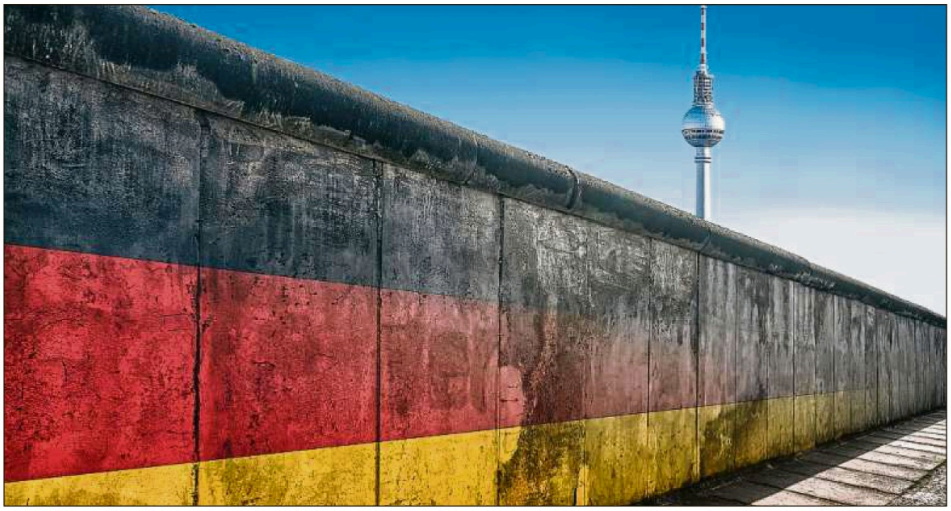

EAST GERMANY: A state many young people today would have no idea ever existed. The stifling and frightening presence and purpose of the Stasi had a terrible impact on so many

History shows how political unionism has failed to adapt to change

Chris DONNELLY

THE rehabilitation of the 1980s has been a theme of recent years. The decade was for long regarded as the poor relation of its preceding decades, with the music and tumult associated with the sixties and seventies being deemed more worthy of revisiting in popular culture.

In recent times, the successful 1980s based Netflix shows *Stranger Things* and *Cobra Kai* seem to have piqued the interest of Generation Z, including the Zoomers (ie today's youth) in my own household. *The Karate Kid* is an iconic movie associated with all things 1980s, so the success of the latter was perhaps predictable not least because the main protagonists from the Hollywood classic appear in the new series, having aged some 30-plus years. In any event, binge watching the show was like being transported back through the decades, and in no time I was calling up Def Leppard and Depeche Mode on Spotify to educate my children (albeit against their will) about the great music that carried a much younger me through my adolescent and teen years.

Beyond the music, fashion and technological developments, there is much separating that period in time from the world in which we live today.

Over the Christmas break, I took a particular interest in reading and watching films about East Germany, a state that many young people today would have no idea ever existed. The stifling and frightening presence and purpose of the Stasi and the terrible impact it had on so many German people was brilliantly captured on screen in *The Lives Of Others*, providing a terrifying insight into the harsh reality of life today for the Uighur people of China's Xinjiang province.

One of the features of the annual Christmas holiday season is the release of the state papers. This newspaper always gives appropriate attention to the content of files declassified after having been sealed by governments for more than a generation. I have always found these worthy of paying attention to for what they tell us about how people in positions of power and authority really felt at critical moments in our past.

The state papers released last month from 1997 included reports of the British government expressing its annoyance at the Irish government for including a chapter about the north in a Facts about Ireland booklet it distributed internationally through its diplomats. The same declassified files also made reference to the Presbyterian moderator being unhappy at meeting Irish government officials at the Anglo-Irish Secretariat at Maryfield just outside Belfast.

The arrogance which long defined the attitude of both the British government and unionism to all things Irish in this part of the island has in part diminished, though remains present and visible both in the hostile attitude towards the Irish language and to recognizing the all-Ireland identity of the nationalist community. The Maryfield secretariat was a product of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, a key British government concession that proved crucial to destroying the unionist veto – a vital prerequisite to peace, laying the foundations for the Good Friday Agreement.

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Brexit has inadvertently delivered a form of economic unity which will complement and accelerate the already developing reorientation of politics onto a north-south axis in Ireland. The taoiseach's Shared Island initiative was devised as a means to play catch-up with civic society, political parties and movements which are already paying no heed to a border which history will record that Brexit briefly threatened to reintroduce on the island.

Mindsets and attitudes are forged and shaped in experiences that can be personal or communal but history repeatedly reminds us that they are fluid and not fixed. In politics, keeping pace with, adapting to and leading change is crucial to staying relevant. Many political leaders, parties and even governing regimes, like those that held grip in Eastern Europe, have fallen due to an inability to read society's mood and adapt accordingly.

The history of Northern Ireland to date has been marked by the consistency with which political unionism has failed to adapt, lead or accurately read the mood and plan ahead.

Cloaking itself in victim's attire has become a tactic to deflect blame and sustain perpetually delusional thinking. The cry of betrayal over Brexit directed at Boris Johnson belies the fact that at no point did the DUP leadership adopt an intelligent forward-thinking position on Brexit recognising the divided and complicated nature of this society. Tory 'betrayal' over unionism's Brexit demands was, in reality, as predictable as it was logical.

Northern Ireland's centenary year will be celebrated by publicly funded minted coins, firework displays and parades but all evidence suggests that a generation from now, declassified papers from today will reveal how out of touch unionist politicians were with the changing tides. By that point, the state may have joined East Germany in being consigned to history.

ON THIS DAY

JANUARY 4 1971

Churchill's 'Unity' Offer Recalled

THE publication of British Cabinet Papers giving further confirmation of the uncompromising stand on Irish neutrality in 1940 by Mr de Valera, the then Taoiseach, has again become a talking point in political circles.

These papers make it clear that although he had been warned that the country could be over-run in hours and that he himself might be shot, de Valera repeated a firm 'No'. Even the promise of a United Ireland made no impression on the Irish leader.

Commenting on the firm stand which Mr de Valera had taken, Mr Eddie McAteer, Nationalist Party President, said last night it was a bit unfair to judge from the after-wisdom of thirty years, but he thought that Mr de Valera was correct in principle.

Would Britain have kept her promise [to facilitate a United Ireland]? The former Nationalist MP said that this disclosure must certainly be a 'smack on the face' for the trusted Unionists who were being suckled by British flattery at the time.

The message was getting clearer every day: Britain would end Partition the moment it suited her, said Mr McAteer.

Lord Brookeborough, former NI Premier, said yesterday: 'On looking back, the Constitution had been in danger although I did not know about the United Ireland offer at the time'. He had trusted Churchill who never gave any indication that he would let NI down.

The British documents disclose that some 'hawks' in the Allied War Council wanted to take over the Irish Atlantic ports by force if necessary while the 'doves' offered a possible end to Partition if Mr de Valera would let in British troops and warships.

It was clear in his rejection of British overtures that he did not regard the offers as any firm guarantee of a United Ireland. And even if Britain had agreed to this, Mr de Valera was insisting that the united country should remain neutral. This was the point on which the negotiations ended on July 4, 1940.

(Debate still rages over de Valera's rejection of Churchill's wartime offer of Irish unity in exchange for Eire joining the Allies. This followed the fall of France in June 1940 which the British PM viewed as heralding 'a new dark age'. De Valera distrusted Churchill who had described the Irish leader in 1922 as 'representing a catastrophe rather than a cause'. He believed Craigavon would sabotage the deal while he also surmised that Germany was likely to win the war. While Craigavon denounced Churchill's 'treachery', two of his cabinet, Sir Basil Brooke and John MacDermott, were prepared to accept reunification as the lesser of two evils.)

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