



TALKS: Taoiseach Micheál Martin and British prime minister Boris Johnson

# Rebuilding British/Irish relationships crucial to tackling challenges ahead

**S**TEADY heads and wise voices are increasingly needed to carefully manage two of the most sensitive, parallel parts of the Good Friday Agreement – the evolving border poll debate and the unfinished prize of uniting people.

If calmly influenced and patiently nurtured, both parallel processes have potential to democratically enrich citizens across the island of Ireland. But if a border poll is now prioritised as a sprint while reconciliation is relegated as a marathon, then both will fail. (The difficult context of Brexit adds to the need for sensible, stabilising approaches.)

It's often forgotten – perhaps conveniently – that the agreement's negotiators voluntarily ceded the decision over a border poll exclusively to the secretary of state. Demands for further clarity about criteria or conditions haven't even featured in any subsequent negotiations for 23 years, even after Brexit.

An important factor in achieving the 1998 agreement was the diligent and delicate work of Ireland and UK diplomacy to frame the terms of debate over previous decades of conflict, including the Downing Street Declaration in 1993.

Despite being only 12 paragraphs in length, the declaration set an agenda of high purpose underpinned by John Hume's genius architecture on the 'totality of relationships'. The declaration framed the negotiations for the next five years until 1998, and indeed for the period since then.

Prime Minister John Major reaffirmed that the British government "will uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland on the issue of whether they prefer to support the Union or a sovereign united Ireland".

An Taoiseach Albert Reynolds asserted aspirations for Irish unity while strongly acknowledging to unionists that "the future of the island depends on the nature of the relationship between the two main traditions... (and recognising) the need to engage in dialogue which would address with honesty and integrity the fears of all traditions".

If you take the temperature



Jarlath KEARNEY

in London and Dublin, that's the kind of space we're now in once again. This is a decade when sophisticated political framing and strategic agenda-setting needs responsible stewardship from both governments as long-standing treaty partners. Ironically, the political circumstances today (particularly in terms of London's institutional knowledge and Brexit's messy fallout) might be even trickier to navigate, even though the context in 1993 was brutal conflict. But it can be done.

The Ireland and UK governments need the commitment – and also, importantly, the political encouragement – to build an enhanced bilateral framework that will create stability and structure for the next decade. In considering such a framework, it is vital that objective realities are recognised.

First, public debate needs to be framed within the parameters of realpolitik that two states will continue to coexist on the island of Ireland for the foreseeable future. Second, the importance of rebuilding Ireland-UK bilateral relationships must be a top diplomatic priority: this process can help to bolster a meaningful culture of reconciliation between people and communities in Northern Ireland, and between north and south.

Third, the challenges in coming years

are jointly shared by the two sovereign governments – often overlapping with devolution. These include major geopolitical, social, economic, environmental, technological, national security and public health disruptors now destabilising Ireland and the UK, and their international partners (USA, EU, and NATO).

These realities point to the logic of adopting a 'two states, one system' approach for the island of Ireland.

Friday's summit at Chequers between Micheál Martin and Boris Johnson was strategically important in helping to rebuild the Ireland-UK relationship. Significantly, it saw Irish and British ministers and officials actually meeting and mingling face-to-face once again. (Sometimes we forget how the building blocks of diplomacy have been impacted by Covid.)

Next month's British Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIGC) should be reignited as an engine room for diplomacy across the three strands of the Good Friday Agreement, fixing a timetable of momentum for future meetings. It could seek to regularly involve representative ministers from each party in the NI executive and even inviting in civic voices. Being led by both sovereign governments, the BIGC should be buttressed as a safe space for unionists and nationalists.

Ambitious ideas for greater bilateral relations could build upon the Chequer's summit and the BIGC's work, including further bilateral agreements, agendas and actions. This could include the structured secondment of officials between both governments, as recently proposed by Sir David Lidington. The potential for considering a full-scale Ireland-UK joint cabinet level meeting, say annually, could also take on special significance.

'Two states, one system' frames the political parameters on the island of Ireland for the 2020s. Major challenges and opportunities lie ahead for communities. Building strong and stabilising bilateral relationships is critical.

■ Anita Robinson is away

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## ON THIS DAY

MAY 18 1921

### Tennis Party Tragedy

CAPTAIN and District Inspector C Eaton Blake of the RIC, who had been stationed at Gort (County Galway); Mrs Blake, his young wife; Captain Cornwallis of the 17th Lancers and Lieutenant McCreery of the same regiment (19) met their deaths under circumstances of distressing tragedy when leaving a tennis party at Ballyturn House on Sunday evening.

Earlier the party, accompanied by Mr Gregory of Coole Park, travelled to Ballyturn House in the private car of Captain Blake and having spent a pleasant afternoon, they left for home. When the motor arrived at the front gate of the avenue it was found to be closed. Not suspecting anything, Captain Cornwallis got out to open it. Shots then rang out from the shrubbery and he fell dead.

At this point the little party was surrounded by armed and disguised men and the two ladies were ordered to leave. Mrs Blake called out that she would never leave her husband and would die by his side. Mrs Gregory was ordered away and further shots rang out with the result that all four of her companions lay dead. The district inspector and his wife were found lying side by side.

### Fatal Ambush in Tyrone

ONE man was shot dead and one Special Auxiliary and a civilian captured during an ambush at Eskra, County Tyrone on Saturday. It appeared that a patrol was passing near Irvinestown crossroads when a bomb was thrown, fire being opened at the same time to which the police replied. The attackers fled and the dead body of a man was subsequently found. Special Constable Madill, a native of Drum, County Monaghan, was slightly wounded.

### Shots in Belfast

A SHOOTING affair took place in North Queen Street in Belfast last night, the victim being a little girl named Mary Anne Carr (13) of Carril Street. The occurrence was witnessed by a large number of people who were returning from Sinn Féin meetings and whose passage attracted the attention of the opposing sections in Upper Henry Street from where the shots were fired. The little girl was wounded in the head.

### Another Execution in Cork

DANIEL O'Brien of Liscarroll, County Cork, who was tried by drumhead courtmartial in Cork on Saturday, was executed yesterday morning for the illegal possession of arms.

THIS last phase of the War of Independence was marked by a massive upsurge of violence, north and south. The 'Partition' election campaign witnessed sniping and sectarian mob assaults, particularly in north and east Belfast. At this point the British cabinet was faced with a grim choice between increased repression and a move towards a truce.

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