



SPIRIT OF RECONCILIATION: Martin McGuinness meets Queen Elizabeth at an event in Crosby Hall, London in November 2016. Also pictured is Dr Christopher Moran, chairman of Co-operation Ireland

We must work to break down human borders

IRELAND will only reach its destiny when those of us who are Irish and those of us who are British recognise that we are dependent on each other - north-south and east-west.

That's why great care must be taken with two parallel and sensitive issues - the evolving border poll debate and the unfinished prize of uniting people - because both are integrated by the Good Friday Agreement.

The agreement is about transforming human relationships, not just legal theory or electoral agendas or institutional reforms or sovereignty. It matters 'in all its parts'. Its elements are intertwined and interdependent.

In the agreement, the participants "firmly dedicate... to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all... (and)... to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands".

There's an interesting vignette in 'Political Purgatory', Barney Rowan's new book: "In November 2016, (Martin) McGuinness was criticised by republicans for his presence, alongside other political leaders, at a London event where Irish artist Colin Davidson's portrait of the Queen was unveiled."

Barney writes that "republicans - including at senior level - had had enough" because they weren't seeing the so-called "quid pro quo" from outreach or reconciliation.

That particular event - followed by utterly unwarranted 'republican' criticism against Martin - was not about 'crocodile' comments, or cash for ash, or Liofa funding. The Crosby Hall gathering was Martin, as deputy first minister, meeting Queen Elizabeth - something they'd done several times. In Barney's well-received and well-researched narrative, he suggests the criticism was rooted in "an analysis that goes deeper than the charge of Martin McGuinness turning the other cheek".

Some in political and public life (unlike Martin McGuinness and Queen Elizabeth) saw - and see - post-conflict relationships through the



lens of quid pro quo and 'keeping score'. Such a crude, binary philosophy completely misunderstands the genuine journey of reconciliation in relationships - personal and political - whenever true openness enlightens engagement.

Better bilateral Ireland-UK relationships - at institutional and official levels - are now required for structure and stability over the next decade. The British Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) will meet next month. After that, it must be hoped that institutional relationships can potentially build up to regularised, formal Cabinet level summits, and possibly other post-Brexit bilateral agreements - a kind of 'BIIGC-plus' approach. This should seek to embed the Good Friday Agreement.

Both governments will continue to be respectively pro-unity and pro-union, thus feeding into the wider border poll debate. It should never be a cause of political difficulty or instability to hold or hear those two thoughts concurrently. The governments' status as treaty partners institutionalises their right to promote either position. The Irish government will continue its

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inclusive and impressive Shared Island Initiative, whilst holding the constitutional objective of Irish unity within the complexities of EU membership. The current UK government will continue to strongly assert its pro-union stance and say so as unionists while persisting with Brexit.

Both positions are legitimate on this condition: practical steps must jointly be taken to consistently protect the precious integrity of the agreement's nuanced settlement, including building relationships, respect and rights. Fermanagh isn't Finchley. But nor is it Finglas. None of this politics is easily navigated by any side.

Interestingly, the South Belfast UPRG recently issued a statement that included this line: "We see our identity as something to be proud of and capable of growth within an 'island of Ireland'..." Proud, pro-United Kingdom loyalists in 2021 confidently talking about their identity also having "an 'island of Ireland'" context. (Thoughts, anyone?)

Ultimately, the border poll debate will only progress positively if it is framed under the agreement's principles of dignity, integrity, equality, respect, inclusion, and good faith. That means no hidden agendas, no lecturing, no hectoring, active listening, mutual patience, open journeys and unknown destinations, and reconciliation being patiently developed by people who actually understand how to construct healthy relationships.

In The Irish News last week, President Michael D Higgins commented on a border poll with characteristic nuance: "I think a lot of work has yet to be done in creating the conditions... It's the distinction between a united Ireland and an Ireland that has united. That is the key. An Ireland that has united."

Our complexity is a great gift. Our diversity should be embraced. Our interdependent relationships must not be shattered - by default or design - under the battering ram of anyone's binary rhetoric. We all must work hard at breaking down human borders and building up living unity among our people. Nuance is necessary.

■ Anita Robinson is away

ON THIS DAY

MAY 11 1921

RIC Men Murdered

THE Press Association wires: Constables Clarke and Murdock were shot dead by rebels at Clonmany, County Donegal today. It is stated the bodies were afterwards thrown into the sea and that the body of Clarke was subsequently recovered. The latter, who was shot through the neck, was a native of Liverpool. Murdock was an Irishman.

Our Derry correspondent wires: Late this evening news reached Derry of a sensational shooting tragedy at Binion in the Clonmany district of Inishowen, resulting in the death of two constables. The report was that the constables were attacked and fatally shot and that their bodies had been thrown into the sea. On information of the tragic occurrence reaching Buncrana, a party of police under District Inspector Geelan hurried to the district. The body of Constable Clarke was recovered but there was no trace of his comrade. Both men left Clonmany barracks yesterday evening for a walk.

Craig Rallies Unionism

AT A meeting in support of the Unionist candidates for South Belfast, held in the Ulster Hall last evening, Sir James Craig said he looked upon the [forthcoming] election as a plebiscite of the people of the whole of the Six Counties on the one great issue - who was for the Empire and who was for a Republic? The proposal that he threw out was, after all, that de Valera should take this Act and work it, not for a political purpose but for the benefit of the people, and they in the North should take it and work it equally for the benefit of the people. He added: "Hands off Ulster! ... I will never bow the knee to treachery or allow a very whisper of Republic to enter my thoughts."

The Orange Grandmasters have issued a manifesto as follows: "Hither to on the shoulders of our representatives in the Imperial Parliament has rested the stress and strain of a protracted struggle against our submergence in a Dublin Parliament and under Sir Edward Carson's leadership they have delivered us from such a calamity. Now, however, the obligation rest upon every Loyalist to see that the victory so far won is not turned into a defeat at the polls. ... Our opponents have combined against us on the single issue of "No Partition". Therefore, we must defeat that combination ... THE War of Independence would continue relentlessly until the sudden arrival of the Truce in July. James Craig found himself having to explain his recent meeting with de Valera in Dublin to suspicious Unionist backbenchers like William Twaddell. Sinn Féin rejected the proposed southern parliament with contempt, as Lloyd George knew it would.

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