



DIVE, DIVE: Former submarine commander Steve Aiken has stepped down as leader of the UUP

ON THIS DAY

MAY 13 1971

Death of Sean Lemass

MR SEAN Lemass, architect of Ireland's industrial growth, who died in a Dublin nursing home, is to get a state funeral. The 71 year-old former 1916 fighter, who made his mark as Minister of Industry and Commerce and became Taoiseach and leader of the Fianna Fail party in succession to President de Valera, had been ill with a respiratory complaint.

Tributes from leaders of State and Church have been paid. 'I have lost a dear friend and the most loyal comrade and the nation has lost a patriot of the highest rank,' President de Valera said. 'As a soldier he served with Pearse and Connolly in the GPO and later as second in command with Paddy O'Brien, took possession of the Four Courts. As Minister for Industry and Commerce he set out at once to build up our industries.' Leader of Fine Gael, Mr Liam Cosgrave said Mr Lemass could be described as the first realist in Fianna Fail. He said that though on different sides politically, he enjoyed the most cordial personal relations with Mr Lemass.

Mr Lemass was born in Dublin in 1899 and educated by the Christian Brothers. In March 1952 he said in London: 'May I express the hope that some day commonsense will be substituted for prejudice in relation to the problem of Partition so that a solution to it will be found for the benefit of the Irish people of the North and the South and for the benefit of Britain also.' In 1959, soon after becoming Taoiseach, he suggested a system of 'useful cooperation' between the two parts of Ireland.

In January 1965 in Belfast Mr Lemass met Mr Terence O'Neill, then NI Premier – the first meeting of its kind in forty years. Later that year Mr Lemass said: 'Our aim is to reunite the Irish people in one nation and one state. We recognise the realities of the situation.'

Ex-Special's Admission

A FORMER B Special sergeant told the Scarman Tribunal in Belfast yesterday that he failed to record the serial numbers of guns issued to his men because 'a lot of work was involved'. He also revealed that guns issued were often 'mixed up' and that one sergeant frequently changed his revolver because he wanted a good one for competitions.

A TOUGH 1916 veteran who had accidentally shot his toddler brother dead at home on the eve of the Rising, Sean Lemass was noted for his more pragmatic policy towards the north. He met O'Neill in 1965 and persuaded the Nationalist Party to accept the role of official opposition for the first time.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com

Unionism, not its leadership, is the problem

IS IT any wonder unionism is in the state it's in today? From James Craig onwards it has been led by inept and blinkered individuals, incapable of living up to the needs of the moment.

In recent times, the UUP has burned its way through more leaders than effigies of Lundy. Rather than holding a leadership election, they'd be better off working through their MLAs in alphabetical order. Buggins' Turn would be no less effective.

Steve Aiken may have been deemed a safe pair of hands by the Royal Navy, which allowed him to sail around the world in a tin can armed with nuclear weapons; but the UUP has defied his navigational skills. More fool him for trying.

Like its DUP cousin, the UUP is unmanageable: a vessel without a rudder, with a crew that has lost any trace of confidence in what it is doing.

The commander, who rose without trace, has now downed periscope. His successor will fare no better without a significant change of course. The evidence of the past 100 years, however, suggests that is an impossibility.

At every point when a choice has had to be made, unionism has made the wrong one – even clutching defeat from the victory of the Good Friday Agreement, and trashing sensible measures to give parity of esteem to the traditions which inhabit this place.

At least Aiken had enough self-awareness to know his time was up; unlike Arlene Foster. Her incompetence in office was not just too much for DUP opponents, it became too much for her party too.

When history looks back on these days, it will record that it was Foster and the DUP which was responsible for the border down the Irish Sea, not Steve Aiken. But he was complicit in the diminution of unionism's position in the politics of these islands.

The UUP had an opportunity to provide a sensible voice for

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unionism – to speak for business, jobs and enterprise, to speak up for the dispossessed on loyalist sink estates, and to work with other parties on redressing the wrongs of educational underachievement.

Instead they chose to shadow DUP policies, lest they be thought of as 'not unionist enough'.

A weakening of ties to the UK was the inevitable cost of Aiken's failure to hold the DUP to account and to promote a soft Brexit as being in Northern Ireland's and Britain's best interests.

With Ash for Cash, the skids were already under Foster. Aiken should have known that one of those moments of political opportunity was about to arrive for his party.

But, by failing to provide a reasoned and articulate alternative leadership to the DUP, the main beneficiary of voter frustration has been the Alliance Party and its able leader Naomi Long. She understands the unionist

electorate better than Aiken and Foster combined.

Indeed, I'd go as far as saying Michelle O'Neill and Colum Eastwood have a better grip on the real needs of the vast majority of unionists.

The constitution, and robust discussion about it, is not a threat to unionism. The biggest threat to the unionist electorate is incompetence in economic management, unwillingness to embrace the opportunities presented by the Northern Ireland Protocol, and the refusal of their elected politicians to work with their counterparts in the Irish Republic on key issues such as trade, transport and health.

There's a saying that people vote with their feet.

For a generation, the brightest from families that traditionally voted unionist, have left these shores for their education and not returned. They are generating jobs in GB, not Northern Ireland; they're leading global companies; working in the media and arts; they are thought leaders for communities that are not their own. Some have been driven out by prejudice over their sexuality or life choices they cannot make back home.

Reverting to type, unionism is about to be convulsed in a debate about the protocol – gifted to them by a prime minister it helped into office.

Once again, they will be wasting their time – and everyone else's – on a fruitless debate. Like Sisyphus forlornly pushing his rock up the mountain, unionism is doomed to failure unless it faces up to this reality: it is best served by accepting we are no longer living in the 1690s, but the 2020s.

Unionism as a political concept is unfit for purpose because it does not meet the basic human needs of those it purports to represent. Or, to put it another way, 'you cannot eat a flag'. Unionism needs a new ideology, not new leaders.

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