**1 DEBATE NI**

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Martin McGuinness’s visit to Warrington, on initial examination, seems brave and what he said was well-received excepting thoughtful criticism from Unionists. Going into what turned out not to be the Lion’s Den, his only opposition was from the relatives of those 21 humans horribly murdered in the Birmingham bombings of 1974. Theirs was a rare expression of mainland opposition to the overwriting of their history.

The story of the hundreds of soldiers from England, Scotland and Wales who died so quietly to keep the peace in Northern Ireland continues to go unwritten. That their deaths led to little or no political opposition against the army’s presence in Northern Ireland is something that needs restated, and indeed researched. The 'Troops Out Movement' was a dog that hardly barked. A very few books like those of Ken Wharton ('A Long Long War') deal with ‘Operation Banner’ and the huge numbers involved, directly as soldiers, or through families at home.

Their sacrifice went almost unremarked compared to the extensive coverage by the BBC, for one, of every British soldier’s death in Iraq or Afghanistan. But then there is a certain political harvest to be gathered today in emphasising each such casualty which was not apparent between the death of Gunner Robert Curtis in 1971 and Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick’s in 1997.

McGuinness only had to fear the sense of his own shame. Ostracism was not a danger as Colin Parry had guaranteed a respectful reception. He does not forgive the IRA, the organisation, but seems willing to forgive those actually involved, at all levels, of the murder of his son Tim in March 1993 and of the baby Johnathan Ball. Time has eased his pain, helped by the huge effort he has put in to creating the Warrington Peace Centre. The visit for him underlined the efficacy of that work. The conflict in Northern Ireland has ended or at least the Provisional IRA has disbanded and gone into government.

Its problem is the legacy of the two thousand deaths caused by Republicans. They will haunt Sinn Fein for decades, popping up unexpectedly and derailing their attempt to assume the mantle of de Valera and Lemass, the first Fianna Fail leaders, who in a real sense also had blood on their hands.

Some of the more notorious Troubles atrocities involving civilians can, Sinn Fein hope, be decommissioned with carefully crafted statements of regret. But when drilled down, words like unjustified or shameful are chosen only because they are not, and cannot be, used to describe the IRA campaign proper. It was shameful that two boys were killed. Their deaths are not justifiable as they were not the intended targets, and so on.

What went unsaid was that the bomb in Warrington was the rawest of terrorist acts. It also had the hallmarks of revenge, the particular Republican mode of revenge. Bridge Street Warrington was no economic target but the town had to pay a price for the capture of two IRA men who a month earlier had bombed an economic target, the Warrington gasworks.