



In our continuing series on the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the troubles, David Ervine tells Sharon O'Neill how IRA violence, and in particular the Bloody Friday atrocity on his birthday in 1972, led to him joining the Ulster Volunteer Force. Twenty-seven years on, the PUP man from east Belfast is older and wiser and says that Northern Ireland can never return to the "dark days of 1969"

Leaving the dark days behind

● LONG JOURNEY... (right) UDA members march through the streets of Belfast during the most violent days of the troubles in 1972; (below) David Ervine leading Progressive Unionist Party member and party spokesman; (below right) British soldiers crouch down as snipers open up on them on the Shankill Road in 1969, one of several such encounters between loyalists and the security forces in the early days of the troubles

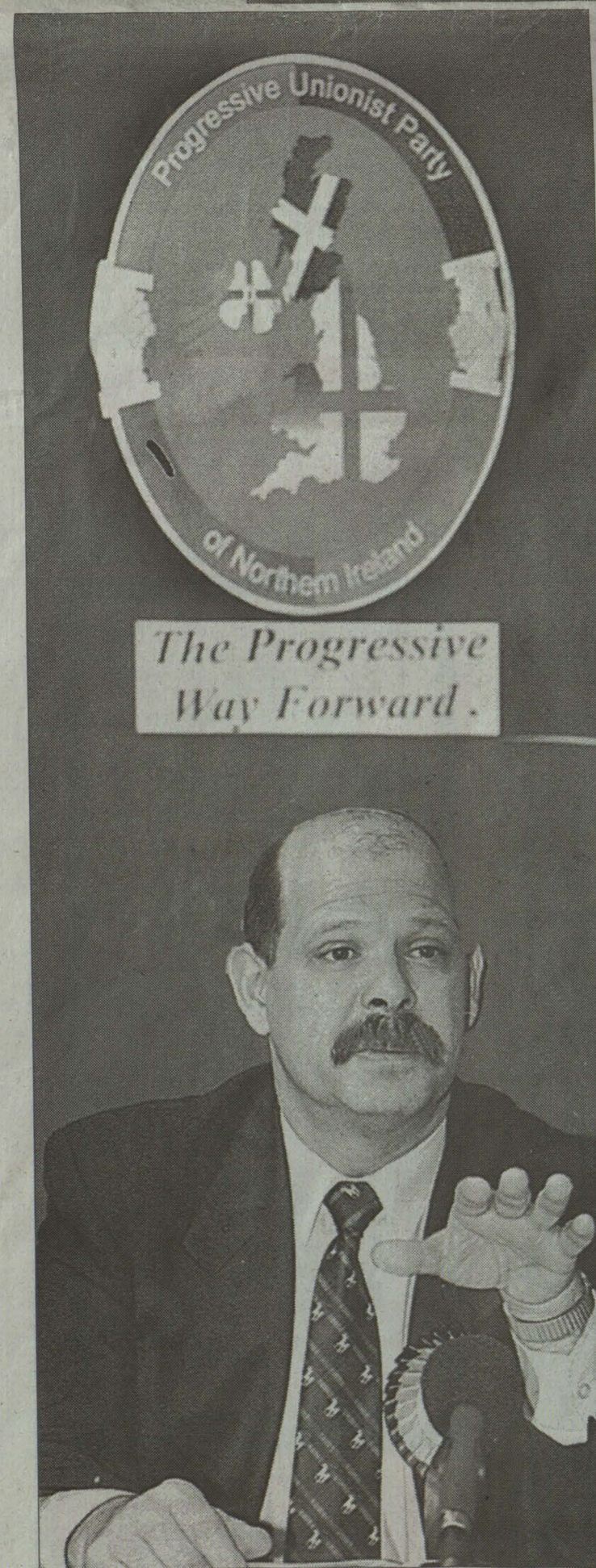
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David Ervine



IN the turbulent summer of 1969 east Belfast teenager David Ervine resisted the temptation to join any of the paramilitary organisations growing daily all around him. But a few years later, outraged by the suffering inflicted by the IRA, he decided he was prepared to kill to protect his community.

David was the youngest of five children. His mother worked in a pram factory and his father was an iron turner in the nearby shipyard who had been a navy officer in the second world war.

He was already surrounded by paramilitarism when violence spilled onto the streets near his home in 1969.

At the tender age of 16, he just watched, listened and learned as thousands of men joined vigilante groups and then later carried out a violent "war" against the IRA. But it all became too much to bear seeing his family and friends die on the close-knit streets of east Belfast.

He recalled: "Paramilitarism was all around me from the age of 16 but I had always resisted the thought of becoming involved."

Later David decided he was prepared to kill to protect his community after the horrific events on Bloody Friday when the IRA exploded 22 bombs across Belfast in 1972.

Fuelled with rage after nine people were killed and more than 130 injured on Bloody Friday – one of the worst atrocities carried out in the long history of the troubles – David joined the UVF at the tender age of 19.

His life changed forever after the death of one of his friends that day, and feeling his community was under threat, was prepared to do anything to defend it.

"It was my birthday on Bloody Friday and I celebrated it with some friends. I was able to watch the puffs of smoke go up all round Belfast from the vantage point of the pub that we were in.

"There was a lad with the same name as me killed on that day who lived three streets away from me and was the same age as me. That had a huge impact on me."

Two years later the young paramilitary was stopped in a car with a bomb. He was sentenced to 11 years in prison for possession of explosives. During the troubles David maintained his links with the UVF

One man's journey from violence to democracy

from inside the prison walls.

"There were a lot of very young men in jail. I remember two lads coming to our compound in Long Kesh with their school uniforms on. They were in for murder.

"Undoubtedly prison changed me. I had a sense very quickly if I didn't defeat it, it would defeat me.

"I eventually worked out I had to fill my time. It didn't come naturally – as a kid I left school at 14, but I began to lift books...

"Prison is a tremendous place for observation and reflection. Slowly but surely we were beginning to have

discussions through arguments and debates and we were coming out of the other end with ideas."

David was released in 1980 after serving five-and-a-half years in the Maze. Living on the outside was a new experience and David returned to family life.

There was huge unemployment and he earned a living as newsagent and milkman, but remained active in loyalist politics. He was forced to move home a number of times because of death threats from the IRA.

Turning his back on violence, David

has played a vital role in the peace process and entered the forefront of the political arena in 1994, when he helped broker the UVF ceasefire.

But he said he has paid a heavy price since the troubles began in 1969.

"In personal terms it is almost something I am glad I have gone through, but I left a young wife and two-year-old boy, who struggled and suffered far more than I did.

"So whilst now I have a political career, which depends on the electorate of course, I have paid an awful bloody price for my family and

still am.

"I worry less about the bomb going off than perhaps many parents have had to over the years."

But 30 years on, David is hopeful of a lasting peace settlement and is confident Northern Ireland will not return to the "dark days of '69"

"There will be peace and I think we will go through a process of winding each other up. There are those who benefit from both sides from that wind up.

"The evidence of our failures are legend in terms of managing a divided society. But I believe there is a new generation coming behind who will not tolerate a loss of opportunity.

"When I was a kid when you went on a day trip to Holywood it was an adventure. We are now travelling the world and are on the worldwide web and yet we are seemingly prepared to tread water because of the failure to challenge the old certainty.

"It will never be as bad as it has been. I don't think there is a will out there to fight a war. I genuinely believe on both sides it is becoming unsustainable.

"If we want to build something sensible for the future we need each other in order to do it and the last 30 years has shown that.

"I think for a very long time we made the past our god. But there are lessons in the past that we must look at to build a better future.

"There was a time when nationalism and unionism wouldn't talk. There was a time when republicans weren't allowed in the same building, never mind the same room.

"There is an energy in the community here that has not been channelled – talents and skills that we have hardly scraped the surface of. When all of that slowly but surely begins to pick up a head of steam we will leave our past behind us as if we had booster rockets on. We will never forget, but we will move on."

