



Press Comment

PAISLEY'S SWANSONG - A COMPELLING POLITICAL EVENT

Gerard Howlin in a guest column in The Irish Examiner gives this assessment -

In the second of a two-part BBC interview with Eamon Mallie, Paisley, now Lord Bannside, alleged of his once loyal and godly Democratic Unionist Party deputy leader, “there was a beast here who was prepared to go forward to the destruction of the party”. Eileen his wife, and Baroness Paisley of St Georges in her own right, was graphic. “They assassinated him by their words and by their deeds — they treated him shamefully,” she said.

If the accusations were shattering the riposte of Peter Robinson was worse. “As someone who faithfully served Dr Paisley for many decades I will make one final sacrifice by not responding and causing any further damage to his legacy beyond that which he has done himself. Rather than return insult for insult, let me bless him with the mercy of my silence and wish him well.”

Accused by his chief priest and elder Robinson’s charity and silence were scripturally excoriating and politically forensic. He repaid Paisley in his own coin of scriptural allusion. In turning his other and Christian cheek Robinson turned the tables on Paisley. The accusation by Paisley that he was shafted as leader of his party and moderator of his church in 2008 undermines and may ultimately devastate the once impregnable twin citadels of party and church he erected as preacher and politician.

What we saw on the BBC was not only compelling television, it was a major political event with potential consequences for politics on this

island. If nothing else the DUP was shorn of its pretensions to be anything more than just another political party, contaminated with all the grubbiness that entails. Still elected to office with an overwhelming mandate from its own community, its remaining claims to be an elect of any kind are finished.

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The DUP is one part of the political duopoly that wields power in Northern Ireland. That party is not as sometimes supposed an extension of the Free Presbyterian Church. It is a grand coalition that includes Free Presbyterians. Indeed Robinson the long serving deputy in Paisley's party is not, nor ever was, a member of his church.

But as Paisley reiterated to Mallie his own role as a Christian minister "always came first". That is both the key to understanding Paisley, his politics and the unresolved contradictions that erupted in such vehement denunciation of his critics. Paisley has repaid what he sees as the treachery inflicted on him. But in doing so he has fundamentally contradicted himself. We saw on television an angry if still indomitable politician. What was apparently absent was the Christian charity and humility that Robinson, however opportunistically, immediately employed to taunt him.

The origins of Paisley's conversation with Mallie can be traced back over 60 years to the founding of the Free Presbyterians in 1951. That breakaway from the Presbyterian mainstream was part opportunism, part local spat in Crossgar County Down and an anti-intellectual, anti-modernist reaction against a budding ecumenism within Presbyterianism. Paisley stood for an uncompromised and uncompromising 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith. That Confession is still the standard for Calvinist belief, and includes the condemnation of the pope as anti-Christ.

Paisley's claim to faithfully follow the Presbyterianism of John Calvin or John Knox was undermined from the start by dissent from a Presbyterian mainstream that valued authority as much as dogma. In its aversion to infant baptism and other theological differences the Free Presbyterian Church was closer to the so-called sects that traditionally

Presbyterianism had an unrelenting aversion against. What Paisley had from the beginning in the 1950s was an affinity with a wider anti-communist, anti-ecumenist world view, including links with politically conservative, evangelicalism in the United States.

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He parlayed his preaching into politics and was present at Stormont to throw snowballs in protest at a visiting Sean Lemass in 1965. If usually bombastic in public, and largely a political opportunist, he was also a more nuanced strategist than he was given credit for. His problem, and the cause of his discomfort now, is that he singularly failed within his church, especially to prepare for the great compromise he acted out. Theologically he preached a world imminently facing the end of time and final judgement. In such a world

compromising with the anti-Christ in Rome or his IRA sentinels in Ulster was unthinkable. In 2007 Paisley moved after a lifetime, out of the end-time he passionately preached, and back into normal time. In its own terms this was not a new dawn. It was an abyss and a Judas-like betrayal. Paisley the upright, unbending preacher flipped, but his fellow Free Presbyterians could not follow. They has not been privy to the savvy calculations of the politician, they had not been prepared. Perhaps they never could have been.

What Paisley demonstrated is how the politician craves the last word. Having shaped events, he wants to write history and avenge wrongs. The Christian, as acted out with devastating political venom by Robinson, has no need of history, he has salvation. Like Christ he has no need to plead before Pilate, he trusts in a merciful judgement. The irony is that the ostentation of Robinson's Christian charity and silence is also ultimately the far more compelling if caustic political commentary.

His political shafting, if contemporaneous with his deposition from his pulpit, was a parallel but separate process. His age and lack of likely future utility were held against him. If a prophet is required in the wilderness, he is rapidly redundant in government. It is not just that

Paisley successfully compromised everything he had claimed to stand for. It is that in delivering compromise successfully, he almost immediately made himself surplus to the requirements of political colleagues. On their own they could never have delivered what he did, but they were absolutely determined to enjoy the spoils of the deal he had done.

That of course is politics and the vanity of this world. Paisley can now reflect with Cardinal Woolsey the last British churchman but one, to be a monarch's first minister: "if I had served God as diligently as I have done the King, he would not have given me over in my grey hairs". The preacher prepares for the next world, but for the politician leaving the stage is hell.