



LADY IN WAITING: We all need to get to grips with the possibility that Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald could become taoiseach

People need to get used to the idea of McDonald leading government

HERE is a form of words you haven't seen before: "The Taoiseach, Mary Lou McDonald".

If you're a unionist or a conservative nationalist and you just got out of bed, then it might spoil your breakfast. Relax and for goodness sake don't choke on your Ulster Fry: the Sinn Féin leader hasn't been promoted overnight to head of the Irish government. But we all need to get to grips with the possibility that it could happen in the not-too-distant future.

Two recent opinion polls had the 'Shinners' as the most popular party south of the border and a third survey put them joint first with Fine Gael. They got the highest percentage of votes in the general election held on February 8 last year and, if the party had run more candidates, it would be the biggest in the Dáil by a sizeable margin.

Opponents of Sinn Féin should not panic just yet, as the next southern general election could be as late as February 2025, although there is no guarantee that the current Dáil will serve out its full five-year term.

The political landscape has changed. Fianna Fáil, who for decades were the biggest party on the southern scene, are not the force they used to be. In the 2007 general election, they got 77 out of 166 Dáil seats but last year they came back with 38 out of 160, including the Ceann Comhairle or Speaker of the Dáil who was automatically re-elected.

SF have a good nose for a vote-getting policy and their manifesto for the 2020 election included some clear examples of that, eg "Sinn Féin will stop the pension age increase to 67 and return it to 65." Fine Gael defended the age-rise on the basis that people were living longer and issuing pensions at 65 was becoming

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unaffordable, but that didn't win the party many votes.

As you would expect, Sinn Féin appealed to republican sentiment with promises that in government it would establish "an all-island representative Citizens' Assembly" or other appropriate forum to discuss and plan for a united Ireland and "Secure a referendum, north and south, on Irish Unity". The party ended up with almost 25 per cent of first-preference votes, many from working people who are attracted by SF's policies on bread-and-butter issues like the pension age but who also cherish, on another level, the traditional dream of a united Ireland.

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That feeling could change in the future.

After all, Mary Lou McDonald was a member of their party before moving over to Sinn Féin and almost all of Sinn Féin's Dáil representatives are too young to be associated with the era of the Troubles.

Sinn Féin participation in a Dublin-based government would of course intensify the debate over Irish unity, since that cause is the party's principal raison d'être.

The issue came up again with last weekend's publication in the *Sunday Times* of a LucidTalk survey which found that a majority of 47 to 42 per cent in Northern Ireland favour retaining the union, with 11 per cent undecided, whilst a majority of 51 to 44 per cent want a border poll by 2025 at the latest.

Meanwhile, there was no comfort for unionists in the London *Evening Standard* column by former UK Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne

where he wrote that, because of the special arrangements made as a result of Brexit, "Northern Ireland is already heading for the exit door. By remaining in the EU

single market, it is for all economic intents and purposes now slowly becoming part of a united Ireland." A somewhat different viewpoint was expressed by Robert Shrimmsley in a column for the *Financial Times* where he suggested that "the commercial advantages of being in both the UK and EU single markets" could be used as a "best of both worlds" argument for retaining the union.

We are indeed living in a period of flux and change with some very interesting times ahead.

ON THIS DAY

JANUARY 27 1921

Double murder in Belfast

A SENSATIONAL and tragic affair resulting in the death of two members of the RIC and the wounding of a third took place in Belfast last night. The names of the victims of a murderous attack are: Constable M Quinn (dead); Constable Thomas Heffron (dead); Constable R Gilmartin (wounded).

The circumstances under which the shocking crime was perpetrated indicate that it was carefully planned. The scene was the Railway View Hotel at the corner of Townhall Street and Oxford Street owned by Mr R Roddy. It appears that the licensed premises had been closed at the usual hour of 9.30 and five men, unobserved, remained seated in one of the 'snugs'. Later, the five men emerged from their hiding-place, walked upstairs and in a few seconds the barmen heard the sounds of revolver shots.

Scarcely a minute had passed before the five, who were quite undisguised, re-entered the bar and, covering the assistants with revolvers, ordered them to open the front door. The men hurriedly left and disappeared into the street.

Realising that a tragedy had been enacted, the assistants rushed upstairs and were confronted with an appalling spectacle. The three constables had recently arrived in the city from the RIC Depot in Dublin. During their stay they had not been wearing uniforms.

Gilmartin, the Irish News believes, was to have appeared as a witness at a forthcoming case and the other Constables had accompanied him from the Metropolis. The wounded man received a bullet wound in the chest.

Search operations on a large scale by police and military were carried out throughout the city generally. Colonel Wickham, [RIC] Divisional Commissioner, and Mr J L Gelston, City Commissioner, arrived early on the scene.

A feature of the night's dread happening was the fact that the telephone wires between Belfast and Dublin were cut near Lisburn. Gilmartin is critical.

THESE murders were carried out by the Belfast IRA on a tip-off from a police source in the nearby Musgrave St Barracks that three RIC men had arrived from the South on an unknown 'secret mission'. It was decided to assassinate them. It transpired that the critically wounded man, Constable Gilmartin had been sent to Belfast under a two-man escort as a Crown witness at the court-martial of an IRA man accused of murdering an RIC sergeant in Co Sligo. In his diary, Mark Sturgis, a key Dublin Castle official, commented that whoever 'let them go to an hotel instead of Barracks seems to me to be almost as guilty of the murders.' Gilmartin survived to testify. A police reprisal would follow later that night.

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