. Seventeen-year-old Mary Laird had a narrow escape when she saw two men leave a package outside.

Discrimination Raised

THE fifteen months old Commissioner for Complaints Department was described as 'useless' at a trade union conference in Belfast. The attack came from Mr Jack Hassard (Union of Post Office Workers) at the closing conference of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Mr Hassard asked what the Commissioner, Mr John Benn had actually done about maladministration. He said that Mr Benn was empowered to hand matters over to the Attorney-General for prosecutions in court, but had not done so.

Mr Brendan Harkin (NI Civil Service Association) said the Department's legislation was completely inadequate. 'I have no doubt that until there is a law in NI outlawing discrimination and until there is machinery similar to that of the Race Relations Act, we will not be able to deal with the problem effectively.'

Paisley Denounced

THE Conference of European Churches in Nyborg, Denmark yesterday denounced the militant Protestant movement in Northern Ireland and its leader Rev Ian Paisley. The Conference urged the Stormont Government to introduce a new social welfare legislation giving everybody full civil rights.

Meanwhile an appeal to the people of NI to uphold the ideals of freedom and shun all forms of bigotry and sectarianism is made by Mr William Bleasde, the NI officer of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) in his May Day message. **Inexplicitly, the vexed issue of discrimination in employment was not directly addressed in 1968's civil rights reforms. Despite trade unionists' concerns, the issue was not effectively dealt with until 1989's Fair Employment Act.**

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com