

Northern Ireland

A time of peace

May 10th 2007 | BELFAST | From *The Economist* print edition**Improbable and exhilarating, self-government is back**

IN THE end, it was conspicuous for the chuckles. Self-government returned to Northern Ireland on May 8th, as two once-implacable foes took the pledge of office, laughing merrily for the cameras side by side. The Rev Ian Paisley, the head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), who once talked blithely of killing any IRA man who approached a Protestant home, swore to uphold the rule of law as first minister. Martin McGuinness, Sinn Fein's chief negotiator and once one of the IRA's finest, swore in as deputy first minister. For everything there is a season, the Bible says, and Mr Paisley thinks so too: "I believe Northern Ireland has come to a time of peace, when hate will no longer rule."

Tony Blair, Britain's departing prime minister, will hope so, for as he leaves office peace in Northern Ireland, for which he worked tirelessly during his decade in power, appears his most lustrous legacy. So too will Bertie Ahern, Ireland's premier and another toiler in the peace-process vineyard, for he faces a difficult general election. Most of all, Northern Ireland's almost 2m Catholics and Protestants, at each other's throats for decades, have had enough of violence. Even Mr McGuinness vowed to overcome difficulties and achieve common goals, for "this and future generations expect and deserve no less from us".

Money, as well as fatigue, brought the two sides to this point. The improbable pairing of Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness was produced in part by fears that the British government would spend less now that the fighting was over. Peter Hain, the secretary of state for Northern Ireland, had galvanised voters on both sides by suggesting that a devolved government might protect them from steep hikes in water charges and local property taxes, as well as let them shape the fate of their schools.

It helped that Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer, offered a financial package which he claimed was equal to some £50 billion (\$100 billion) over ten years (although Northern Ireland's politicians reckoned that little of it was new money). The first ministers are hoping to screw another few billion out of Westminster. This shared determination to shake Britain down may yet forge a real partnership in Northern Ireland.

The first and biggest task confronting the new government is to rebuild an economy kneecapped by violence and propped up by central-government subsidies. The bombs that tore the heart out of Belfast and many towns disrupted transport, deterred investors and discouraged local entrepreneurs. In an effort to shield the peaceable population, public housing, schools, hospitals and leisure services were kept afloat with public money. The result is a disproportionately large public sector that provides one in three jobs and two-thirds of economic output. The central

government spends over £2,000 more per head in Northern Ireland than it does in Britain as a whole. [...]

Unionists and nationalists make common cause on broad economic measures—at least for now—but their unity will be tested in other areas. The first contentious issue is what to do about schools: in particular, which ones to close and whether to retain selective grammar schools. In a largely rural region, falling birth rates and empty desks have already led to some reorganisation. Catholic schools have moved the furthest: most of those with spare capacity now cater for Protestant children. [...]

There are other problems too, most of them stemming from the underlying clash of political allegiances, poisoned by sectarianism and years of bloodshed. The oldest loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), hailed the approach of self-government by announcing on May 3rd that it was going out of business. Its gunslingers, though, agreed only to put their weapons out of reach, not to hand them over. That will bear watching.

So too will the more than 50 "peace walls" built to keep Protestant and Catholic housing apart. Few people want them removed. Until there is popular pressure to do so, no amount of new investment and infrastructure, no display of bonhomie among the new leaders, will conceal the grassroots segregation that the walls signal. There are signs, small but visible, that outside the big cities separation is dwindling. Encouraging it to vanish faster will be the true test of whether self-government in Northern Ireland has worked.

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WORKSHEET**I. Questions on the text**

Read all the questions first, then answer them in the given order, using your own words as far as is appropriate.

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| 1 | What is especially remarkable about the combination of Paisley and McGuinness? | 10 |
| 2 | What reasons for the development towards peace does the author name? | 20 |
| 3 | Choose two metaphors and explain how they work and what they mean. | 20 |

II. Composition

50

Choose one of the following topics and write between 250 and 300 words.

- Ian Paisley said: "I believe Northern Ireland has come to a time of peace, when hate will no longer rule." – Do you think this development will happen smoothly and quickly, taking into consideration what you know about Northern Ireland (cf. also II. 35-62)?
- Many people outside Northern Ireland do not understand how extremists could fight about the result of a historical development that started in 1170, or quarrel about a commemoration march for a battle in 1690. They say, the borders of a country's territory ought to be accepted after so many years. Do you agree? Discuss.
- Imagine you are the mayor of a small Northern Irish town with a Catholic majority, and Rev. Ian Paisley, now Northern Ireland's First Minister, has announced his official visit in your town. Write a welcome speech.

“A Time of Peace”

I. Questions on the text

- 1 What is especially remarkable about the combination of Paisley and McGuinness?

“The improbable pairing of Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness” (l. 22 f.) was seen as a great surprise because they had been bitter enemies not so long ago. For years, Paisley had professed to hate all IRA people and had demanded to kill any IRA members who tried to get close to a Protestant’s house (cf. ll. 6-9). And McGuinness had been one of the leading members of the IRA (“IRA’s finest”, l. 11).

- 2 What reasons for the development towards peace does the author name?

The author gives various reasons why peace has finally come about. The most important aspect for him is the population’s weariness with the situation – they “have had enough of violence” (l. 19). In addition to that, voters realized that they had quite a few common interests with regard to subsidies from the British government and the desire for better solutions to local problems through a functioning “devolved government” at Belfast (cf. ll. 22-28).

A final incentive came from Gordon Brown, the then chancellor of the exchequer, who offered a “financial package” (ll. 29 f.) as a sort of premium for a successful formation of the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont (cf. ll. 29-32).

- 3 Choose two metaphors and explain how they work and what they mean.

There are a number of metaphors in this text. One of them occurs in the description of Ahern’s role in the peace process, when he is called “another toiler in the peace-process vineyard” (l. 17). This poetic image is an allusion to the bible, where in some parables God is portrayed as the owner of a vineyard. Thus Bertie Ahern is depicted as doing God’s work by actively supporting the progress of the peace process.

Another metaphor is used in the passage about the difficulties for realizing the peace process everywhere, one of the problems being a “clash of political allegiances, poisoned by sectarianism and years of bloodshed” (ll. 50 f.). The image of “sectarianism” as poison very strongly shows how dangerous the principle of emphasizing the differences between the denominations is, and how negative its implications are for years to come.

II. Composition

[individual answers: coherent, logically structured]