



Refusing to deal with the past will always end in failure

THE legacy issue was meant to have been resolved by the Good Friday Agreement. And by a whole series of gathering-dust, inter-party agreements and nods-and-winks in the two decades since.

The New Decade, New Approach agreement in January 2020, which rebooted the executive after a three-year hiatus, committed to maintaining a broad-based consensus recognising that any UK Parliament legislation "should have the consent of the NI Assembly".

But two weeks ago, Secretary of State Brandon Lewis announced government proposals to introduce what is, to all intents and purposes, an amnesty in the form of a statute of limitations applying equally to all Troubles-related incidents.

It's about drawing a line in the sand; albeit the line is the edge of the carpet under which everything is to be swept.

I don't object to amnesties per se. They serve a purpose in many post-conflict societies and have been instrumental in ending conflict, establishing peace and, crucially of course, sustaining peace.

Yet 23 years since the GFA there is no genuine reconciliation; no genuine contrition; no agreed narrative on the past; no agreed approach to the present and future; no genuine power-sharing and cooperation at the heart of government; and no particular sense that NI has moved on all that much since 1998.

In his recent book, *A Troubled Sleep*, Professor James Waller makes an important point about ending conflict in NI: "Reconciliation implies, however, that the two parties were in a state of conciliation at some previous point; that there was an earlier version of history in which combatants were colleagues, enemies were friends. In the north of Ireland's history, notes on conciliation are drowned out by the cacophony of the irreconcilable."

He's right. In the centuries' long dispute between unionism and nationalism in what became and remains NI, there was never a moment when it lived in what might be properly

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acknowledged as political/constitutional conciliation. It still doesn't.

So, the notion that an amnesty, or turning a blind eye to the past, while sweeping huge swathes of pain and anger under the carpet, will somehow pave the way to what some fancifully describe as reconciliation, is nonsense. Nonsense on stilts.

Refusing to deal with the past will always end in failure. If we reach the point at which those with the knowledge of who authorised murder, carried out the murder and remain unaccountable for the murder are allowed to escape in the cause of pretend reconciliation, then, as night follows day, many key parts of our past will escape too.

Amnesty without truth, common narrative etc is not just a get out of jail free card; it's also a 'keep the cupboard to the past locked forever' card.

In April 2020, responding to previous legacy

proposals, a group of Catholic bishops wrote: "Real reconciliation means that we cannot forget the past. We must face the past, no matter how costly or painful that encounter may be, before real reconciliation can flourish."

If there was peace, maybe you could forget the past. If that peace had been tested and remained stable, maybe you could forget it. If there was overwhelming evidence of a new way of 'doing' political business and the presence of strong, consensual government working in harness and common purpose, maybe you could forget.

That isn't the case here. The past casts its shadow everywhere. It will not be forgotten, because there isn't the collective will to forget it.

Even if the five parties in the executive, the main Churches, civic society, opinion polls and most victims and their families all rowed in behind the proposals, it still wouldn't resolve other issues which presently threaten to bring down not only the assembly, but the entire post-1998 peace/political process.

Support for the assembly and politicians (measured by the likelihood of their delivering good governance) is incredibly low.

At different times and for different reasons a majority of SF and DUP voters were content to support stasis (the last one lasting 36 months). The next period, which increasing

numbers of unionists/loyalists are leaning towards because of the sea-border protocol, could come quickly and last longer. Maybe permanently.

Getting it wrong on legacy – which Lewis's bull-in-a-china-shop proposals are – may further and significantly increase the numbers from all sections of the electorate who believe the peace/political process is no longer worth the candle.

Too many people know too many other people who have been permanently impacted by the Troubles: and it's a knowledge and memory which is passed down the generations. As it always has been.

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ON THIS DAY

JULY 30 1921

Parliament Finds Home

IT IS officially announced that the Assembly's College, Belfast has been secured on a three years' lease as the Parliament House of the Northern Parliament with the housing of the various Departmental staffs pending the acquirement of permanent buildings. The negotiations for the letting of the building had been in progress for some time past.

The College, which is a handsome and imposing structure, is situated at the extremity of Botanic Avenue and at the rear of Queen's University. An interesting coincidence in connection with the College as the home for Northern Parliament is that, along one side of it, runs a thoroughfare called College Green. The fact is rather suggestive. Perhaps the negotiators were convinced that the 'permanent buildings' would also be in College Green – but not the Belfast one and in this way the thought of the other College Green might come less disagreeably to their friends.

The Assembly's College (the Presbyterian Theological College) was designed by Sir Charles Lanyon, built by Mr John Corry and opened in December 1853. Since that date it has been the theological training centre in connection with the Presbyterian Assembly. Work of the College will not be interrupted as the premises have been acquired by the trustees convenient to Queen's University.

Lloyd George Hopeful of Settlement

SPEAKING yesterday to Lord Fitzalan, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Mr Lloyd George referred to the guest's activities as a Whip and said he had worked night and day and had now earned his rest. So he had been made Viceroy of Ireland (laughter) by way of giving him a nice, quiet, tranquil task, free from all anxiety (laughter). Ireland was at its most critical time but he had great faith in Lord Fitzalan who had the three necessary qualities for success – patience, a courage that never flinches and the uprightness of character which makes others trust him.

"We wish him well in his task", concluded the Prime Minister, "and look forward to the inauguration of an era of peace – the closing of a great feud between two nations which have been cast by Providence side by side in these islands."

A FORMER Tory chief whip, Lord Fitzalan (the former Edmund Talbot), was the first Catholic Viceroy since the union. Informed by an official, the laconic Cardinal Logue allegedly quipped in his Donegal accent: 'I'd rather have a Catholic hangman!' There was much irony also in the fact that the new Northern Ireland Parliament should find its first home in the classical Assembly's College in College Green – recalling the site of the last all-Ireland parliament in Georgian Dublin.

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