



A 10-month election campaign already feels too long

IS THE next assembly election really 10 months away? During lockdown, time seems to have moved so very, very slowly that every day has felt like a month. The Olympics appear to have been running since Easter, the rare hot weather of July already a fading memory.

By rights we should have been gearing up for an early election next month. The DUP's rapid implosion in spring, bringing with it several changes of leadership and a renewed push for an Irish language act from Sinn Féin would have, if Stormont had followed its usual script, led to an assembly collapse.

But since neither of the two largest parties were in a decent position to go before the electorate, a swift deal was made.

Both the DUP and Sinn Féin have some rebuilding work to do. The unionist party remains at a loss over the Northern Ireland Protocol and is reliant on the – to borrow from Countess Markievicz – “problematic chivalry” of Boris Johnson to encourage any changes.

The retirement of Alex Maskey, coming months after the ousting of Martina Anderson in Derry, is yet another move in the changing of Sinn Féin's old guard.

By May, Sinn Féin may well be the largest party in the assembly and Michelle O'Neill will be nominated as first minister.

A nationalist majority would be, symbolically anyway, a seismic change.

Yet the more things change, the more they remain the same.

The choice of former paratrooper John Ross as a TUV candidate for east Belfast in next year's election was a predictable one.

Appalling remarks he made in 2019 about Bloody Sunday being a “successful” Parachute Regiment operation could easily be dismissed then as the ravings of just one man.

They carry more weight now that he is an election candidate.

While the TUV is perfectly entitled

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to choose its own candidates, did it really have to pick the one who accused the BBC of encouraging “provo propaganda” while being filmed by former TUV councillor Jolene Bunting?

Was the former soldier, who also questioned whether those shot dead in Ballymurphy in 1971 were innocent, really the best choice? Or was there no-one else available?

For all TUV leader Jim Allister's obvious ability as a politician, his party remains a fringe one almost 14 years after it was founded.

Aside from one assembly seat in North Antrim, the party has rarely troubled the ballot box.

And since it was essentially built around one person, if the party leader were to step down, there is no obvious candidate to take over.

It's so much easier to make inflammatory, headline-grabbing statements, than do the hard, often thankless, yards of social justice work

While Mr Ross's rhetoric may go down well with some of the DUP's disillusioned electorate, it will not help the TUV widen its base, particularly in a constituency which has seen strong support for the Alliance.

A party can only be one of opposition for so long.

Mr Ross's comments were particularly dispiriting in the week we remembered John Hume.

The Nobel Laureate, who died in August last year, was known for his positive politics and took risks when few others were willing.

His youngest daughter, Professor Mo Hume, told *The Irish News* that her father “wasn't about static, symbolic politics”.

“He was about the politics of bread and butter, the politics of social justice,” she said.

For all the positive changes in our political landscape since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, few parties seem to have bread and butter politics at the heart.

It's so much easier to make inflammatory, headline-grabbing statements, than do the hard, often thankless, yards of social justice work.

If we're really moving into an election campaign, then let it be slightly different than all the ones which have gone before.

Let's have proper debates about how we can rebuild after the pandemic, funding for our healthcare system, and how children lit by repeated lockdowns and home-schooling will be given extra support.

The Bloody Sunday Trust has challenged the TUV to say whether Mr Ross is “fit to be a candidate”.

It is now up to the electorate in East Belfast to say whether they think he is fit to be an MLA.

Positive politics, which offers solutions to problems instead of endlessly trying to counter arguments, rarely gets enough attention.

It's our responsibility as voters to opt for change, rather than getting sidelined into the same old circular arguments.

ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 9 1971

Violence Grips Belfast

ONE soldier was killed and two others wounded by gunfire; five youths were injured when gas cylinders on a lorry which had been set on fire exploded; several vehicles were hijacked and burned; nailbombs were hurled at military patrols and the Army fired rubber bullets in confrontations with youths.

The dead soldier was shot in Ardoyne. He was the eleventh soldier shot dead in NI this year. Meanwhile three MPs were last night demanding that a murder charge be preferred against the soldier who shot dead Mr Harry Thornton. [Mr Thornton, an innocent worker, was shot dead when his van backfired.]

Priests' Appeal Over Derry March

THIS morning the Apprentice Boys of Derry will receive letters signed by thirteen Catholic priests in the city asking them to call off the Apprentice Boys' march on Thursday 'in the interests of Christian charity and peace.'. They state: 'The situation in our city is worse today than it was two years ago...'

Editorial: At the point of despair

BELFAST is at the point of despair. Fresh outbursts of violence sparked off by the shooting down by the British military of a civilian on his way to work, must leave the community wondering if there is any way out of the morass of torment which now affects us; if there is any peace initiative which has been overlooked; any move still left to take us away from the edge of the abyss. ... Violence begs violence. ... The situation is now agonising.

In the search for measures to control the situation, the Stormont Government is being urged to adopt methods which would merely provoke further disorder.

... The days to come are filled with peril. This is probably the final phase of the long tragedy of the Ulster Plantation, of the failure of the Partition experiment and of intolerant and sectarian government. The time has come for tripartite talks between London, Dublin and Belfast with a search for a constitutional solution if the situation here is not to deteriorate any further. ... The decision to allow the Apprentice Boys' parade through Derry shows how little appreciation there is at Westminster of the imminence of disaster.

THE Irish News leader-writer on this day 50 years ago had no inkling that the crisis was about to reach the point of no return with the calamitous decision of premier Brian Faulkner to introduce internment on that fatal August 9. There was an immediate upsurge of violence and 17 people were killed in the next 24 hours including the 10 innocent victims shot dead by paratroopers in the Ballymurphy Massacre, with an 11th victim dying of a heart attack.

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