

For many unionists ending partition would spell the end of their identity

Alex KANE



THEY really don't come much more unionist than Wallace Thompson. He was one of the DUP's founding members; close to Ian Paisley for decades; a special adviser to Nigel Dodds when he was minister of finance; a member of the Orange; and one of the key people in a lobby group known as the Caleb Foundation, which has been described as the "rock upon which the DUP was built".

This was Thompson speaking a few days ago, responding to a question from the *News Letter's* Sam McBride: "I still believe in the union but the protocol has created a crisis for unionism once again and I feel we must learn from what has happened to us in the past. As unionists we've been betrayed over and over again and we're always on the back foot. There's a pattern that's repeated – there's the betrayal, there's the fightback, there are the attempts to undo the damage that rarely ever succeed."

That's quite an admission for a unionist to make: not least because it prompts constitutional opponents to ask: "But why do you support a union whose political leadership serially betrays you? Why the loyalty to people who don't seem to care about you? How would you even persuade a small-n nationalist or constitutional agnostic that the union is preferable to a united Ireland where your voice and votes might actually matter?"

Thompson went further: "It's about future generations, and we need both sides to be able to listen to each other, and to seek to genuinely understand each other's perspectives, concerns and expectations. In this centenary year there needs to be a meaningful, open and honest debate... Too many nationalist politicians and commentators seem either unable or unwilling to understand the Ulster Protestant mindset. It's often portrayed by them as triumphalist and sectarian, whereas it is based on genuinely held and totally legitimate principles. Over the years when it has reacted angrily, it has done so out of a sense of fear that it was being threatened with destruction."

He makes a crucial point. The fire of Irish unity has never been extinguished in my lifetime. Even if unionist governments from 1921-72 had held out the hand of friendship to the Catholic minority the fire wouldn't have been extinguished. And that's because partition struck at the very core of their identity: that sense of who they were and who they wanted to be recognised as.

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FEELING OF BETRAYAL: DUP founding member Wallace Thompson

as – matters just as much to those of us who are unionist. Unionism is another form of nationalism and it is just as valid as the nationalism of those who regard themselves as Irish. For many unionists, the ending of partition – a united Ireland, in other words – spells the end of their identity. Our country disappears. Our constitutional linkage to the UK disappears. We become something different: significantly so.

Just before lockdown began last March I had a long conversation over an equally long lunch with an Irish nationalist friend who admitted that no matter how well governed Northern Ireland had been, or would be, he would still like to see a united Ireland in his

lifetime. As he put it (and I'm paraphrasing, Tom): "The attitude of unionism has probably increased the appetite for unity as soon as possible for most of us, but the appetite has been there since day one of partition." For him partition represents the denial of a key dimension of his identity. And that is something I fully understand.

For me the end of partition and the removal of Northern Ireland from my address would represent the termination of a key dimension of my identity: almost like a victory of sorts for those nationalists who could never even bring themselves to use the name 'Northern Ireland'. That may seem like a ridiculous thing to say, yet the fact remains that the Northern Ireland reference in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland matters very much to me: as does my citizenship of the UK (even if certain British governments really p*s s me off at times).

I'm not afraid of the Irish unity debate: and never have been. But if we are going to have it then it would help if key elements within nationalism acknowledged that my sense of identity is as valid as their sense of identity and not just some sort of 'planter hangover mentality'.

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ON THIS DAY

MARCH 26 1921

Prime Minister Defends Executions

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, Mr Asquith [former Liberal Prime Minister] said the situation in Ireland had been seriously aggravated by the policy of the Government during the past six months. In the past three or four days there had been outrages resulting in the loss of fifty lives. The means and methods adopted by the Executive had had the effect of alienating popular sympathy from the side of law and order and diverting it to those engaged in violating it. Six men have been hanged recently in Dublin. Four of them were only engaged in an ambush in which there was no loss of life...

What shocked the intelligence and conscience of people was that they did not see any evidence of corresponding steps being taken against those who had committed the supreme outrage, that, having been entrusted with its protection, they had rivalled the criminals in crime.

Mr Lloyd George said: '[Mr Asquith] quoted three cases as illustrating the wickedness of the policy of the Government. One was the case of the six men who were hanged in Dublin. I took a good deal of trouble over the case. [Mr Joseph Devlin] made a special appeal to me... It is a horrible thing to have to put an end to six young lives in cold blood, but, not only do I say that no Government could have interfered but [Mr Asquith] would have come to the same conclusion. Two of the men were engaged in murder. [The others] were engaged in an ambush to kill policemen. They were armed with bombs which they threw...'

'Is there any possibility of bringing an end to this distressing condition. You will not bring an end to it by surrender to crime (hear, hear)... If there is going to be a truce, it must be on the basis of the surrender of arms. The people of this land will be glad to see an end of this killing and counter-killing in Ireland... We could not agree to a separate independent Irish Republic... We propose to put into operation the Act of Parliament [1920] and for holding elections in May in the South and the North.'

'We propose to put into operation the Act of Parliament [1920] and for holding elections in May in the South and the North.'

FACED with a corruscating attack on Government policy by Asquith, Lloyd George brazenly defended the executions and reprisals which had alienated almost the entire Irish population. Any Truce must be based on the surrender of IRA arms and the rejection of a Republic. For The Irish News the most alarming part of the PM's speech was his declared determination to proceed with partition in May 1921.

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