



THE WRONG MAN: Taoiseach Micheál Martin has said now is not the time to promote the cause of Irish unity

Ireland's misfortune to have Martin in charge

FOR me, one of the most memorable moments on BBC's *Dragons' Den* happened about 10 years ago when the blunt-speaking dragon Hilary Devey uttered a simple five-word sentence now burned in my memory.

Giving feedback to a contestant, she said: "You make my foot itch."

That phrase goes through my head every time I see Taoiseach Micheál Martin. He makes Leo Varadkar look like a statesman, and that takes some doing, and by god he makes my foot itch.

Martin suffers from an affliction common in the political class. Foot-in-the-Mouth disease. He showed signs of it again this week – one of the most important in the political calendar.

The eyes of the world are turned on Ireland. The Guinness is as green as the Chicago River on St Patrick's Day, and politicians around the globe are celebrating a small nation that has influence far beyond its size.

And then in blunders Martin – blind to the current political realities.

The uncomfortable truth is we are a nation dangerously close to the precipice following England's decision to take the United Kingdom out of Europe. There are ominous signs that the compact that has sustained peace in Ireland is under pressure. And we know there are those prepared to threaten that peace for their own political salvation.

I could fill a book on the reasons why Brexit was a monumental mistake. But we are where we are.

It is the job of political leaders to assess the new realities, and to chart a course that mitigates against the impact of England's retreat from the world.

One impact is on the future of the UK itself. As part of the price of Brexit, Boris Johnson – enabled by the DUP – drew a border down the Irish Sea, making emphatic the separation between these islands.

Great Britain and Northern Ireland, it may be; but the word 'and' now signifies

Tom COLLINS



separation rather than union.

Earlier this month, Welsh first minister Mark Drakeford said the union was 'not sustainable'; Scotland knows the writing is on the wall too. It is only a matter of time before it votes for independence. Northern nationalists have known for generations that partition is but a phase in Irish history; as do unionists – that is why their politics is built entirely on denial.

And Boris Johnson knows the union is tottering.

He is an oaf, but he is not stupid. Wrapping himself in the flag, the jingoistic boasting, and repressive legislation outlawing legitimate protest, are all signs of insecurity. A country that has to put a police guard on a statue of Winston Churchill is not a country at peace with itself.

The only person in these islands so lacking in political intelligence that he cannot see the new realities is An Taoiseach who this week dismissed calls to debate the future of this island and the case for reunification

The only person in these islands so lacking in political intelligence that he cannot see the new realities is An Taoiseach who this week dismissed calls to debate the future of this island, and the case for reunification.

On Monday Martin told the Brookings Institute in Washington that now was not the time to promote the cause of Irish unity. "I think it is divisive and puts people back into the trenches too early," he said. 'Reconciliation first' appears to be his motto.

But the simple truth is that an open and honest discussion about Irish unity is the precursor to reconciliation – not a block.

Whatever Martin may think, people are in the trenches now. Irish unity is the best hope we have of getting them out of them.

Martin says he wants to work with the Northern Ireland Assembly and with the British government to build consensus.

The first minister – toadying to loyalist paramilitaries – is unfit to govern, the executive is a shambles, the assembly is a joke; the British government is in breach of international law and its commitments to the Northern Ireland Protocol; and one of its leading ministers has repudiated Peter Brooke's assertion that Britain does not have a selfish and strategic interest in Northern Ireland.

By their actions you shall know them. The British government is lobbing grenades at the peace process, and the taoiseach is low-towing when he should be marshalling the support of Irish America, and President Joe Biden.

The world has changed. Brexit has torn the bonds that once held the UK together. Northern Ireland and Scotland, let us not forget, voted remain.

A leader with vision would be acting now to promote a managed reworking of the constitutional arrangements in these islands.

Britain's misfortune is to have Boris Johnson as prime minister. Ireland's is to have Micheál Martin.

ON THIS DAY

MARCH 18 1921

Carson Ally Resigns

AT THE conclusion of questions in the House of Commons yesterday, Mr Lloyd George rose and said: 'It is my very painful duty to read to the House a letter which I have just received from the Leader of the House who writes: "I very much regret that I have to inform you that I am no longer able to continue my political work. The strain of the last few years has pressed very heavily upon me ... Now I am quite worn out and my medical advisers have warned me that my physical condition is such that, unless I have an immediate and long rest, an early and complete breakdown is inevitable ..."'

Mr Lloyd George was deeply affected.

Andrew Bonar Law was born in New Brunswick, Canada in 1858. His father was a Presbyterian minister of Scottish descent who had emigrated from Ireland. The future Conservative leader returned to Scotland where his education was completed. After several years in the iron and steel business, he turned his attention to politics and was elected for the Blackfriars Division of Glasgow through the Irish vote in 1900. He became leader of the Conservative Party in 1911.

Sir Edward Carson and his advisers in the North of Ireland then provided the English Unionist with the policy and the war cry. The Ulster Volunteers were formed [1913] and elaborate preparations were made to inaugurate a rebellion against an Act of the Imperial Parliament. Mr Bonar Law allied himself with Sir Edward Carson at once. The sole object was to destroy the Liberal government and get back to power themselves. Without caring in the least for the consequences of their actions in regard to Ireland, they threw themselves with ferocious fervour into the Carsonite campaign of threatened rebellion. Henceforward Mr Bonar Law was Sir Edward Carson's henchman.

Mr Bonar Law lost two of his sons during the war.

Boycott of Belfast

IT IS reported that Belfast goods consigned to Castletown [County Monaghan] were taken from a train which was held up at Inniskeen. The goods were burned. Masked men entered the goods store of Sligo railway station. They broke open four boxes containing boots and confectionery and carried them away. Some of the goods were from Northern firms to local traders.

A LIFE-LONG pipe-smoker, Bonar Law was suffering from the cancer which would kill him in 1923. The son of a Coleraine Presbyterian minister, he made 'Ulster' a strong emotional issue to rally the Tories in opposition to Asquith's Third Home Rule Bill. Though 'indisposed' during 1921, Law used his powerful influence to support Craig during the Treaty negotiations.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com