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## ...the Bad and the Ugly: Good Guys after all? Representations of Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley in the English Press

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**Abstract.** This article aims to explore developments in the way political agents in Northern Ireland have been (re)presented in the British media, particularly in the light of the recent and historic agreement between the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin to enter into government together on May 8<sup>th</sup> 2007. According to media specialists like David Butler (1995), protagonists in the Troubles have traditionally been attributed the roles of "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly", (the British Army, the IRA and Loyalists), in accordance with the British state's bipartisan approach to the Troubles and its policy of incriminating endogenous agents. However, Butler remarks on a shifting discourse during the peace talks of the 1990s, with Northern Irish protagonists being separated into "Hawks" and "Doves" (anti and pro Belfast agreement respectively). May 8<sup>th</sup> 2007 saw the "Bad" and the "Ugly" firmly installed at Stormont as deputy First Minister and First Minister of Northern Ireland, following a long peace process in which the British State played a significant part. Consequently, this paper will aim to determine whether a new pattern of representation has been adopted by the media or whether the "old roles" still remain. It will also explore whether any interpretation has been offered for two such "extremes" coming together.

**Key words.** Northern Ireland, British media, representation, bipartisanship, extremism, criminalisation.

**Resumen.** Este artículo se propone explorar la evolución de la (re)presentación de los agentes políticos en Irlanda del Norte en los medios de comunicación británicos, en particular a la luz del reciente e histórico acuerdo entre los dirigentes del DUP y el Sinn Féin para formar gobierno conjunto el 8 de mayo de 2007. Según especialistas en medios de comunicación como David Butler (1995), a los protagonistas del Conflicto tradicionalmente se les han atribuido las funciones de "El bueno, el malo y el feo" (el ejército británico, el IRA y los lealistas), de conformidad con el enfoque bipartidista que el estado británico da al Conflicto, y a su política de incriminar a agentes endógenos. Sin embargo, Butler advierte un cambio de discurso durante las conversaciones de paz de la década de 1990, en las que los protagonistas de Irlanda del Norte se dividen en "Halcones" y "Palomas" (en contra y a favor del Acuerdo de Belfast, respectivamente). El 8 de mayo de 2007 vio al "malo" y al "feo" firmemente instalados en Stormont como Viceprimer Ministro y Primer Ministro de Irlanda del Norte, tras un largo proceso de paz en el que el Estado británico desempeñó un papel importante. En consecuencia, este artículo tratará de determinar si se ha adoptado un nuevo modelo de representación por parte de los medios de comunicación o si por el contrario perduran los "viejos roles". También se estudiará si se ha ofrecido algún tipo de interpretación en torno al acercamiento de los "extremos".

**Palabras clave.** Irlanda del Norte, medios de comunicación británicos, representación, bipartidismo, extremismo, criminalización

The quality, quantity and tone of media coverage in Britain of Northern Ireland affairs is especially important since previous research has shown that the vast majority of British ‘mainlanders’ rely heavily on newspapers and television for information on the region (Butler 1995),<sup>1</sup> and therefore media sources play an important part in the shaping of public opinion (Bracey and Gove-Humphries 2003). Consequently, this article sets out to examine media portrayals of the key Northern-Irish players in the light of the restoration of the power-sharing executive at Stormont, following an historic agreement reached between the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin (Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams) on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007, and culminating in the investiture of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness as First Minister and deputy First Minister, respectively, on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

In his book *The Trouble with Reporting Northern Ireland* (1995: 126), David Butler remarks that once the IRA’s bombing campaign had taken off in the early 1970s, the British media tended to attribute type-cast roles to the three main protagonists involved in the Troubles of the time, namely the British Army (representing the British state) in the role of the Good, striving to keep the peace between two warring factions; the IRA as the Bad; and the Loyalists in the supporting role as the Ugly (not quite as evil as Republicans, but troublesome nevertheless). This representation was in accordance with the British state’s bipartisan approach to the conflict and its policy of incriminating endogenous agents. Media specialists such as Alan Parkinson (1998: 73) have underlined the emphasis on reporting violence at the expense of explaining the background to the conflict:

The one-dimensional nature of the reporting of the Ulster situation – what’s been called a ‘shopping list of death and destruction’ has been criticised for presenting the British public with ‘a series of decontextualised reports of violence’ which ‘failed to analyse and reanalyse the historical roots of the problem’.<sup>2</sup>

1. “Television news is the object of academic inquiry not least because the political and bureaucratic elites in the state are sensitive to the power of broadcasting to shape common perceptions” (Butler 1995: 139).

Parkinson goes on to quote the Irish historian F.S.L. Lyons (1978: 26) who spoke out for his fellow countrymen against this “one-dimensional reporting”:

English public opinion had little option but to take a view of Northern Ireland as a place where bloodthirsty bigots of various obscure sects murdered each other incessantly for reasons no sane man could fathom. I longed to say to them what I still say – show us the place as it really is, show it to us in all its human ordinariness, its integrity, show it to us, above all, as a place inhabited not only by evil men... but also by decent human beings (Parkinson 1998: 73).

This emphasis on evil men has obviously had a long-term impact on the way English people perceive Northern Ireland and the Northern Irish. It has proved a barrier and prevents them from overcoming the stereotyped and ingrained opinions of the Irish in general as irrational and unreasonable, and from looking at the wider picture (Miller 1994).<sup>3</sup> Parkinson claims that Sinn Féin has been the main focus of media attention during the Troubles: “Great attention was paid to Sinn Féin leaders’ speeches and actions. Indeed, Gerry Adams was, for many years, the most profiled, non-elected politician in Europe” (1998: 75). However, it would appear that just because the media have focused their attention on violent republicanism, this does not translate into a greater understanding or awareness of the issues by the mainland public.

During the Thatcher era, rules on reporting Northern Ireland tightened considerably, with the 1988 Broadcasting Ban famously prohibiting live interviews with proscribed groups, including Sinn Féin and the UDA

2. The term “shopping list of death and destruction” is quoted from Philip Schlesinger’s *Putting Reality Together: BBC News* (1978), London: Constable, p.243.

3. “If it is true that the British public cares little for what happens in Ireland, then we ought to ask how they came to care so little. It is precisely the object of British government relations to contain the Northern Ireland and thus isolate it from mainstream politics. In that sense the desensitisation of the British public owes something to successful official information management” (Miller 1994: 280)

(Curtis 1998: 279-299).<sup>4</sup> The aim of this ban in Mrs Thatcher's famous words was to "starve the terrorists of the oxygen of publicity". Many programmes were censored, postponed or modified during the period from 1988 to September 1994.<sup>5</sup>

However, Butler (1995: 154) remarks on a shifting discourse during the peace talks of the 1990s, with Northern Irish republicans, previously all 'Baddies', being separated into 'Hawks' and 'Doves' – anti- and pro-peace process respectively.<sup>6</sup> The British State, encouraged by John Hume and others, began to understand the need to 'bring the republicans in from the cold' if any feasible and sustainable solution was to be found. During the 1990s, there is evidence, much of which is just being made public, that not only were the British State and intelligence services cultivating channels of communication with the IRA, they were also protecting senior IRA figures – not to mention the plethora of informers and double agents within the IRA (Clarke and Johnston 2001).<sup>7</sup>

May 8<sup>th</sup> 2007 saw the 'Bad' and the 'Ugly' firmly installed in Stormont as deputy First Minister and First Minister of Northern Ireland, following a long, roller-coaster peace

4. When republicans were interviewed, they were singularly dubbed by actors with English accents, which the English respondents in my study found rather ridiculous!

5. See Curtis (1998: 279-299) for a list of all the programmes censored or delayed during this period.

6. "[...] liberated broadcast journalism from dependence on the pathological typecasting of Sinn Féin / IRA as psychotic thugs and gangsters" (1995: 154).

7. "Martin McGuinness had a right to be confident in the wake of press speculation that he would be arrested as a result of the Cook Report's allegations. [...] The Operation Taurus had been forced on the authorities by a TV exposé and the political pressure which followed. The evidence gathered by Taurus, investigation officers believed, should have been sufficient to bring conspiracy and IRA membership charges. The failure to act displayed a willingness to keep McGuinness in play, a willingness that had been developing ever since his 1974 negotiations with British agents. This view is supported by British soldiers who contacted us to say that they had instructions that he was under no circumstances to be shot" (Clarke and Johnston 2001: 304).

process in which the British State played a significant part. Therefore, this paper will aim to determine whether a new pattern of representation has been adopted by the media or whether the 'old roles' still remain. It will also seek to ascertain whether any interpretation or explanation has been offered to the British public for two such 'extremes' coming together, and look at the portrayal of the role of the British government represented by Tony Blair. Indeed, one cannot isolate the portrayal of the Bad and the Ugly without looking at how the Good have fared, since the role of the Good only exists in relation, or even in opposition, to the two unsavoury roles. Moreover, the depictions of Paisley and McGuinness and indeed the whole 'sell' of the peace process and its cornerstone, the power-sharing assembly, must be seen in the light of the impending departure of Tony Blair, one of its major architects, and 'Ireland's true friend' as Bertie Ahern was to call him on May 8<sup>th</sup> 2007. Did this landmark chapter in the ongoing saga of the Irish Question have to be packaged as a glowing triumph for British diplomacy and the crowning achievement of a soon-to-depart Tony Blair?

Most observers will recall the jubilant news stories which appeared in the press on May 9<sup>th</sup> 2007, the day after the setting up of the new Assembly, and particularly the striking photos of a beaming Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, laughing and joking over a cup of tea, flanked by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and the Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain. These images were to be the first of many more photo opportunities when Paisley and McGuinness would be seen smiling in each other's company, and were to earn them the nickname of "the Chuckle Brothers".<sup>8</sup> In my own research Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley were rarely perceived as more than cardboard cut-outs or characters in a Punch and Judy show. The people I interviewed referred spontaneously to the former as IRA leaders but had very little idea as to their political aspirations and policies (Lelourec 2003: 111-124).

If the IRA has in the past been demonised by many elements within the British media

8. After second-rate English comedians who do the pantomime and seaside resort rounds.

(Miller and Rolston 1996), Parkinson maintains that it is the Unionists who have lost out in the propaganda war, failing, due to their own lack of presentational skills and distrust of the media, to portray themselves, or be portrayed, as anything other than old-fashioned intransigents. Butler states that the media have condensed the “socio-political complexities of protestant politics [...] into Paisley’s demagogic form” (1995: 129). The British media, generally speaking, have contextualised the Troubles as Britain trying to separate two warring factions, acting as a neutral ‘pig in the middle’.<sup>9</sup> We shall see that the logical conclusion of this narrative during the on-going peace process was to present the British State as ultimately succeeding, after many trials and tribulations, to bring these two extremes together.<sup>10</sup>

### **Portrayals of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness in seven English daily newspapers.**

In order to examine media presentations of the two ‘notorious’ northern Irish politicians, I have taken a sample of articles from seven major English daily newspapers,<sup>11</sup> mostly dating from 9<sup>th</sup> May 2007, but also some key articles from March 27<sup>th</sup> or appearing around that time. I will pay particular attention to the

9. This idiom, taken from a schoolyard game where two people throw a ball to each other over the head of a third person standing in between them trying to catch it, was also used as the title of a book on the role of the British Army in Northern Ireland: Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: Army in Northern Ireland 1969-84*, London: Methuen, 1985.

10. For example, in his own study into media reporting of the Brooke talks in 1991, Parkinson (1998: 78-86) concludes that the Unionist were depicted as the “wreckers” of these talks, and the British government as bending over backwards to bring about consensus. (A theme that was highly prevalent during the peace negotiations leading up to the Good Friday Agreement). He cites the newspapers of the right such as the *Daily Mail* which praised the efforts of the British Minister for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke for doing his best to rescue the talks and bring the two sides to a compromise.

11. The four ‘quality’ newspapers: The *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, and three of the four ‘tabloids’: The *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Sun*.

adjectives used to describe Paisley and McGuinness, and also to the tone of the articles and leaders and their view on the two men occupying the two top jobs in Northern Ireland at the time. I have divided the papers into three groups which broadly speaking represent three differing perspectives on the key protagonists, the Northern Irish peace process and the Troubles in general.

### **1. The Bad, the very Bad and the Ugly.**

The *Daily Mail*

Out of the seven newspapers under scrutiny, two have clearly stuck to the traditional perspective of Paisley and McGuinness remaining very much ‘the Bad and the Ugly’, namely the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, both right of centre and politically conservative.

Although the *Mail*’s leader dated 9<sup>th</sup> May is entitled “Day for Rejoicing”, the tone is rather more sombre, verging on bitter. The bottom line is that peace has been bought at a terrible cost, and that ‘the Bad and the Ugly’ have won, rewarded for their unpalatable and intransigent past. It is depicted as a victory of evil over good, extremism over moderation, recklessness over reason:

True, much of the ‘peace process’ has been deeply distasteful. In the course of it decent, moderate opinion on both sides has been crushed. Lies have been told on both sides and terrorism abjectly appeased. Indeed, the new settlement has been bought at a terrible price in blood, taxpayers’ money and political honesty.

But all this is for future historians to argue about. Today we should only rejoice that peace has settled upon Northern Ireland – and pray that it lasts (*Daily Mail*, 9th May 2007).

As we shall see, there is often a difference in intensity between the leading article of each paper and the longer, signed articles on the same story. In the case of the *Daily Mail*, one only needs to glance at the title of a second, much longer article by columnist Stephen Glover, “Forgive me if I don’t join in this great Ulster back-slapping bonanza” (Glover 2007), to understand the firm disapproval of the new set-up in Stormont. Glover begins by taking offence to the photos of smiling McGuinness and Paisley: “I must say that the photographs of Dr Paisley, the new First Minister, and Martin McGuinness, his deputy, joshing and laughing together made me decidedly queasy.”

The journalist goes on to describe the two men, in no uncertain terms showing the hierarchy in evil between them:

Paisley, an arch-loyalist, has been a bigot [...] The only good thing that can be said about him is that he never openly espoused violence, though he has come close to it. McGuinness is even worse – he is a murderer [...]. McGuinness appeared in a Dublin Court in 1973, after having been found close to a car with 250lb of explosives and 5000 rounds of ammunition. He is a former commander of the provisional IRA (Glover 2007).

Gerry Adams, incidentally, also receives the same treatment:

Gerry Adams, [...] is now a major figure in the Republic's politics. This is the man who was accused by Ed Moloney, an authoritative Dublin-based journalist, of setting up the IRA unit which murdered and clandestinely buried at least 9 people in the 70s. [...] What a nice man he must be (Glover 2007).

Glover comments bitterly that “Sinn Féin has been the main beneficiary of the ‘peace process’”, and proceeds to bemoan the absence of the moderate parties, “squeezed out and marginalised by Sinn Féin / IRA and by Paisley’s DUP”.<sup>12</sup> For the *Daily Mail*, Sinn Féin is just a cover, a name for terrorists in suits. Like the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* persists in writing ‘peace process’ in inverted commas, in doing so making a statement that the process, or the peace it produced, is a sham. Proof of the distasteful sacrifices made is given in the numbers of prisoner releases, who are deemed to still constitute a threat to mainland security. Glover fails to mention that many former prisoners have played an integral part in the peace process and been prominent in garnering support and restraining would-be paramilitaries from returning to violence. And lest the reader forget the ultimate price in what was never openly referred to as a war on the British mainland, Glover, concludes with figures of the numbers of British soldiers and police officers “killed by the IRA”. There is only one mild hint of recognition that the peace settlement is a positive move and the journalist

12. It is interesting to note that the *Daily Mail* continues to use the double label Sinn Féin / IRA, just as the DUP did until very recently.

ironically signals the quirky symmetry of the two extremes now governing Northern Ireland together, at the same time underlining the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’: i.e. **we** (the English) would not want extremists running **our** country.

Of course, I understand the arguments in favour of the settlement in Northern Ireland, and to a certain extent I accept them. Peace is obviously better than violence. Perhaps there is honour among thieves, and the two extremist parties may rub along together. But none of us would want to be ruled by such politicians (Glover 2007).

The peace that has been achieved is, according to the *Daily Mail*, overshadowed by the ghosts of victims and clouds of barbaric acts. Its journalist lays huge emphasis on past atrocities and refuses, on moral grounds, to sell out to extremists. Moreover, now there is another villain in the piece / peace: Tony Blair and the Labour Government for enabling this nightmare scenario to unfold – the Bad and the Ugly not defeated, but disguised as responsible politicians, enjoying the trappings of power at the helm of part of the United Kingdom. The republicans remain very much the prime enemy, still depicted as the cause and not a symptom of the conflict. So, instead of the accustomed roles of the Good, the Bad and the Ugly, we now have something worse: the Bad, the Very Bad and the Ugly.

#### The *Daily Telegraph*

The *Daily Telegraph*'s May 9<sup>th</sup> 2007 edition is very much on the same wavelength as its fellow right-wing paper, the *Daily Mail*. Its leader, entitled “Ulster deserves good governance” doesn't mince words regarding the calibre of the two new leaders of the Northern Irish executive, alias the Bad and the Ugly, and the fact that they looked happy in the photos only adds insult to injury:

The spectacle of the godfathers of extreme Unionism and extreme republicanism, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, laughing like drains as they made common cause to rule the Province was unappetising. The conflict they helped fuel (and in which Mr McGuinness actively participated) took more than 3000 lives (*Daily Telegraph*, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2007).

The *Telegraph* thus echoes the *Mail* in earmarking McGuinness as worse than Paisley, (Bad versus Ugly) and in regretting what it considers as excessive concessions to the republicans, which it incidentally labels, just like the *Mail*, ‘Sinn Féin / IRA’. No mention is made of Sinn Féin’s huge concession prior to official talks to participate in the governance of a region that its very existence was geared to eradicating.

In the same vein, the *Telegraph* laments the manner in which peace has been achieved “But it has come at such a high price. Mr Blair has at every turn appeased Sinn Féin / IRA in his anxiety to find agreement.” Tony Blair is not therefore to be congratulated for his endeavours, for he has sold his soul and betrayed his country for the sake of an imperfect peace. The *Telegraph* also blames the British Prime Minister for his part in the destruction of moderate elements within Northern Ireland, and depicts the republican party as some kind of monster with a sinister aim – reunification: “In the process, Mr Blair helped destroy moderate unionism and its champion, David Trimble [...]. Sinn Féin has got what it wants.<sup>13</sup> With its hands on the reins of power, it will feel that its goal of a united Ireland must be that much closer”.<sup>14</sup>

The leader ends with a condescending aside on the quality of Northern Irish politicians, and almost seems to regret the days of direct rule from Westminster:

We have noted before that the Province has been ill-served by its political classes, not least because they have such little experience of governing. This will be the real test of the new Stormont Assembly. It must resist the temptation to keep glancing over its shoulder at the murderous nihilism of the past. [...] The altogether tougher challenge facing the power-

13. The use of the pronoun “it” rather than the usual “they” firmly designates Sinn Féin as non-human.

14. If the author had read all the small print of the Agreement, he would have known that there are many obstacles to this end, and that the Good Friday Agreement, and subsequent St Andrew’s Agreement firmly entrench the six counties of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, until there is sufficient consensus for a referendum on the issue.

sharing administration will be to provide the good governance for which the people of Northern Ireland are crying out. We can only hope they will not be disappointed (*Daily Telegraph*, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2007).

How ironic that the *Telegraph* advises the people of Northern Ireland to forget the murderous past, something which the broadsheet itself has difficulty in doing!

As in the case of the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph* reserves its most scathing remarks not for its leader but for an article by columnist Jenny McCartney, published in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2007. Entitled “Not everyone in Belfast is laughing”, it adopts, like so much of the coverage on Northern Ireland, the imagery of the stage with unlikely or surreal characters:

What a picture it was, last week at Stormont. What an eye-popping, mind-boggling vision. The wider public laughed in shock and relief, the way that children do when they suddenly see a picture of a much-feared bogeyman in a silly hat. Yet I suspect there were many who, like me, experienced a flash of anger while watching the Stormont performance of *Send in the Clowns* (McCartney 2007).

Paisley and McGuinness are still very much the Bad and the Ugly, but even more horrific due to their increased powers.

McGuinness’s mistakes left civilians without limbs and families without mothers and fathers, sons and daughters [...] to be at the centre of it, one required an unusually strong stomach for the smell of human suffering. McGuinness evidently possessed that attribute in abundance. Paisley, meanwhile, persistently fanned the flames of sectarian tension with his impassioned anti-catholic rhetoric [...] and by his own antics long allowed the wider Unionist community to be parodied unfairly by outsiders as tub-thumping bigots (McCartney 2007).

McCartney, who adds that she grew up in Northern Ireland, continues the established pattern of pantomime characters who cannot be taken seriously. Moreover, the decision by Sinn Féin and the DUP to compromise is presented as the chillingly calculated action of a predator – the *Daily Mail*’s monster, in the *Telegraph*, has turned into a couple of beasts:

They have abandoned their intransigence at the precise moment at which its shedding will deliver them the greatest political rewards. Between them, the carnivorous DUP and Sinn Féin have outmanoeuvred and annihilated the herbivorous politicians of the centre ground, and now they have moved in for the spoils (McCartney 2007).

We have here very much the discourse of ‘evil men’ referred to by Lyons earlier on. What is more, no mention is made of the popular vote and the mandate that these two parties received from the public. The journalist, just like the *Daily Mail*, cannot comprehend this triumph of the extremes, and bitterly reminds her readers of the silent moderate majority.

The excesses of these men cannot be explained away as unavoidable reflections of the times. I grew up in Northern Ireland during those turbulent decades in which McGuinness and Paisley were notably extreme, although marginal players on the political scene. The majority of people at the time found their thinking aberrant. There were prominent working class Catholics who made radically different choices to those of McGuinness, and at some personal risk: brave, non-sectarian Irish nationalists such as the late Paddy Devlin and Gerry Fitt. And there were many Protestants who respected the differing faith of their Catholic neighbours, and staunchly opposed the Paisleyite vision of a fundamentalist Ulster (McCartney 2007).

Interestingly, no mention is made of the British implication in this new state of affairs. McCartney instead derides the particular consociational format of government at Stormont which imbeds cultural diversity and an unhealthy competition for funds at the heart of northern Irish policy making.

## **2. The Good, and the steadily improving Bad and Ugly.**

The *Times*

On the other hand, the majority of English dailies portrayed the events of May 8<sup>th</sup> as a continuation of the established distribution of roles: the Bad and the Ugly may be more well-behaved than before, but the Good are to be commended for having masterminded such a feat, bringing the two arch-enemies and extremes together in a power-sharing executive. Like all the other leaders, the

*Times* highlights the ‘astonishing’ nature of the event. In a pragmatic and supportive piece entitled “New Ulster”,<sup>15</sup> the Leader, however, refrains from congratulating Tony Blair personally: “It has been obvious for at least 35 years that power-sharing of the sort that was instituted yesterday was the only means by which Northern Ireland could administer itself in a peaceful and equitable manner” (*The Times*, 9th May, 2007).

Unlike the two previous newspapers, there are no blood-curdling epithets tied around the necks of Paisley and McGuinness, simply a schoolmasterly wag of the finger “There is no need for ‘No Surrender’ or ‘Ourselves Alone’”. While the Good is implicitly still Good, it would also appear that the Bad and the Ugly have begun to see reason.

In contrast to the *Telegraph* and *Mail*, the *Times* uses the words ‘peace process’ without inverted commas, and where the former are keen to dwell on the dark and dismal past, the best-known British broadsheet is very much looking to the future, and its message can almost be read as a reply to the two previous papers: “The past, though, cannot be allowed to become a ball-and-chain on the future. Northern Ireland is, in any case, a much more prosperous place thanks to the peace process”. The leader concludes by setting out the agenda facing the new politicians at the helm of the Northern Irish government – tackling the problem of an ethnically divided society, which probably accounts in part for the *Times*’ lack of jubilation.

The other articles in the *Times* are of a similarly pragmatic and measured tone. David Sharrock, in his article entitled “After 50 turbulent years, Stormont shakes off the heavy chains of history”, describes Blair as “looking like a proud father at a school prize-giving ceremony. In a “then and now” inset (*Times*, May 9th 2007: 31), choice quotes are printed, to show at one glance the immense change that has occurred and the journey that the Bad and the Ugly have undertaken. Their statements are taken in good faith, contrary to views expressed in the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph*:

15. Note that the word Ulster is the term preferred by most British newspapers for referring to the region, even though it is not the appropriate label and is linked to Unionism. Even BBC guidelines encourage the use of Northern Ireland instead of Ulster.

	Martin McGuinness	Ian Paisley
Then	“I am a member of Oglaiigh na Eireann, and very, very proud of it”. (1973, in a Dublin Court)	“Never! Never! Never!” (1985, opposing the Anglo-Irish Agreement)
May 8 <sup>th</sup> 2007, Stormont	“As for Ian Paisley, I want to wish you all the best as we step forward towards the greatest yet most exciting challenge of our lives”.	“That was yesterday. This is today and tomorrow will be tomorrow. From the depths of my heart I can say to you today that I believe Northern Ireland has come to a time of peace.”

Sharrock concludes, in the same vein as his newspaper’s leading article, with the caveat that Belfast is still very much a segregated city with 26 ‘peace walls’.

#### The *Sun*

If one recalls that this was the paper which ran the notorious headline on its front page on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1993: “Gerry Adams, the 2 most disgusting words in the English language”, in a scathing attack on the Sinn Féin leader for carrying a coffin at an IRA member’s funeral, then the *Sun*’s leading article on 9<sup>th</sup> May, entitled “Day of Hope” is surprisingly upbeat:

Here and in Ulster, we went to work never knowing who would return in one piece. More than 3500 people, many of them children, died in a pointless orgy of torture and slaughter.<sup>16</sup> The IRA’s atrocities eclipsed al Qaeda’s cowardly 7/7 attack on London. Now, thanks to Tony Blair, former Tory PM John Major and a string of Irish leaders,<sup>17</sup> we’ve had 12 years of peace. They persuaded terrorists the ballot box, not the Armalite, was the only path to power. Ironically, it was an ex-IRA warrior, Martin McGuinness who summed up the moment: “This is the greatest, yet most exciting challenge of our lives” (*Sun*, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

Quite remarkably, considering the *Sun*’s past coverage of Northern Irish affairs, Martin McGuinness has become a warrior; not quite a freedom fighter, but a much more romantic term than the overtly criminal terrorist, bomber, or gunman. The leader continues:

16. The Leader begins with the *Sun*’s definition of the Troubles.

17. The *Sun* feels no need to name them; this is, after all a nationalist newspaper!

Former sworn enemies sit side by side and laugh, heralding peace in Ulster and a major triumph for Tony Blair. To prove generations of bitterness had been consigned to history, a new era had dawned, both Paisley and McGuinness were comfortable and relaxed in each other’s company (*Sun*, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

The *Sun* is looking on the bright side of things, keen to play up Tony Blair’s success, and does not dwell on the past of “the former IRA chief Martin McGuinness” nor on that of “fierce Unionist Ian Paisley”. It must be said that Britain’s top-selling daily paper, traditionally right-wing and patriotic has been a supporter of Tony Blair’s New Labour since it first ran for office in 1997. Unlike the *Mail* and the *Telegraph*, the *Sun* does not take offence at the two men laughing and joking, but is rather reassured that they really do seem to be getting along and communicating with each other as normal human beings.

#### The *Daily Express*

The *Daily Express* gave quite substantial coverage to the unfolding of events both on 26<sup>th</sup> March and 8<sup>th</sup> May 2007, but printed no leader on the subject. Like the *Sun*, the ceremony to swear in Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness at Stormont is very much portrayed as a success for Tony Blair. Instead of demonising the two northern Irishmen, there are rather dispassionate descriptions: McGuinness is “a former and feared IRA leader”, whilst Paisley is simply “Head of the Free Presbyterian Church”. Adjectives underlining the unlikelihood of such an outcome abound: “an historic day”, “in a historic moment”, “a momentous meeting in March”.

On the other hand, an article by Leo McKinstry, entitled “Don’t forget British Army’s role in peace deal” dated 29<sup>th</sup> March 2007, reacts more aggressively towards the two men who brokered the agreement to enter into government, and is unforgiving in its characterization of the past, continuing to adopt the pattern of the Bad and the Ugly:

Paisley, the bullying voice of hardline protestant Unionism, built his career on fighting any concessions to Irish nationalism. “No Surrender” was his watchword. Gerry Adams was even more sinister. The grinning front-man for murderous Irish Republicanism, he employed weasel words to justify even the most savage atrocity (McKinstry 2007).

Interestingly though, the journalist is shrewd enough to understand the significance of this deal:

Yet this week’s agreement is so important because the 2 men represent such diametrically opposed traditions. Without Sinn Féin and the DUP declaring their willingness to work together, there could never have been a lasting settlement (McKinstry 2007).

However, whilst the journalist recognizes the mighty concession made by the IRA (and ignored or unnoticed by the vast majority of British commentators), McKinstry refuses to apportion any merit to what he perceives as ‘defeated republicans’, holding up this compromise as proof of capitulation at the hands of sheer British expertise.

They have accepted the partition of Ireland, the retention of British rule in the six counties, the legitimacy of the Northern Irish police service and the democratic will of the unionist majority. And they have gone down this road not because they suddenly saw the light and became peace-loving democrats but because the sophisticated, courageous brilliance of the British Army, MI5 and the RUC left them with no alternative (McKinstry 2007).

The Good have become, quite simply, magnificent.

#### The *Guardian*

The liberal and left-leaning *Guardian*’s leader entitled “A time of peace” is unsurprisingly favourable to the renewed power-sharing government in Stormont. Insisting on themes of hope and renewal, it no longer type-casts the main protagonists as the Good, the Bad and the Ugly. The DUP leader

is definitely the centre of attention, and we are told that “Ian Paisley’s extraordinary good humour, quite magical in its scope, came on a day that sparkled with optimism.” Laying emphasis on the veteran’s transformation, the leader begins with Paisley’s words spoken on 9<sup>th</sup> May: “I wonder why people hate me, because I’m such a nice man.” Whereas praise is given for “the sustained efforts of prime ministers and presidents in Britain, Ireland and America over 20 years”, it is the top ranking republicans and loyalists who are lauded for their courage: “But the greatest achievement lies with the leaders of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, behaving with a public generosity that was once unimaginable and which has done much to carry their communities with them” (*Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2007).

Interestingly, whilst there is no demonising of republicans, there is no special mention for McGuinness to counterbalance the attention bestowed on Paisley. Everyone though, it would appear, now deserves the role of the Good. Tony Blair is congratulated since his “great efforts have paid off as he prepares to leave office.” Like the *Daily Mail*, the *Guardian* reminds its English readers that Northern Ireland is heavily subsidised, and even the *Guardian* cannot but help a slight note of condescension:

The indulgence shown to Northern Ireland during its conflict has left it too dependent on the state for wealth and employment. The Treasury’s new funding package cannot overcome the structural weakness of a society that gets 60% of its income from London (*Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2007).

Nevertheless, one thing is clear for the *Guardian*: the armed conflict is over for good and whilst the paper remains cautiously optimistic, it takes the opportunity to speak directly to the new rulers in Northern Ireland and tell them what they now need to do: “The task facing Northern Ireland’s new rulers is to use yesterday’s spirit to better the lives of its people. Their work has only just begun” (*Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2007).

As in the other papers, the article accompanying the leader is more abrupt and less measured in tone and content. The *Guardian*’s front page article by Michael White on May 9<sup>th</sup> uses an extract from Paisley’s investiture speech, which itself was

quoted from the Bible, as its title: “A time to love, a time to hate, a time for war, a time for peace.” The journalist is not wholly convinced by the new arrangement in Stormont, as can be judged by his mocking and flippant tone, and the resort to the metaphor (used, but not as systematically, by other papers) of marriage. For a wedding, there is a noticeable lack of celebration in White’s words, and one gets the feeling that this is definitely an arranged, if not a shot-gun marriage. Moreover, there are no words of praise for the matchmaker, Tony Blair. It is as if the journalist has been invited to the wedding but is definitely not one of the friends or relatives of the happy couple:

Yesterday all his oratorical power, so long a destructive force, was gracefully directed towards the common good. Most of it anyway. Though everyone was on their best behaviour, they all managed little point-scoring digs. Mr Paisley spoke of his Unionism, Mr McGuinness of his belief in a united Ireland. Mr Paisley quoted the Bible, Mr Adams’ team spoke a little Irish. But the wedding went ahead (White 2007).

Such behaviour (talking Irish, quoting the Bible) is anathema to most English readers and serves to highlight the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – the normal English and the strange Irish. Moreover, the fact that each party was true to their constituency is hardly surprising considering the concessions that had been made, so it would seem rather churlish, and a little superior to speak of them trying to score points. While Martin McGuinness is not demonised, we are told that he “can be a menacing man. But when he wants to he can do a good twinkle. Yesterday he twinkled, so that both the ex-demagogue and the ex-gunman sounded as if they meant it.” The journalist is definitely not 100% convinced that the two leopards have changed their spots, and furthermore considers finding oneself in government with Sinn Féin an unenviable state of affairs, asking the reader to “spare a thought for Bertie Ahern, facing an election on May 24<sup>th</sup>. He may end up power sharing with Sinn Féin too.” We are also told that the date was stage-managed by Downing Street to coincide conveniently with Blair’s imminent departure.

### 3. The Good and the Misunderstood

*The Independent*

The *Independent* is interesting in that it

extensively covered the investiture on May 8<sup>th</sup> and the talks leading up to it, but did not print a leader on the 9th, preferring to give space and voice to Peter Hain on the Opinions page in what is, unsurprisingly, a buoyant article about the peace process and its successful outcome, insisting on the shared future that former sworn enemies have at last accepted to embrace. By doing so, the *Independent* espouses the Government line. However, Hain is keen to stress the challenges that lie ahead for Northern Ireland’s new leaders in terms of rebuilding a private sector economy and tackling bread and butter issues like education and employment. In a front-page spread, entitled “The Miracle of Belfast” David McKittrick,<sup>18</sup> the *Independent*’s accomplished Irish-born Ireland correspondent, is unequivocally optimistic. Like most of the other papers, he expresses disbelief at “the two warriors of the Troubles ‘coming together’”. The poetic term warrior, as used by the *Sun*, is preferred, and there is no reminder of the bombings, the shootings, the punishment beatings etc., and unlike the *Guardian*, there is no suspicion that the reconciliation is anything but sincere: “Ian Paisley, now Northern Ireland’s First Minister, spoke of ‘a time when hate will no longer rule.’ Martin McGuinness, ex-IRA and now his deputy, spoke of peace and reconciliation. They both clearly meant it.”

We are reminded that the erstwhile Bad and the Ugly are not marginal as they have been endorsed by recent elections and have a mandate from their electorate. Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern are singled out for their perseverance “basking yesterday in their status as those who stuck to their guns with the peace process against such odds and steered it through many crises.” Blair is confirmed in his role as the ‘Good’, not only by the *Independent*, but by none other than the Prime Minister of Ireland himself: “Tony Blair has been a true friend of peace, and a true friend of Ireland. For 10 tough years, he has spent more time dealing with the issues of the island of Ireland than any person would have asked any other person to do” (McKittrick 2007b).

On the other hand, as a slight caveat to this hope and jubilation, there is a small inset featuring interviews with Catholics and

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18. Co-author with David McVea of *Making Sense of the Troubles* (2001), Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Protestants regarding the segregation that is still so prevalent in Belfast today.

And finally, the *Independent on Sunday* dated 6<sup>th</sup> May, just two days before the ceremonials in Stormont, carried an eye-catching title: “Martin McGuinness: peacemaker and poet”. David McKittrick’s description of the multi-faceted former IRA Chief of Staff is in stark contrast to previous one-dimensional reporting:

He’s a poet, a fisherman, a chess player, a family man described as considerate and thoughtful, somebody who cares about nature and the environment, passionate yet even-tempered. [...] He’s good at relationships and a conspicuous success at most things (McKittrick 2007a).

McKittrick goes against the grain of the majority of past reporting on republicans, insisting on the humane side of the man, not the beast. He explains to the reader why McGuinness was so crucial to the peace process in persuading more recalcitrant republicans to stay on board: “During many tense moments it was the McGuinness reputation for flinty, sea-green incorruptibility that reassured traditionalists Adams was not moving too far, too fast.” Whilst McKittrick reminds us, in a matter of fact way, of McGuinness’s IRA past, he concludes that “somewhere over the years he morphed from the icon of militarism into the politician of today who has been seasoned by meetings with British, Irish and American representatives. [...] But no-one believes he cares about reaching office for his own sake, or making money, or that he has given up on the republican goal of a united Ireland”. No clear explanation for this transformation is offered, in terms of person or circumstances, but McGuinness is depicted as genuine, a truly Nelson Mandela-like figure who has almost (but not quite) reached his destiny, as deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, and who never was a devil or a beast.

## Conclusion

So what are we to conclude of these varied depictions of the two most top-ranking politicians in Northern Ireland in 2007? Clearly, there is no longer one single representation. The British media are not speaking with one voice.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand there are the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*

who remain true to the original portrayal of the two extremes. These stalwarts of British conservatism have not budged one iota from the 1970s model and are not going to be swayed; doggedly contesting the essence of the “peace process” as a sell-out to the IRA. In doing so, they create another culprit – the British State becomes the cowardly broker of an end to violence at any cost and not the upright, steadfast upholder of the fight against terrorism and evil of the 70s and 80s. This is not the scenario envisaged by Thatcherite Britain which refused to give in to the hunger strikers, survived the Brighton bomb in 1984, and sought to starve the terrorists of the oxygen of publicity.<sup>20</sup> The past does in fact become a “ball and chain”, to coin the phrase used by the *Times*.

Then in a second group we have the bulk of the other papers, notably the *Times*, which almost understands the position of the conservative newspapers but believes that the British government has done its best in a no-win situation. There is an implicit admission of the “Dirty War” and an acceptance that dirty deeds had to be done to secure a deal and a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. This view is very much forward-looking rather than backward-looking. While these papers refrain from what could be considered unsuitable celebrations, they acknowledge the significance of the peace agreement and the tremendous efforts on all sides which preceded it. The British State, personified by Tony Blair, comes out, not perhaps as a hero, but as having done its job. Blair still embodies “the Good” in a truly British sense of duty, neutrality and obligation. Times and circumstances have changed, the IRA is not the same post 9/11 as before, the DUP has been forced to recognize that it has no option but to govern with republicans.

Seeing the “Baddies” at the helm of a power-sharing executive was not the first preference scenario of any British government, as Tony

19. There have been occasions when British newspapers advocated differing policies or responses to the Troubles, for example the support for the Troops Out movement by the *Daily Mirror* after Bloody Sunday on 30.01.72, but their representation of the nature of the conflict has essentially been homogenous.

20. Speech to the *American Bar Association*, London, 1985.

Blair confirmed in an interview for BBC Northern Ireland's Hearts and Minds programme in April 2008. He would have preferred the moderates to remain in power, but that was not to be. For the British government to come out of the Troubles well, the new leaders from the erstwhile margins had to be portrayed as essentially "decent" people. Most of the British newspapers toed this line.

The *Independent*, (and to a lesser extent, the *Guardian*), goes even further in stressing the transformation that has taken place within Northern Irish politics. It applauds the deal and all those who took part in its elaboration and implementation, including the traditional Baddies. The *Independent* is no doubt the most radical thinking in this respect. McGuinness is a poet, and never was a terrorist.

This spread of opinion probably reflects the mixed feelings held generally towards the peace process. A British public brought up on a daily diet of bombings and tit for tat shootings cannot easily begin looking at Northern Irish key players in a dispassionate light. The latter are tainted with the terrorist brush and for many people will remain so. The general, pragmatic view is that this is an imperfect peace, but it is infinitely better than a war. What is certain is that the timing of the 8<sup>th</sup> May investitures was most convenient for Tony Blair, desperate to bow out on a high note and salvage some achievement from his 'foreign' (sic) policy after the fiasco of Iraq. Whatever his failings elsewhere during his 10 years in power, very few observers question his input into the peace process and level of

commitment and risk taking (e.g. the liberation of political prisoners was given very bad press).

At least two explanations can be discerned for the coming together of the two "extremes". In some of the papers, Blair is presented as the magician of the peace process, succeeding through sheer determination in cancelling out two former enemies by uniting them. As the representative of the British State, he remains the Good, having brought the conflict to its logical conclusion and having continued to act as mediator between two enemies. In others (the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph*) he is the traitor, and the jury is still out on whether the end justified the means (appeasement of the IRA).

In March 2008, Ian Paisley announced his forthcoming resignation from the forefront of Northern Irish politics. His successor as leader of the DUP, and First Minister of Northern Ireland, was Peter Robinson, prompting the *Guardian* to run an article entitled "Ulster's Chuckle Brothers will now give way to Brothers Grimm" (McDonald 2008), which carried the warning that "the cold-blooded and businesslike Peter Robinson will manage his relationship with Sinn Féin with much less warmth than Ian Paisley did". One senses that the former personification of the "Ugly" will almost be regretted. It will be interesting to see how the British press manages the portrayal of his successor, a man who has been behind the scenes for many years, and whether it will refrain from placing the onus on "evil men"...

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