



DEBATE: Claire Byrne Live on RTÉ with Sinn Féin president Mary Lou McDonald and Tánaiste Leo Varadkar

Winds of constitutional change getting stronger

OVER the past seven days, a number of developments occurred illustrating how the winds of constitutional change on this island continue to gather pace. Last Monday's *Claire Byrne Live* programme on RTÉ, focused on the theme of Irish unity. It was noteworthy for a number of reasons, particularly for the manner in which the tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, found common cause in terms of tone and sentiment with Sinn Féin's Mary Lou McDonald with regard to the need to engage in preparing for unity.

This represented a significant departure for Fine Gael, who have always been most comfortable with the idea that discussions about a united Ireland should always be reserved for mañana, an ever elusive tomorrow.

It was left to Micheál Martin to disappoint – a recurring theme, with his contribution providing little by way of suggestion that he understands the weight of responsibility upon his shoulders to lead the great project of nation-building destined to define the second century in the history of the independent sovereign Irish state.

He wasted an opportunity to cultivate the tremendous goodwill which exists amongst the Irish American diaspora for this project over the St Patrick's Day period and appears now, more than ever, to have failed to capture the mood and embrace his obligations to take the leadership role in developing a comprehensive programme of preparation and planning for unity.

On Tuesday, the man many believe to be Micheál Martin's successor in waiting, Jim O'Callaghan, gave a very significant speech to a college in Cambridge outlining his thoughts on unity, including a new Irish constitution, bicameral legislature with one house sited in Dublin and one in Belfast, as well as floating the idea of reserved cabinet seats at Irish government level for unionists.

He also made the entirely reasonable suggestion that the PSNI would continue to exist as a regional police service within a united Ireland.

Chris DONNELLY



O'Callaghan insightfully pointed out during his speech that unionists will inevitably play a much greater role in the formation of governments in a united Ireland than they could ever hope to at Westminster simply due to the strength of their numbers.

By Wednesday, plans for a Dublin-Belfast economic corridor were revealed involving eight east coast local government councils, four each from both jurisdictions. In time this will highlight the necessity of delivering high-speed rail to connect Ireland's two major cities amongst other things. The involvement of two majority unionist councils in the north in the project illustrates how the potential economic benefits flowing from this initiative proved to be an opportunity they simply could not resist – a lesson for future reference.

The leading economist David McWilliams has been highlighting the need to start thinking strategically about the future of Dublin Port, and whether or not it could and should be relocated between Dublin and Drogheda, allowing for Dublin city to address its chronic housing crisis and also work towards the realisation of the 15-minute city

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vision. This is the type of bold and visionary thinking which should be characterising preparations for a new Ireland.

Thursday brought the launch of the latest research and information document to be produced by Ireland's Future, entitled 'Planning for a Strong Economy in a New Ireland'. The paper provides a concise yet expansive facts-based examination of the Irish economies and other aspects of public policy and services, north and south, outlining the potential benefits of unity for citizens in both jurisdictions on the island. I'll happily declare an interest at this point as a member of the group and invite readers to access a copy on Twitter or at the Ireland's Future website.

In a public discussion organised to launch the paper, fellow Irish News columnist Brian Feeney correctly pointed out the need for an all-island citizens' assembly to ensure that constitutional change is people-led and not simply left to the political class.

Also on Thursday, the taoiseach's own initiative, the Shared Island Dialogue, held its third public session, examining the role civic society can play in improving connections and mutual understanding across Ireland. During his speech, Simon Coveney pointed out that 1.3 million young people have been born in Ireland since 1998, commenting that "their perspectives on identity and ideas for the future are central to how we plan for the future".

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Over the same period of days, the leadership of political unionism busied itself finding new ways to antagonise: demanding Union flags be flown year round from all government premises; accusing an SDLP minister of sectarianism over potholes in North Down; and threatening to punish Irish language speakers for their own folly over Brexit and the protocol it spawned.

Leave them to build their walls. The rest of us can stay focused on those windmills.

ON THIS DAY

MARCH 29 1921

'Police' Machine-gun attack on Church

OUR Cork correspondent wires: 'While hundreds of the Catholic people were assembled in St John's Parish Church on Saturday night awaiting Confession in preparation for Easter Sunday, a machine-gun was trained on the church, apparently from the direction of the new presbytery in Denny Street, recently commandeered by Auxiliaries forces from the Dean.

Verex lights were sent up first to mark the objective of the attackers and volley after volley crashed against St John's Church. The people inside threw themselves on the ground as bullet after bullet, in rapid succession, crashed against the walls of the sacred edifice.

The people in the church behaved with great fortitude. They joined in fervent prayer for protection and their prayers were heard. Not a single person in the church was injured. Those in the street outside were not so fortunate for a party of Auxiliaries, acting apparently in concert with the machine-gun party, left a local hotel and fired several rounds in the streets, the people fleeing in all directions. A boy was shot through the legs.

Saturday night's outrage was strongly condemned by the Dean at Mass yesterday. 'What a brave act to direct machine-gun fire against five unarmed priests sitting in their confessionals, about eighty women and children, unarmed, and forty or fifty laity, certainly unarmed... This attack marks the beginning of warfare against the Catholic Church...'

Devlin on Partition

THE fine spirit existing amongst the Nationalists of the Ards Peninsula found expression in the very large and enthusiastic rally which took place yesterday on the occasion of the visit of Mr Joseph Devlin, MP to Ballycran, Kircubbin where he opened a splendid new hall built by Division Number 661 Ballycran.

The Portaferry Division of the AOH attended with a Irish pipers band and flag and headed the procession. Mr Devlin was accompanied by the Rev A Neeson, PP, Ballycran and Rev L McKeown CC. In his speech the MP recalled the splendid part played by the Ards in 1798. 'I am glad to know there are still in the Ards sturdy Protestants who believe in Ireland a nation.'

Referring to the proposed Northern Parliament, Mr Devlin said: 'This is not a solution to the Irish problem; it is a scheme which insults our nationality and our intelligence... Our only hope is that before many months are over this Parliament will have disappeared.'

(As Crown forces increasingly treated civilians as 'the enemy', Joe Devlin identified Partition as the greatest threat facing Northern nationalists at a rally in Down. Devlin's mentor, Samuel Young (1820-1918), a Protestant Home Rule MP and distiller, hailed from Portaferry.)

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