

SPEECH: Taoiseach
Micheál Martin speaks
to the media after giving
an address on the
Shared Island Initiative
at Dublin Castle



Taoiseach deserves to be given benefit of doubt on shared island unit

MY octogenarian father has a vivid memory, as a child, of my grandfather rushing into the house to 'switch on Athlone' (as he insisted on calling Radio Éireann) to hear an important message from the taoiseach, only to be bitterly disappointed when he realised that the north did not feature prominently in De Valera's pronouncement.

This did not prove to be a unique experience.

Since partition, successive Irish governments have singularly failed to take ownership of the campaign to reunify the country, provoking disappointment and resentment amongst the northern nationalist community and republicans across the island impatient to end the nationalist nightmare and right the wrongs of partition.

Last Thursday, An Taoiseach Micheál Martin made a speech launching his Shared Island initiative. He chose Dublin Castle specifically because of its historical significance and used the occasion to announce that the venue would be the operational headquarters for the new unit. Be under no illusion: this step is a reaction to the electoral success and associated political influence now being exerted by Sinn Féin within southern Irish politics.

It would not have happened had Mary Lou McDonald not succeeded in leading the republican party to break the traditional Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael duopoly and force the rivals into sharing power.

That was a transformative moment in Irish history continuing to impact on politics, north and south. Within a few months of that election, a Fianna Fáil taoiseach has been forced into creating a unit with a half billion euro budget to finally begin putting flesh on the bones of all-Ireland policy development, something no Irish government had either felt compelled nor inclined to do up to that point in history.

The messaging employed by the Fianna Fáil leader has been intentionally provocative at times to distance the initiative from Sinn Féin and to suggest that it constituted a rejection

Chris DONNELLY



of the united Ireland campaign most readily associated with the party. He was at it again last week when referencing "Brits out" as a strategy even though those sentiments could not reasonably be ascribed to any pro-unity vision being articulated at this time or over the past few decades.

In his desire to shape a new space for his proposals to be received and considered by unionists, the taoiseach has publicly spoken out against a border poll in a very dismissive and at times careless tone.

As a consequence, he has rightly been rebuked by those aware of the fact that any suggestion of the Good Friday Agreement being undermined by a lack of clarity over the consent principle would be very dangerous, empowering those within unionism who would invariably seek to resist by any means a democratic transition to unity at some point in the future.

In recent years, it has become the fashion in some quarters to speak of a shared and

agreed Ireland instead of a united country. By labelling his initiative a 'shared island' unit, the taoiseach was going a step further and hinting that his endeavours were motivated by a desire to promote sharing without unity implications – akin to a friends with benefits offer to heads not readily turned by the constitutional question.

Whilst that has understandably caused some rancour and discord amongst northern nationalists suspicious of the sincerity, motives and intentions of the taoiseach, it is nevertheless something that is worth indulging at this point – a case, if ever there was, of keeping one's eyes firmly fixed on the prize.

Our political environment continues to be in a state of flux due to the enormous challenges presented by Brexit, Covid-19 and a rapidly transforming Ireland.

Micheál Martin has pointed out that more than 1.3 million people living in Ireland today were born after the Good Friday Agreement. Dogmatic attitudes and approaches are counter-productive when the intention of shifting tones and terms is to open new doors and minds to the possibilities and realities of change.

The shared island approach is best understood as a pitch to moderate unionists and the burgeoning non-aligned community in the north to embrace the vision of all-Ireland engagement for pragmatic purposes in the knowledge that political unionism will continue to strive to frustrate any such progress regardless of how it's framed. The absence of substantive north-south development through the devolved institutions at Stormont over the past two decades illustrates the difficulties to date in progressing this agenda in the absence of focused and determined direction from Dublin.

Whilst we have seen many false dawns in the past, the taoiseach deserves to be given the benefit of the doubt. The shared island unit has the potential to finally begin demonstrating the efficacy and benefits of thinking 32 to people across Ireland, something advocates for unity can only welcome.

Dogmatic attitudes and approaches are counter-productive when the intention of shifting tones and terms is to open new doors and minds to the possibilities and realities of change

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 26 1920

Mayor Dies on Hunger-Strike

ALDERMAN Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, died in Brixton Prison at 5.40 yesterday morning on the 74th day of his hunger-strike. During the past week the imprisoned man had been subjected to fits of delirium and his condition had become steadily worse.

The late Mr MacSwiney was born in Cork city in 1881 and received his early education at the Christian Brothers' North Monastery. On leaving school he was employed by a firm of wholesale distributors in Cork but it was not his metier and he continued to read ardently. He took his BA degree in the Royal University of Ireland, abandoned trade and accepted the post of teacher of commercial subjects. When the Sinn Féin movement began to make itself felt, Mr MacSwiney became one of its leading lights. Mr MacSwiney first attained political prominence as Commandant of the Sinn Féin Volunteers in Cork.

Devlin Accuses Carson and Craig

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, Mr Joseph Devlin [Nationalist] said Sir Edward Carson was not only an eminent lawyer but a splendid actor. One would imagine he was the most conservative apostle of law and order.

He was as much against the murder of policemen as Sir Edward Carson. He was different to the right hon. gentleman in that he had never inspired murder. ... Sir Edward was an organiser of the rebellion in Ulster and the gun-running there. The 'lamb's' who followed Sir Edward Carson drove countless men and women and children into starvation... Mr Devlin spoke of 'hypocrites' on the Ministerial Bench who day after day were thrilled by the tragedies of the murder of policemen, yet he had not heard a single word of sympathy for men against whom crimes had been perpetrated worse than murder – the crime of driving them from their work.

The Chief Secretary [Sir Hamar Greenwood] went to Belfast recently but never from his lips fell one word of protest against this scandalous conduct... The gentleman who held the position of Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty (Sir James Craig) went there and said 'he thought it was only fair that he should be asked did he approve of the action the boys had taken in the past', and he said 'Yes'. That gentleman was the spokesman of his Government...

MacSwiney's death, after a prolonged hunger-strike, captured world attention and galvanised support for the republican struggle at home and in the US.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com