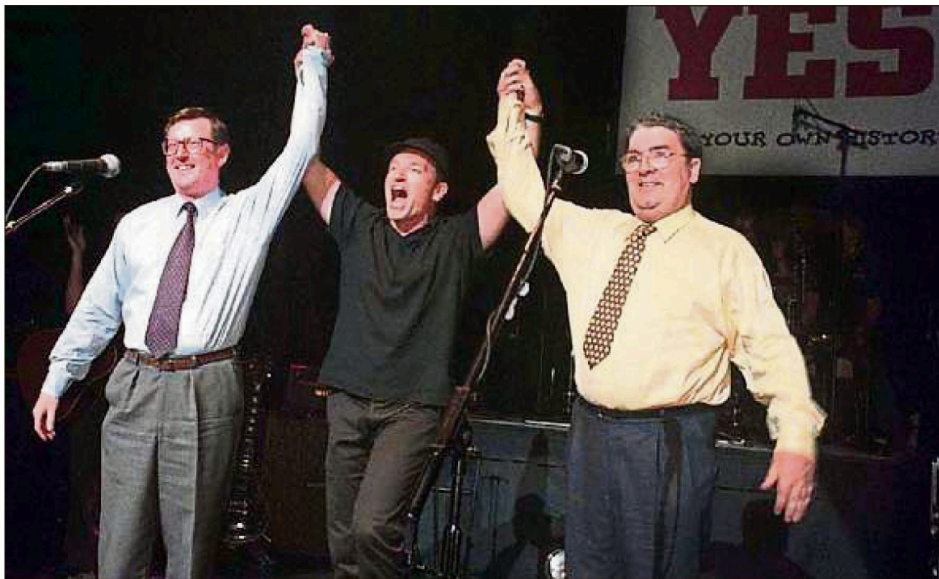




NEW ERA: David Trimble, John Hume and U2's Bono on stage at the Waterfront hall in Belfast in May 1998 for a concert to promote a 'yes' vote in the Good Friday Agreement referendum

Continuation of sectarian living and politics damning our children

IT SEEMS like a lifetime ago that we were committing ourselves to a peace process for the 'sake of the next generation'. Poor old John Hume and David Trimble were dragged onto the stage of a U2 concert so that Bono could raise their arms in the air and encourage the youngsters to cheer the bringers of change. There were very twee TV and poster commercials with sweet, smiley kids and a voiceover asking us: "Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time?"

Old men – and it was mostly old men and old terrorists – assured us they wanted a better life for their children and grandchildren. So, on May 22, 1998, huge numbers turned out for the referendum and voted 'yes' for a better future for the little ones. As the results came in on the Saturday afternoon the King's Hall was full of people clapping, cheering and high-fiving each other (as well as jeering the departing DUP contingent) and waving around the cheery flyers of the Yes campaign. The future, so it seemed, would be new, bold and era-changing. The next generation would get the chance to do politics differently; and do it better.

Well, that next generation has grown up. The 18-year-olds from 1998 are now 40. The mid-twenties are now middle-aged. The mid-thirties are in their late-thirties. Many of them have their own families. But here's the thing: a majority of those who vote are still voting for us-and-them parties. A majority of that majority are, in fact, voting for the less moderate forms of us-and-them. And while there has been a shift towards something which is now recognised as 'other', it still accounts for just about 18 per cent of those who vote.

So, let me pose a question. What do we mean when we talk about 'doing it for the children?' Most of us want our children to have a better life than we

Alex
KANE



have. Most of us don't want Northern Ireland dragged back to the days of terror campaigns and huddling round the radio and television at 11pm to hear the latest bad news. Most people will tell opinion pollsters that they want their children mixing freely and not being hung up about the political or religious background of their potential friends. Poll after poll since the early 1970s indicates substantial support for integrated education and housing: in other words, an end to us-and-them schools and us-and-them areas.

But, as I say, that doesn't seem to have happened. We (the majority of whom were

my generation) may have voted 'yes' for the sake of the next generation, but we didn't take the next steps. The children born between 1998 and 2002 (who are now voting age) and those catching up on them, were not born with political beliefs and ancient grudges. They inherit them or learn them from parents, peers, schools and the people they socialise with most. If that process happens almost exclusively within us-and-them schools and areas then we can hardly be surprised if their voting preferences reflect that background and upbringing.

It's also worth remembering that almost 30 per cent voted 'no' in 1998; and it's worth remembering because the evidence would suggest that number has now grown – otherwise both unionism and nationalism would have recognised the electoral benefit of moving closing together rather than further apart. Had there been the change that some of us had hoped to see after 1998 I think it would have been evident in the growth of entirely new centre parties (reflecting the 'new' Northern Ireland) rather than a bit of rejigging of Alliance, which was created 50 years ago.

Is it too late to do something for our children? And I don't just mean mine, by the way, or just the children of unionists. I mean for all our children. If we continue with sectarianised schooling, living and politics then we are dooming and damning each succeeding generation to the same problems we have. And even if Northern Ireland were to leave the UK at some point within the next 20 years (and, to be honest, I still think that's unlikely) our ongoing inability to integrate just means that we'd carry the problem into the new dispensation. Indeed, it might even exacerbate the problem and add further to our sense of being 'a place apart'.

The children born between 1998 and 2002 (who are now voting age)... were not born with political beliefs and ancient grudges. They inherit them or learn them from parents, peers, schools and the people they socialise with most

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 4 1970

Banbridge Siege Recalled

Letter to the Editor

A chara – The Irish News dated 1st July 1970 refers to a legal case of the 1920s. It made reference to the case of Miss Bernadette Devlin and went on to refer to the attack by an Orange mob on our house in Banbridge on the evening of July 29, 1920. The purpose of the letter was to point out that Mr J C Lardner, counsel defending my father and brother at our Court-martial in 1920, said that an Englishman's home is his castle and that he was legally entitled to defend it and that this statement effected our acquittal. That was not so.

An Orange mob, about 300, attacked our house on July 20, 1920. My father, my younger brother, aged fifteen and myself had a broken revolver each and we fired into them, killing one and wounding two others. They immediately ran off. We surrendered about three hours later at 11pm to a party of British military who came in from Newry. When it became known that we were prisoners and disarmed, the mob returned and set fire to our premises and made attempts to shoot us.

We were taken to the police barracks and a guard of soldiers was posted outside. Next morning we were charged with the murder of William Starritt and feloniously wounding two others. Later on, when it was known that Mr Tim Healy, KC (former Nationalist MP) and Mr J C Lardner would be defending us, the charges were altered to 'firing on police and military' and 'possession of firearms without a permit'.

We were court-martialled in Victoria Barracks, Belfast. I refused to recognise the court. It was Mr Lardner (defending) who made the claim already quoted about 'the Englishman's home'. We were not acquitted, however. I was sentenced to six months' imprisonment which I spent in Worcester Prison, England. My father was fined £20 or a month in jail and my young brother 10 shillings or a day in jail. Both fines were remitted.

Every Catholic shop in Banbridge was wrecked and looted that night including our own. As a result of that night's orgy of looting and destruction of property, the only persons charged before the law were the three Monaghans who were simply defending their lives and property. Thus were British law and order and British justice maintained in 1920. Le mór meas, Seamus O Muineachain, Dublin

(This extraordinary letter by Seamus Monaghan recalls the 1920s' Northern Troubles when his family's premises in Banbridge were attacked by a mob following the IRA assassination of Lieutenant-General GB Smyth of the RIC in Cork.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com