



ANNIVERSARY: It is disappointing that Sinn Féin and the SDLP (along with a number of key figures from within civic nationalism and academia) have decided not to participate in the Centenary Forum to mark the formation of Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's story can't be told by just one side

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WAS at a panel event last year and was asked by representatives from both the SDLP and Sinn Féin why mainstream unionism tended to 'boycott' such events. "Wouldn't they," the Sinn Féin member asked, "benefit from hearing a perspective they wouldn't usually hear. And aren't they missing the opportunity to put their opinion before an audience which wouldn't normally hear them in detail?"

Many of these events tend to be off-the-record; with speakers knowing they won't be filmed or recorded and that members of the audience won't be posting their comments on social media. That makes them useful events and exchanges. It certainly allows for a level of frankness you wouldn't otherwise get; and, more importantly, allows for the building of personal relationships that can be crucial to the addressing of difficult issues in a public domain.

Over the years I've been able to engage in some fascinating discussions and press – and be pressed – on key points of belief and behaviour. And much of what I've heard and learned – and it's surprising how much I've learned – has found its way into my columns and commentary.

I remember writing a piece for *The Irish News* a few years ago and later being phoned by a Sinn Féin MLA who told me he was impressed that I had clearly been listening to key players within the party.

That's why I'm disappointed that Sinn Féin and the SDLP (along with a number of key figures from within civic nationalism and academia) have decided not to participate in the Centenary Forum to mark the formation of Northern Ireland.

I can understand why they don't want to 'celebrate' the event, but I still find it strange they're missing the chance to have an input into how the centenary is marked, particularly the huge changes in the past 50 years.

OK, they don't want to play 'spot the highlights' of 50 years of

unionist governments; but what about the 48 years when there hasn't been a unionist government? What about the 1998 Agreement? What about the Paisley/McGuinness breakthrough?

The story of Northern Ireland is not a story that can be told by just one side. It is a story that touches the lives of every single one of us, particularly those who lived through those three horrible decades from 1968-98.

What amounts to a nationalist boycott of the event actually robs the potency of their criticism of unionists for not taking part in 'Shared Island' conversations, or Micheál Martin's recently announced series of Shared Island Dialogues. It makes a mockery of claims to be interested in reconciliation or

accommodation. They are, in fact, doing the very thing they criticise unionism for doing: refusing to take part in honest discussion.

My friend Allison Morris made a very good point in *The Irish News* on October 13: "There is a real opportunity to reflect on how different sections of the community view the last 100 years and how they feel the partition of the island has impacted on generations of people who live here."

So given the official British government plans have been shunned by many of those who would be in a position to give a more rounded perspective leaves a process likely to be sanitised with a glossed-over depiction of Northern Ireland.

Allison and I have spent many occasions in front of audiences representing all sections and political beliefs across Northern Ireland. We come to almost every issue from diametrically opposed perspectives; yet oddly enough the only time she's really annoyed me is when she described Sherlock Holmes as a 'bit of a tube' (although I've since forgiven her).

Anyway, we both know the public actually enjoy honest exchange and banter. Indeed, they come to events precisely because that's what they want to hear. We get the same reactions when we speak at the below-the-radar events I mentioned above.

That's why I regret the unwillingness of both sides – particularly within the political parties – to take part in events where they think they may not 'control' the event or agenda.

Let's be honest, if we can't even sit round a table and discuss the creation of Northern Ireland and our joint history, then I despair about what would happen if a border poll ever resulted in us having to discuss the creation of what would be, to all intents and purposes, a newly created united Ireland.

Finally – and just for the record – Sherlock Holmes is not a tube. And that's a view jointly shared by all sides here!

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ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 30 1970

Arms Trial Acquittals

THE outcome of the Dublin arms trial, in which a jury found all four accused not guilty of conspiracy last night, brought calls for an immediate general election. As the four men celebrated their acquittal, news of the verdict was given to the Taoiseach, Mr Jack Lynch in New York where he has been attending the United Nations. Cleared in one of the most dramatic trials in Irish history were Mr Charles Haughey (former Minister for Finance); Captain James Kelly (retired Army Intelligence Officer); Belgian-born company director Albert Luyckx and Belfast engineer, John Kelly. Asked if he considered the trial had been a political one, Mr Haughey said: 'I was never under any doubt...' He said there were fundamental differences between himself and the Taoiseach.

Provisional Sinn Féin

ABOUT 200 delegates from all parts of Ireland and from Britain attended the Ard Fheis of Sinn Féin in Dublin on Saturday. The new president is Ruairí Ó Brádaigh who was a candidate in the Imperial election in Tyrone a few years ago. In his speech to delegates he said he hoped that on the conclusion of this Ard Fheis, the various news media would 'at last acknowledge who is the true Sinn Féin'. They welcomed the statement from the IRA that the 1970 General Army Convention had been held, that the 'Provisional' period was ended and that a duly-elected leadership had been installed, pledged to uphold the thirty-two county republic of 1916 and 1919, and to defend the rights of the Irish people. He said that their newspaper, *An Phoblacht* was now selling 30,000 copies and that *Republican News* in Belfast was selling 15,000 copies per month. The new Ard Chomhairle includes the 1916 veteran Joe Clarke; the Civil Rights leader in Derry, Sean Keenan and Seán MacStiofáin.

Police Called to Council

Police were called to Dungannon Urban Council Chamber last night to evict six non-Unionist members who had refused to leave after the Unionist chairman had closed the meeting. The special meeting had been requested by Independent and Labour members to discuss a 'points system' for house allocations. Councillor Michael McLaughlin (Independent) said there was 'a looming crisis of public confidence' in the Urban Council and demanded the appointment of an Opposition councillor to the Housing Committee.

(Less than a year after the IRA split over criticism of it for alleged inaction in August 1969, the Republican traditionalists formed Provisional Sinn Féin under the Longford IRA veteran, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh. At the same time the Lynch government was rocked by the acquittal of Charles Haughey and his co-defendants in the Dublin Arms Trial.)

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