

OLIVER RAFFERTY

When peace is the higher cause

The meeting between the Queen and the former IRA leader Martin McGuinness last week was an historic encounter. It highlighted the extent to which Sinn Fein is now willing to engage in dialogue – but just how much has McGuinness really changed?

“Our position is clear and it will never, never, never change, the war against British rule [in Ireland] must continue until freedom is achieved.” So Martin McGuinness told the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (party conference) at the height of the Irish Troubles in 1986. It is a measure of how far both he and the British Establishment have travelled that he was able to meet the Queen in the course of her recent visit to Belfast.

McGuinness finally officially admitted his role in the IRA in the early years of the Troubles to the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, although he claims that he left the IRA in 1974. However, his account of his involvement with the Provisional IRA is disputed by many respected commentators who maintain that he long remained in charge of the Northern Command and was a prominent member of the army council. That he was part of an organisation that brought terror,

death and heartbreak to thousands of individuals is a matter that still rankles with many in Britain and Ireland, and yet he has given extraordinary leadership in the advancement of the peace process since the negotiations over the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

There are those in the republican movement

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– admittedly a minority – who will never forgive McGuinness for what he has now done in meeting the Queen. The opposition to his position comes not only from the ranks of republican dissidents, such as the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, and the Real and

Continuity IRA, but also from hardliners within Sinn Fein such as Laurence O’Neill who has dubbed him a “traitor” and a “Judas”.

When Sinn Fein took the decision that McGuinness was to meet the Queen, its president, Gerry Adams, declared that it was prompted by “a genuine desire to embrace our Unionist neighbours”. This point was reiterated by McGuinness himself who made clear that he was “in a very pointed, deliberate and symbolic way offering the hand of friendship to Unionists through the person of Queen Elizabeth”. This is the real significance of the events in Belfast last week and it is part of a well thought out strategy by Sinn Fein, which has stretched over several decades. The impetus came, however, not from McGuinness but from Adams, who long ago decided that the only way republicanism could make headway in Ireland was by political rather than military means.

McGuinness represents an old style tradition of “faith and fatherland” within

‘The Queen’s hand of friendship marked a new beginning, a new confidence’

Another remarkable gesture the Queen made was to enter a Catholic church in Northern Ireland for the first time. It happened at Enniskillen, the scene of a devastating IRA bomb in 1987. Here, the town’s two leading clergy, Peter O’Reilly and Kenneth Hall, reflect on the visit

It was a week of weeks here in Enniskillen. Speaking of her experience, one local woman said: “As Her Majesty was walking across the street from the cathedral to the church, my little heart was bursting with pride. Now we can get back to being the town I grew up in, where we were all neighbours.”

People of all hues were in St Macartin’s Church of Ireland Cathedral and in St Michael’s Catholic Church on Tuesday last week. The Queen’s hand of friendship and peace that day marked a new beginning, a

new confidence. The local level of respect and friendship that we already have, came into full focus.

When Elizabeth II crossed the street in Fermanagh’s county town, it was more that of a pedestrian crossing that street. Without a word, she made a connection for all to see. Her actions enabled us to powerfully feel that we were one people under God and one people together.

It was all the more powerful because of the separation that has been part of our mindset here in Northern Ireland. Martin Luther King Jr articulated that kind of separation when he said: “Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated.”

In Northern Ireland, unfortunately, such separation has been an implicit part of our mindset; sectarianism permeates the whole of our society. It is not just about religion, it is rather about allegiances: one allegiance to “Britain” and “Britishness” and the other to “Ireland” and “Irishness”. Such allegiances can emerge in names, colour codes, dress, and even variations in language and pronunciation. As Yvonne Naylor of the Irish School of Ecumenics, wrote in 2001: “A divided society produces divided memories.” History has been used by both traditions to articulate and fortify those separate allegiances.

And yet, for all these differences, regardless of how we draw our identity, people realise with increasing acuity that we are living here together, breathing the same air, walking the same streets, admiring the same scenery, even attending the same

republicanism. He, along with Adams, is something of a transitional figure within the movement, now giving way to a more overtly secularist style from younger members of the party. He is still very much an Irish republican and the goal of an all-Ireland republic, albeit one brought about by peaceful means rather than the bomb and the bullet, remains his motivating force.

The peace process is far from complete and there remain a number of very difficult obstacles on the road to peace and reconciliation in Ireland. Sinn Féin is particularly irked by the continued refusal of the Orange Order to meet its representatives, and McGuinness has warned of the danger to the peace process of provocative Orange marches through or near Catholic/Nationalist areas – the biggest of which is coming up next week on 12 July, to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne. McGuinness has also spoken of the fact that he and Peter Robinson, the First Minister of Northern Ireland, have met President Barack Obama more times than they have met David Cameron. McGuinness is rightly concerned about the lack of personal investment on the Prime Minister's part with the situation in Northern Ireland, a concern shared by others in the region, while in Britain, Tony Blair's former press secretary Alastair Campbell has written of Cameron's "disengagement" from the province.

Yet in Northern Ireland there are hopeful signs of improving dialogue. Sinn Féin has, since Easter, had intensive contacts with the Unionist community, including discussions with representatives of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Ireland. Both Churches are keen to continue this dialogue. It builds on previous contacts and on an address to the Sinn Féin party conference last year by the Derry Presbyterian minister Dr David Latimer. In the course of his speech, Latimer described McGuinness as "one of the great leaders of modern times".

weddings and funerals in our various churches, sharing the same soil. Because of this, the realisation is growing again here that we must share a common destiny too. Here in Fermanagh, most are happy to do so – and are happy, too, to endorse the friendships quietly formed and kept over the years, despite the Troubles.

Such is the realisation that the action of the Queen endorses. Such is the freedom to respect positively (and not merely tolerate) that the action of the Queen encourages. Such is the energy to build a better future that the action of the Queen unleashes.

This is no small thing here in Northern Ireland. Reflecting on that "crossing the road", it is not hard to see the implicit invitation to break down myths, suspicions, divisions and all those other things garnered tacitly by the sectarian mindset.

For us clergy, the main thing is to build on the respect that is already there, the same respect that the Queen has now appeared to endorse.



Members of the Orange Order gather outside Drumcree Church, in Portadown, Northern Ireland, on 10 July 2011. Photo: Reuters/Cathal McNaughton

Despite his earlier reputation as "the butcher of Derry", McGuinness is a highly intelligent, articulate and charming individual. Brought up in a typical Catholic nationalist household in 1950s Derry, with six siblings, he has stressed that the real emphasis at home was on the family's Catholic faith rather than on nationalism. A nephew of the late Bishop of Nottingham, James McGuinness, the Deputy First Minister has had an ambiguous relationship with the Catholic Church. His support for IRA violence meant that he frequently clashed with senior churchmen, including Cardinal Tomás O Fiaich and his successor, Cardinal Cahal Daly. Such was McGuinness' overt support for the "armed struggle" that it is thought that senior churchmen advised him to no longer frequent the sacraments. It was advice he ignored.

Edward Daly, the retired Bishop of Derry, has written of the fact that McGuinness is a churchgoer, a strong family man, a teetotaler and in every other aspect of his life an upright individual. Yet his Catholicism seems never to have undermined his commitment to vio-

lent republicanism. Bishop Daly records how on one occasion he had a long and intense discussion with McGuinness about the morality of the IRA's murderous campaign in which McGuinness argued his case "cogently and forcefully". McGuinness maintained that the violence of the IRA was morally acceptable, given the circumstances confronting Northern Irish society.

We must all be grateful that McGuinness has changed his mind, and that he now devotes his considerable energy and resourcefulness to peace and reconciliation. When asked recently about his relationship to Catholicism, he responded that he hoped he was a good Catholic and that his political and religious views moved along parallel lines. At the same time, he conceded that the imperative for his transition from "terrorist" to statesman came from politics rather than religion.

McGuinness is to the recent conflict and its aftermath what Eamon de Valera was to Ireland's struggles in an earlier generation. Much more than Gerry Adams, he has engaged in the activity of state and community building which occupied de Valera in the 1930s and 1940s. McGuinness' task, however, given his own past and the sectarian divide of Northern Ireland, is altogether more difficult than it was for de Valera in the Irish Free State.

McGuinness has spoken movingly of the need for reconciliation between the peoples of Britain and Ireland and he has declared that there can be no going back to the past. Sinn Féin has come a long way from its days of unreconstructed and atavistic commitment to the armed struggle.

It is a mark of the complexities of the Northern Ireland situation since the beginnings of the peace process that the academic commentator Andrew Sanders can astutely observe that the "irony of modern Northern Ireland is that a vote for Sinn Féin is effectively a vote for peace and against the IRA". McGuinness has done much to bring about such a reality.

We are not denying the differences that actually exist. We, of ourselves, cannot eradicate these.

Nonetheless, we are striving to undo hidden barriers and to establish a level of friendship and respect. Unity does not have to mean uniformity. We believe those differences to be significantly less than our inherited culture would suggest. Over here, there may be "different sides of the house" but nowadays – and especially now since the visit of Elizabeth II to Enniskillen – many more of us are aware of "the house" rather than "its sides".

What was done here by the clergy in Enniskillen could only be done because of what the people here are already doing. We are already a friendly people. Come over and see us sometime!

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