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The peace dividend

After three decades of violent conflict, Belfast's transformation into one of Europe's high-tech capitals is giving former paramilitaries a new way of life

By Benoit Faucon

Had he not just turned 50, you would think of Donnall McBilling as your archetypal geek. His small workshop, located in a derelict building in West Belfast, looks like a teenage hacker's den: old 486x PC carcasses, exposed motherboards, Apple Macs and dusty floppy disks are scattered around the room, mixed with CD-ROMs and brand new software. On the other side of the city, in Ormeau Road, Eddie Kinner is busy working with the same kind of stuff as Donnall. Today, he is just finishing the migration of a local area network from a Novell architecture into Windows NT.

McBilling and Kinner use similar technologies and speak the same language – a computing jargon one hears unmodified from Istanbul to Abidjan to Palo Alto. McBilling and Kinner have never met. Yet had they met a couple of decades ago, they would have been the worst of enemies. McBilling was in the Irish Republican Army, the main Republican paramilitary group; while Kinner had joined the Ulster Volunteer Force, the principal Loyalist paramilitary.

Brought up in a Republican family in Dublin, McBilling was one of the many angry young men who joined the IRA before the eve of Bloody Sunday in 1972, when 13 unarmed protesters were killed by the British Army in the Northern Irish city of Derry. In the wave of violence that followed over the three next decades, 3,000 were to lose their lives. Belfast's working-class neighbourhoods were torn apart between the Orange areas, controlled by Loyalist militia, and the Green strongholds, home of the Republican paramilitary. Both groups carried out sectarian attacks against each other's communities; the IRA also targeted the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the British army. The Troubles only began to settle down – although they did not cease – with the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998.

In 1972 McBilling was arrested in Armagh, a city close to the border with the Irish Republic, in possession of five pounds of gelignite explosive, the most widely used substance for bombing attacks at that time. "There were all these Loyalist shootings against Catholics; I had to do something about it," he says.

On the other side of the city, Kinner was seeking revenge. He was living in Shankill Road, the Loyalist stronghold in Belfast. Four of his neighbours – including a baby in a pram – had just been killed by an IRA bomb attack on a local furniture shop. "I had just one idea in mind: go to Falls Road, the IRA stronghold, and do as much damage as possible," Kinner recalls.

He had just turned 17 in 1975 when he volunteered to go on a "mission" for the UVF, which now supports the Peace Agreement. He set out for a local Catholic hangout, the Conway pub, with two other members of the UVF. The bomb they were carrying blew up prematurely. One of his colleagues died in the explosion and so did a woman who was in the pub. "Of course, I regret what happened," says Kinner. "At the time, we, the communities, had dehumanised each other. I just wished I had done some studies, had a job. Then maybe I would not have resorted to violence."

Kinner and McBilling both know the world has changed since they emerged from jail in the 1980s. From the harsh, war-torn city of the past, Belfast has turned into a centre for the Internet economy. It has high-tech incubators and Internet start-ups, including Adculture.net, a thriving online advertising company, and Blackstar, the main UK online retailer for videos. Some of the big names in the industry – such as [Phone.com](#) (now named Openwave after its merger with [Software.com](#)), Nortel, [Fujitsu](#) and ICL – have operations here, not least because of Belfast's pool of cheap, highly-skilled labour.

The new industrial estates, in all their sanitised decorum, are still surrounded by neighbourhoods where paramilitaries mark out their territories with graffiti. Opposite the Fujitsu building in West Belfast is the logo of the Real IRA, the dissident Republican group that opposes the Good Friday Agreement. And the entrance of the local Kentucky Fried Chicken in Shankill Road, the Loyalist neighbourhood, welcomes you with a disturbing mural featuring a balaclava-wearing, gun-toting paramilitary.

But the numbers show genuine economic progress: in five years, unemployment in Northern Ireland has been halved to 6 per cent. Local promoters even envisage making an industrial park of the Maze jail, a symbol of political martyrdom where IRA prisoner Bobby Sands died in a much-publicised hunger strike in the early 1980s.

In this changing world, McBilling and Kinner don't want to miss the Internet bandwagon. While in jail, both took Open University computing courses. McBilling then earned a master's degree in computer sciences at Queen's University in Belfast before setting up his own small venture. He now designs CD-ROMs and Web sites for local businesses such as a pub, a limousine rental agency and a property developer.

Kinner pursues a career as a computer programmer. He dealt with a local engineering company's customer management system before moving to the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders as chief information officer .

An estimated 30,000 people have been imprisoned in Northern Ireland for politically-motivated crimes over the past decades, half on the Republican side, half on the Loyalist side. Nearly all have been released, the latest by a general amnesty last July. Coming to terms with years of violence and an isolated life in jail will never be easy. But many see the boom in Internet technologies as a way to start afresh, not least because they obtained IT degrees while in jail.

Coiste, a group which represents the majority of former IRA prisoners and supports the Peace Agreement, has set up Internet and computing workshops. It is supported by Worldwideserver.com, a local Internet design business that has made Web sites for such companies as UK food retailer Healthy Life.

"They have shown a tremendous interest. Many are beginning to design their own pages and want to set up their own e-commerce Web sites," says Kevin Morgan,

Worldwideserver's manager and the founder of Coiste's Internet workshop. Morgan is not a former prisoner himself, but he understands that finding a job with a CV featuring a couple of years within a terrorist organisation is always going to be difficult.

"I never applied for a job in a company. With such a background, nobody would have wanted me," says McBilling.

Tommy Gorman is also a former IRA member: he spent a total of 13 years in jail for possession of bullets and explosives. He now heads Proj-EX 2000, an organisation helping former prisoners on both sides to come back to work.

"Companies might be reluctant to hire former terrorists in IT positions," he says. "That is because these positions give access to sensitive information. Who wants a former IRA member to have access to the address of a policeman or a soldier through its billing information?"

There are also moral concerns. Referring to the killings of civilians, who made up more than half of all the victims in the 30-year conflict, one executive of a local Internet company says: "It's not easy to imagine employing someone who has committed violations of human rights."

Yet many local businesses are open to the possibility of employing former prisoners. Barry Hagan, general manager in Ireland for IT services giant ICL, says: "We do not ask information about past convictions. And although I have no knowledge of our company employing former prisoners, we would do so if they had the requested skills."

According to Stefan Wolff, a political scientist at the University of Bath and an expert in post-conflict reconstruction, economic prosperity is one of the key factors that can help prevent a return to the violence of the past. But Wolff warns that "economic recovery is only one element of a successful reconstruction process".

A large majority of the foot soldiers of terrorism came from the poorest backgrounds. They may find it easier to find another way of life. As ICL's Hagan says, "The high level of employment, and especially the fact that there are so many good careers now offered in Northern Ireland, will help to prevent the return of the Troubles. When people have good jobs, they are too busy and have no reason to join an armed group." Eddie Kinner agrees: "I see myself as a healing agent, a role model. I want to show the kids there is another way of life than violence."

Located on the peace line, IT organisation Synergy seeks to be another of these healing agents. A joint venture between ICL and the University of Ulster, it wants to bridge the gap that still exists between the booming Internet economy and the residents of the most deprived areas of the city, where paramilitary activity is still present. It has set up IT courses in partnership with 160 charities and organisations from both communities.

Synergy manager Ken Magee says: "One of the pupils was a teenage mother who had left school at 16 with no qualifications. After she trained here in Web authoring with us, she got a position as a multimedia designer for BBC Online. That kind of situation would have been unthinkable a couple of years ago." Synergy has now opened an incubator, which supports 10 local start-ups.

Neil (not his real name), is a good example of this generation shift. Now 24, he is the son of a builder. He grew up in Falls Road, the IRA's heartland, and lived next door to the local police station, which was regularly bombed and attacked. Yet he managed not to get caught in the meshing of political activism and sectarian tensions, and made it through Belfast's most reputable university. He is now one of the heads of a leading local Internet firm.

The McBillings or Kinnors of tomorrow may not need to choose whether their future is Orange or Green.

Paramilitaries online

Last November, Amazon.com registered a new Web site as one of its 600,000 affiliate members. Amazon affiliates get a commission if one of their visitors clicks on the Amazon button to buy a book.

But Amazon didn't realise what it was getting into. This new member was the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, the political branch of the Real IRA, a dissident armed group that opposes the Good Friday Agreement and was responsible for the deaths of 29 people in the Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland in August 1998. Through a press enquiry, Amazon.com discovered who it was dealing with and promptly cut the hyperlink. It claimed no books had been bought through the organisation and therefore, no fee was paid.

But the Web traffics in a more dangerous currency than money: information. Last year, The Express newspaper discovered that all the movements as well as the address of Prince William had been posted on the Web site of the Scottish Separatist Group, a political wing of the Scottish National Liberation Army, a terrorist group that is said to work with the so called Real IRA. According to security sources, it could have been used to plan an attack on the heir to the crown.

It's not only the Republicans who exploit the Net's power to diffuse information. One Web site set up by a supporter of the Loyalist Volunteer Force, a paramilitary group which opposes the Peace Agreement, published the address of a man accused of an attack on Loyalists. The site also provides a link to a list of former IRA members, creating a potential "hit list" for Loyalist paramilitaries. "Even my name was on it," says Tommy Gorman, a former IRA member who now opposes any use of violence and works with ex-members of the Loyalist groups on a review promoting mutual understanding, The Other View.

One unexpected casualty of the site's lack of discretion with names was Shane Sinclair, a Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate for Swansea in Wales. Sinclair had to resign after he was caught posting pro-Loyalist messages to the site's mailing list.