



DEFENDER OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY OF THE UK?: Margaret Thatcher described Northern Ireland as being as much a part of the UK as her own constituency, yet signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement

ON THIS DAY

MAY 28 1921

Custom House Burnt

DUBLIN was the scene of the most desperate struggle and tragic happenings recorded in that troubled city or in any part of Ireland since the Insurrection of 1916. The Custom House on Eden Quay, one of the finest edifices in Ireland, was set ablaze shortly before 2 p.m. Those who undertook the attempt – and who seemed to have succeeded in destroying the Custom House almost as completely as the GPO was shattered in 1916 – paid a heavy toll in life and more than a hundred prisoners were taken. Seven civilians were killed, ten wounded and 111 taken prisoner. Other reports place the casualties at higher figures. Four [Auxiliary] Cadets were killed.

Preparations for the onslaught on the famous building were elaborately made. The Dublin Fire Brigade were 'held up' for an hour. At the end of that time the Custom House was 'a seething mass of flame'.

Bombs were flung at a party of Auxiliary police in motor lorries as they were passing under the railway bridge at Beresford Place. Fire was opened by the Crown forces and almost immediately afterwards two other motor lorries containing Auxiliaries and accompanied by an armoured car arrived on the scene. Firing continued for about fifteen minutes and revolvers, rifles and a machine-gun were in action.

Within 10 minutes of the first explosion a huge volume of smoke was seen ascending from the Custom House. It grew rapidly in extent and by 1.45, flames were shooting up many feet above the roof. Terrible scenes were witnessed following the initial volley of shots. A veritable hail of bullets swept the streets.

Our Dublin correspondent wires: 'On effecting an entry, the raiders proceeded to the different departments and held up the staffs at the point of their revolver. For about half an hour fire of petrol were being carried into the building by the raiders. Soon the building had to be abandoned. The whole interior was completely gutted and valuable papers, including the records and books of the Local Government Board and of the Income Tax and Estate Duty departments were destroyed.

(The IRA attack on the Custom House was planned by the Dublin Brigade of the IRA at the insistence of Eamon de Valera. The plan was opposed as potentially too high-risk by Michael Collins but the Dáil President contended that the destruction of the records of the Local Government Board would weaken the British regime and gain world attention. Several hundred IRA men were engaged in the operation. However, the splendid Georgian building was quickly surrounded by Black and Tans. Five Volunteers were killed and scores captured.)

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Unionists are always betrayed by Tory PMs

BETRAYAL is an ugly, brutal word. Made uglier, as Mark Twain noted, by the fact it can only be done to you by someone regarded as a friend and ally: 'an enemy can never betray you.'

So what are we to make of Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher, John Major, David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson? Each one of them described themselves as a unionist and defender of the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom and yet each one of them has been accused by Ulster unionism of betrayal at some point or other.

Edward Heath (at a time the Conservative whip was still extended to the UUP) closed down Stormont, having said he would stand by Brian Faulkner. Margaret Thatcher described NI as being as much a part of the UK as her own constituency, yet signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. John Major (with whom the UUP had a brief parliamentary pact during the Maastricht crisis) spoke of being 'sick to his stomach' at the prospect of back-channel negotiations with the IRA, then had to admit he had been aware such negotiations were taking place.

David Cameron signed an electoral pact with the UUP in 2009 (the ill-fated and bizarrely named UCUNF project) but couldn't be persuaded to add the words, 'I will always stand shoulder to shoulder with Ulster unionism' to any speech. Theresa May cut her own deal with the DUP in 2017 and then tried to cut a separate deal with the EU without bothering to phone Nigel or Arlene. Boris Johnson swore, until he was red, white and blue in the face, he would ensure NI was never reduced to semi-colonial status and then did precisely that.

In fairness, unionism was also done over by Labour's Harold Wilson, Jim Callaghan and Tony Blair when they were in office, but then they were never really regarded as friends by unionists.

Alex KANE



Yet at key moments, usually just before or just after they entered Number 10, every single Conservative PM has been viewed as a friend of unionism. Jim Molyneaux adored Thatcher at one point. And some DUP MPs genuinely appeared to be searching for his polyps, so slavish was their toadying to Boris Johnson.

But each Conservative prime minister in turn since 1970 has betrayed them. Just as Churchill had seemed prepared to betray them during WW2. And just as Edward Carson had hinted was likely to happen when he made his 'we were just puppets' speech in the House of Lords in 1922. Which raises two obvious questions: why did unionists ever regard them as friends in the first place; and why did they keep thinking the next one would be any different to the previous one?

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Even a casual study of the evidence suggests there is very little unionists could offer as a convincing argument that Conservatives have ever really had their interests at heart. At almost every moment when support from a Conservative government might have bolstered their position and raised their morale, the government was found wanting. And even when the DUP must have realised that Boris Johnson was a badly blended blancmange of Del Boy and Alan B'Stard they still decided to trust him one more time.

The problem for unionists is they need to have a friend – even if it doesn't go much beyond imaginary status – at Westminster. Because without that friend they have no one at whom they can point to as someone who actually gives a damn about them. I'm not convinced, by the way, that Johnson gives a damn about his supposed new friends in a regenerated English nationalism, either, but at least they have given him votes in the last two elections.

In Northern Ireland his party can barely muster a single percentage point of support (no MPs, MLAs or councillors): which is probably why he had no difficulty lying straight-faced to them when, during a pre-election visit in November 2019, one of them asked him what to do if business people received letters about a new sea border. Throw them in the bin, was his advice. A less messy fate than his under-the-bus solution to the DUP a few weeks later.

At some point – and it must be soon – unionists are going to have to make a difficult call about whom they can really trust to both listen to their concerns and make a genuine effort to address them. Or, putting that another way, they must decide if sucking-up to the biggest bully in the political playground is, in the long run, worth it.