

# TWO CHEERS FOR DEVOLUTION

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Ian Paisley's and Gerry Adams' lives are profoundly intertwined, even though they had not met until Monday, for it was Ian Paisley who brought Gerry Adams into the Republican movement when he demanded that a tricolour be taken down in Divis Street in 1964. They sat down in a world where the ideals of 1916 are ever more remote, where Britain and Ireland routinely work together, where the Republic's economy dwarfs the North's and Unionism has never been weaker.

The Republican movement had to learn that it could not win through violence. The Leadership learnt this in the 1980s and we have seen a slow working out of this: ballot box and armalite, IRA ceasefire, decommissioning, joining the Policing Board. Paisley had to learn that Ulster could no longer say no; by last November we had got to Ulster says maybe. The perennial – and despised – outsider has become the powerful insider. The hated insiders, the Ulster Unionist Party, had to be conclusively defeated. At 80 he was top of the Unionist heap – and recognised as such by the British establishment with its seductions. For once in his life he could relax and think about his legacy, and what mattered for his children and his grandchildren. Ulster says no could be finally left behind.

So yes this is an historic moment. But it has to be seen as only another step in a long journey. It is not the end of the journey – reconciliation and a shared future have not arrived. At best it may be a sort of half resolution and there are big uncertainties hanging over it. How it will work will be through trade-offs, clientalism and personal ministerial fiefdoms, and it may not be a pretty sight. The power of public money could be used to intimidate and silence those who are not clients of the DUP and Sinn Fein. There may well be paralysis at the heart of government on major policy issues. There may be recurrent crises. One thing both major parties are agreed on is the need for more money; Oliver Twist is alive and well and living in the poor house at Stormont (imposing façade for a poor house).

Perhaps what we can hope for is some desperately needed stability for 10 to 15 years and then, hopefully, new more inclusive political forces may emerge. Perhaps the two main parties can do serious work on improving the Northern Ireland economy and we can do better than a loveless form of political cohabitation where there is a battle a day in which the odd couple confront each other in mutual self-righteousness. This unbrave new world is going to be strange. But maybe it is as good as it gets for a while: alternative Ulster will have to wait.

The Corrymeelas of this world – independent, alternative voices, people who actually believe in and have lived the shared future – are going to be more than ever needed in this strange new world. And we need voices of constructive opposition to a world of potentially suffocating conformity in the two main power blocks.

The central challenge in Northern Ireland is to change the historic pattern of community relating – of distrust, fear, exclusion and violence – and to create a shared future of equity, diversity and inter-dependence. Monday's historic agreement has to be tested against that goal. That shared future cannot ultimately be created on sectarian power blocks which operate by mutual fear and distrust. Sectarian turkeys will not vote for inclusive Christmas's. However, we may need agreement between the sectarian power blocks as a step along the road. It is this paradox that we need to be attentive to. There are big opportunities in where we are at the moment – but dangers lurk. This centre cannot hold because there is no centre. How do we build a centre? So two cheers for devolution on May 8.

**David Stevens**