

Ireland's Blast From the Past

Poverty and Political Violence Revisited

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This year, the snakes are back.

The Irish national holiday on St Patrick's Day may be a chance to wear the green and drain a few beers elsewhere in the world, but around here it's a moment to take stock, if we dare. The cupboard has rarely looked so bare, and the dangers so real.

Unemployment in the Republic of Ireland has been growing at a rate of about 1 per cent of the workforce every month. Tax revenues have collapsed so rapidly that the government is soon to publish an emergency budget that will jack up taxes on everyone (except corporations, which will continue to enjoy the lowest rate in Europe) and slash services, partly to pay for a bailout of a coterie of deeply despicable bankers. Debt and poverty stalk tens of thousands of families. Road-traffic deaths have seen a sudden spike. Yesterday a family of boys died horribly in a grisly housefire. And, last but surely not least, political killing has returned to the streets of Northern Ireland, where two British soldiers and a policeman have been shot dead by republicans — and a pizza delivery man from Poland seriously wounded for the crime of 'collaborating' with the British by, uh, delivering pizza to them.

As we've discussed here [previously](#), there has been a spate of national breast-beating taking place for months, with a concern that all the 'progress' of the last 10 or 15 years, economic and political, has proven to be something of a mirage. Nothing is more certain to crystallize that sinking feeling than to wake up, as we have done twice in the last 10 days, to those old familiar radio-news bulletins, e.g. "A policeman was shot dead in Craigavon..." (Just how unfamiliar this sort of news had become internationally was indicated on a New York Times blog, where there was initial ignorant speculation that the latest killing could relate to criminal-gang activity rather than to republican dissidents.)

The groups that did the three killings, the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA, splintered from the Provisional republican movement in the 1980s and 1990s respectively. Great comfort was taken last week, nationally and internationally, from the fact that the Provisional leadership has denounced them in no uncertain terms, with former IRA leader and Northern Ireland deputy-first-minister Martin McGuinness provocatively calling them "traitors". But in reality, no one familiar with the bitter history of political and paramilitary splits in Ireland should be either surprised or especially comforted that former comrades are now among the dissidents' harshest critics.

And the assertion from the head of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Hugh Orde, that the groups are small and "well-infiltrated" will come as cold comfort to the families of the men they killed in audacious and carefully planned attacks. (There have been many arrests

in relation to the two killings but, at the time of writing, no charges brought.)

Sadly, the killings draw attention to the failures and fragility of the Northern 'peace process'. If you're not a politician enjoying the trappings of a newly created office, just about the only thing that can be said in favour of that process over the last decade is that it has maintained relative peace. This is no small compliment, of course, given that 3,500 people died in the conflict over the previous 30 years. But the Northern political structure into which the Provisionals' political party, Sinn Fein, has squeezed itself over the last several years bears little resemblance to the all-island socialist republic for which it struggled. What's more, and maybe worse, the Northern 'power-sharing' set-up has a tendency to sustain rather than break down the North's sectarian divide — a divide that remains profound in terms of how and where people live and their children are educated. The 'peace lines' (mostly walls) that split West Belfast and Derry into nationalist and unionist sections remain in place.

Recent statistics that showed grim and grey Northern Ireland to be currently the UK's most economically successful 'region' merely serve to underline how bad things are in Britain. Partly it benefits from the proximity of the Republic — the North has hosted a lot of cross-border shopping due to lower sales taxes and weak currency: with less than 30 per cent of the island's population it sells, for example, 40 per cent of Ireland's booze, and not because they're any drunker than the rest of us. The Northern economy has another advantage in the current climate: the years of conflict have left a state sector which still plays a larger role in the economy than elsewhere.

As Sinn Fein's leaders strut the [world stage](#) as emblems of peace and reconciliation, they struggle to show some people in the republican heartlands of the North that abandoning the fight against British 'occupation' has been worthwhile. This is unlikely to cost the party electoral support; the dissidents are not really organized politically, not surprising given that many of them believe the turn to politics was central to the Sinn Fein 'sell-out'. But it would be foolish to assume that the dissidents won't be able to draw on the well of hostility to continuing (albeit reformulated) British rule and the conditions of life for many Northern nationalists — this will generate crucial practical support, in the form of safe houses, hiding places for weapons, silence when the police come around asking questions. It may not be a coincidence that the killings came just days after the police announced they were bringing in a British army surveillance unit to help track republican dissidents, a move that was seen as provocative by most nationalists. There is no prospect of the dissidents being able to mount a campaign on the scale of the Provisionals in their heyday, not least because the well of outright popular support for an armed campaign is much more shallow than it was, but it is virtually certain those dissidents will strike again.

Condemnations are irrelevant. How quickly we forget the widespread and noisy revulsion at the Provo campaign.

If the killings last week seemed like a literal blast from the past, the Dublin government has been doing its own nostalgia trip, trying to restore the glories of Clinton times and reboot the relationship with the United States,. As happens this time every year, the Irish prime minister will present the US president with a bowl of shamrock in the White House. (The traditional Waterford Crystal bowl is itself a symbol of Ireland's decline, as the glass company is bust and its famous plant set to close.) In 2009 there are new incumbents in both roles, the hugely unpopular Brian Cowen enviously confronting the charms of Obama — whose Irish ancestry lies in Cowen's home county of Offaly.

Obama, who enjoyed Irish-American patronage throughout his Chicago years, has shown no special interest in Ireland; but with Hillary in State (yesterday she denounced the republican dissidents as “rejectionists” and “criminals”) and Joe “Kiss Me I’m Irish” Biden as vice-president, the country shouldn’t be short of friends. While there is no prospect of special treatment for Irish “illegals” in the US, Cowen hopes to announce a new bilateral visa, so Irish and American workers will be free to check out each other’s unemployment blackspots. Ireland will open new consulates, set up special committees on both sides of the Atlantic and even reach out to the ‘Scotch-Irish’, whose distant ancestry in Ireland has rarely figured large in the life of this Republic.

Ireland’s Celtic Tiger was hugely dependent on US investment, so it’s predictable that the country hopes to hitch itself to the next American recovery. Still, with the global turn inward — every righteous denunciation of ‘protectionism’ an implicit endorsement of its charms — this feels like grasping at straws. Further straw-clutching is evident in the widespread notion that the success of the Irish rugby team will somehow raise the nation’s mood, notwithstanding the fact that most people don’t care much about rugby and the team is chasing a title it last won in the sunny climes of, eh, 1948.

Faint and probably false hope also glimmers in the prospect of a premature election in the Republic, if the present coalition (which still has three years to run, in theory) can’t carry the political weight of the coming cutbacks. The left, most of it of distinctly tepid temperature, would do well and could play an unprecedentedly large part in the next government. But to what effect?

And then there’s the exciting news in the local headlines today: a brand new episode of The Simpsons, not even seen yet in the US, features Homer and family visiting Ireland, and it is being shown as a Patrick Day’s special tonight on Rupert Murdoch’s Sky television. We’re assured that, though that the episode pours a few pints, Ireland’s people are depicted as sober and hard-working, beaver away happily in gleaming US high-tech multinationals. In other words, the show’s long production schedule means it’s already hopelessly out-of-date.

In reality, in 2009, and in spite of unseasonably bright weather, the conditions on the ground here feel far different. In fact, it’s a twist on a Simpsons catchphrase that comes to mind: “Worst. Paddy’s Day. Ever.”

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