



VISIT: Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer with shadow secretary of state Louise Haigh at Parliament Buildings, Stormont PICTURE: Peter Morrison/PA

Starmer's rejection of Irish unity is appalling misjudgment

YOU have to be of a certain vintage to remember the moment US election tactics first surfaced in the United Kingdom.

The election was the one which catapulted Margaret Thatcher to office – 1979 to be exact – and the single image that has come to define it was a poster created by Saatchi and Saatchi.

"Labour isn't working", it proudly declared over a picture of a long line of people queuing for the dole office.

The jibe resonated with a British public tired of the lagged-out Labour government led by Jim 'Crisis, What Crisis?' Callaghan.

A single vote cost Callaghan a confidence motion in the House of Commons.

Fermanagh and South Tyrone's independent nationalist Frank Maguire, who rarely attended Westminster, said before the vote: "I have come over here to abstain in person."

Having refused to buy off the Ulster Unionists, Callaghan's hopes rested on shoulders of the honourable member for West Belfast, SDLP leader Gerry Fitt. Fitt decided to vote against Labour but, in one of those turns on the point of a needle he was famous for, said he would campaign for a Labour government if Callaghan was forced to call an election.

In a way, Thatcher had Fitt to thank for her victory, and she made him a peer in 1983 when he lost his seat to Gerry Adams.

Now, back to that infamous poster. Not only was it the beginning of US-style attack advertising, it was also a naked example of political fakery. Rather than the unemployed, this 'dole queue' was recruited from the ranks of Young Conservatives in Hendon. Only 20 turned up, so the picture was 'created' by shooting the same group again and again. It was, in a sense, a double fake.

Forty years on, the message – Labour Isn't Working – still resonates here, and I was reminded of it this week with Sir Keir Starmer's unbelievably crass

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intervention in the debate about the future of Ireland and the consequences of unity for the United Kingdom.

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Many Labour activists have been sensitive to the nuances of Irish politics; but the leadership – with only a few honourable exceptions – has been anything but.

Indeed, the impact of British Labour on the politics of this island has been every bit as malign as the Conservatives – remember Roy Mason?

The governments of Ramsey MacDonald, Clement Atlee, and Harold Wilson ignored the gross abuses of power perpetrated by Stormont.

It was a Tory government that ended that distortion of parliamentary democracy. The

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seeds of Labour's neglect have resulted in the thicket we are grappling with today.

Blair and Mowlam were exceptions. But Blair's achievements depended critically on the work of his Tory predecessor.

Even so, you cannot take away from him the achievement of steering the Good Friday Agreement to a conclusion.

Fast forward to today, and Labour's leader is a man ostensibly in the Blair mould.

He looks like a grown up, and sometimes acts like one. He has a brain, and a track record in public office which has got him a knighthood and the leadership. There's a 'but' coming.

Harold Wilson once said of Tony Benn that "he immatures with age"; much the same can be said for Starmer, who appears intent on bringing himself and his party down the level of the current government.

So frightened is Starmer of the forces of English exceptionalism, and the risk to his party from pro-Brexit electors, that he has decided to shadow Tory policies rather than articulate any of his own.

His explicit rejection of the possibility of Irish reunification, and his pledge to campaign for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK, is an appalling misjudgement, it represents a kick in the teeth for the Good Friday Agreement, and is an affront to the Irish people – north and south.

As with the Conservatives, the British Labour Party has no mandate to interfere with the right of the Irish people to determine their own future.

Starmer's sole responsibility is to help facilitate a reunification vote, take no part in it, and ensure the result is implemented.

For him to say to an Irish audience, "I believe in the United Kingdom", demonstrates ignorance and insensitivity. It's a blunder of Johnsonian proportions.

This is another nail in his disappointing leadership. He won't last.

ON THIS DAY

JULY 15 1921

District Inspector Shot

A DISTURBANCE of the most deadly character prevailed over a wide area of the city for the entire day yesterday. The districts mainly affected were Ballymacarrett and the network of streets between North Queen Street and York Street while many Catholic houses and establishments were wrecked. As it is, only one death was recorded, the victim being a girl of fourteen named Margaret Webb.

District Inspector McConnell, Glenravel Street [Barracks], was shot by a Unionist sniper in Little George's Street.

Melancholy Procession of Victims' Funerals

THE funerals of eleven of the victims of the weekend's disturbances in the city took place yesterday afternoon. The passing of the corteges to the respective burying-grounds was marked by scenes of the most impressive character. The scenes on the Falls Road as the remains of each victim followed close upon each other in a melancholy procession have rarely, if ever, been witnessed in the city.

De Valera and Lloyd George Meet

THE meeting of the British Prime Minister with Mr de Valera took place at 10 Downing Street. A large crowd assembled to witness the arrival of the negotiators and Sinn Féin flags were in evidence.

Sash Seizure Prompts Mob Rule

WILD scenes of disorder, lasting for several hours, occurred in Cookstown [County Tyrone] on Tuesday night when a fierce attack was launched in Orritor Street, the principal Catholic quarter, by an Orange mob. The trouble is said to have arisen over the snatching of a sash from an Orangeman by some irresponsible individuals and despite the fact that the police and several leading citizens used their best endeavour to have the missing regalia restored, this did not satisfy the members of the mob who proceeded to wreak their vengeance on unoffending citizens.

Craig Under Attack At Twelfth

IN THE course of a vehement outburst at Clogher [Co Tyrone], Mr William Coote, MP said Premier, Sir James Craig, if he was to have the confidence of Ulster, must not soil his garments with Sinn Féin.

AS THE IRA OC in Co Antrim recorded: "The truce was not observed by either side in the north." While nationalists rejoiced at its terms, loyalists saw it as undermining their new state. District Inspector JJ McConnell, a southern Catholic, records in his memoirs that the attack which left him seriously wounded was the third attempt by B Specials to assassinate him that month.

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