



VISION: Sinn Féin president Mary Lou McDonald has spoken of the need for an island-wide Irish national health service (stock picture)

# Health service a key issue in unity debate

**T**IME was when proponents of a united Ireland consisted of two substantial groups: those who advocated an entirely peaceful approach and others who used violence. Nowadays the overwhelming majority favour an exclusively political path towards the long-held objective whereas advocates of the bomb-and-bullet strategy are a small minority.

Interestingly, the unity question has become a central feature of public discourse to the greatest extent for decades and the objective of a 32-county democratic republic appears rather more attainable than at any time in the last 100 years. Formidable barriers still remain, however.

The biggest obstacle is of course the opposition of the unionists in Northern Ireland. The challenge for nationalists and republicans is to win over a sufficient number from that community to their cause. Under the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, a single-vote victory on each side of the border would be sufficient to achieve unity but many, including the present writer, would regard that as a nightmare scenario which could set the stage for years of discontent, disruption and indeed violence.

Any thoughtful advocate of unity would be hoping for, at the very least, a 60-40 majority in the north and a minimum of 80-20 per cent in the south. In a TV and radio address on December 9 1968, then-Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill asked the question: "What kind of Ulster do you want?" The question in a referendum debate could be: "What kind of United Ireland do you want?"

In those far-off days, 53 years ago, O'Neill saw the choice as one between "a happy and respected province" of the United Kingdom and "a place continually torn apart by riots and demonstrations". Little did he or

Deaglán DE BRÉADÚN



anyone else know at the time that riots and demonstrations were a minor threat compared to the litany of unspeakable horrors that would take place in years to come.

The question now is how to persuade a substantial number of unionists that a united Ireland is in their best interests. There are the largely-symbolic aspects such as the union flag, the monarchy, etc. The practical side is more important at the end of the day. The difference between the health systems in the two parts of the island, for example, would be a major issue.

It's a subject that deserves more attention. An article in *The Economist* on March 21 2019 noted that there was talk of fresh momentum towards Irish unity in the event of a "hard Brexit", since a majority in Northern Ireland had voted to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum.

The same analytical piece cited the

difference in the health systems, north and south, as a problematic issue in this regard: "The 1.8m people of Northern Ireland enjoy free access to the British taxpayer-funded National Health Service (NHS). The Republic of Ireland's 4.8m residents have to make do with something less appealing."

The article continued that almost 50 per cent of the Republic's population were said to be paying for no-frills private health insurance (at an average annual cost per family of €1,850/\$1,600 in 2017) in order to skip lengthy queues. In addition, unlike their UK counterparts, some 60 per cent of Irish people, were paying up-front in cash for primary health care, with a single GP visit typically costing between €50 and €60 (\$43-€51).

There has been a lot of rhetoric down through the years about Irish unity, but Mary Lou McDonald is at least conscious of the challenges involved in bringing it about. In an interview with Carole Coleman on RTÉ Radio's *This Week* programme last January, the Sinn Féin leader said that, in conversation with ordinary unionists, nationalists and republicans about the future of the island, "the thing that is raised most often with me is the future of the health service and I think the opportunity to build an Irish national health service island-wide is absolutely within our grasp".

This echoed a point she made in an address to her party's annual conference in Derry on November 16 2019: "Our system is broken. We need an Irish National Health Service. That is the future."

The problem is, of course, that the south has never had a left-led government. Step forward the Irish answer to Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh socialist who did the heavy lifting to establish the NHS for the UK back in 1948.

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## ON THIS DAY

MARCH 24 1971

### Faulkner is New Premier

MR BRIAN Faulkner, the Minister of Development, became Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in succession to Mr James Chichester-Clark in all but name yesterday. His election will be confirmed at a meeting of the Unionist Parliamentary Party today. It is believed inevitable that four Unionist MPs including Mr William Craig (former Minister of Home Affairs and a contender for the premiership) and Mr Harry West will be readmitted to the Parliamentary Party. But even with four extra votes, Mr Faulkner is expected to coast home.

Mr Faulkner, who saw the Premiership slip from his grasp to Mr Terence [now Lord] O'Neill [in 1963] and who was pipped at the post – by a single vote – to Mr Chichester-Clark, is a tenacious fighter. But even his best friends last night admitted that, faced with formidable opposition from the right wing and distrusted by the Opposition, his tenure of office is likely to be only about a year.

On the eve of Mr Faulkner's election, a Minority Rights Group was formed yesterday – and with it came a clear warning to the Unionist Party that any reversal of the reform programme would lead to total withdrawal of the Catholic minority from public life. Fifty representatives of trades unions and professional and business life formed the group.

In a plea to the Protestant population, they called for united community support for its aims as 'only in this way can a community in peaceful partnership be established'.

### Heath Warns Unionist Hardliners

THE British Prime Minister, Mr Edward Heath yesterday reminded the warring Unionist factions that his government held 'the ultimate authority and responsibility for NI'. His government would support any Stormont administration provided it cooperated in implementing policies approved by Westminster.

Mr Heath and the Opposition leader, Mr Harold Wilson made it clear that Britain's two major parties agreed on a programme of reconciliation, equality and an end to violence and terrorism. The PM assured Mr Wilson that the Conservatives are opposed to reconstituting the B Specials or re-arming the RUC.

Clark's failure to persuade Westminster to double troop numbers to counter the IRA campaign ensured the election of the suave, ambitious and Dublin-educated Brian Faulkner. Within months Faulkner's predictable resort to internment – directed exclusively at the minority – would trigger total Catholic alienation from the Northern Ireland state.

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