

LEADING
THE POLLS:
Sinn Féin
president
Mary Lou
McDonald,
left, with
deputy first
minister
Michelle
O'Neill

PICTURE:
Hugh Russell



Sinn Féin's performance in Republic worries unionism

UNIONIST parties don't talk about it out loud, but they do worry about how well Sinn Féin seems to be doing in the southern Irish elections.

The latest RedC opinion poll (published in last Sunday's Business Post) has, for the first time, recorded SF as the lead party. Fair enough, at 29 per cent it is still well behind the coalition government's tally of 45 per cent, but the fact remains that SF is polling as the lead party on both sides of the border. And, as I say, that worries the unionist parties.

Their biggest fear boils down to this: for how long can you exclude the lead party from government? Sinn Féin will have learned a number of lessons from the 2020 general election—when it was also the lead party on 24.5 per cent – but made a bit of a dog's dinner in its attempt to pull together a coalition. It won't make that mistake again. And the smaller parties, along with FF and FG, will also have learned lessons and will be factoring in SF to their pre-election/post-election calculation if, as seems inevitable, another coalition will be required.

In 2020 the split between the big three was tight: SF (24.5), FF (22.2) and FG (20.9). That tightness made it much easier for FF and FG to strike a deal. But if the next election ended in a split of 29, 28 and 13 it would, I think, make it easier for FF (on 13) to nudge in with SF. I'm not saying that sort of coalition would be a given in that sort of circumstance, but it's certainly a possibility that shouldn't (and won't) be dismissed.

And SF in the Irish government would really rattle unionism in Northern Ireland. Even more so if, in the next assembly election (either this autumn or next May), SF had also nudged itself into the first minister's office. That's the sort of cross-border, cross-government influence and pressure which makes it

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just a little bit easier for SF to push dates and conditions for a border poll.

Right now party-political unionism/loyalism (which, as I keep noting, isn't exactly the same thing as pro-unionism) needs some good news. Something useful from Boris Johnson on the protocol would help, particularly after Jeffrey Donaldson's political equivalent of a Hail Mary in his speech last week. But Johnson doesn't do miracles. He does, though, do a blend of Del Boy cast-offs and Tommy Cooper legerdemain: so, if unionism can be saved with a dodgy clock that doesn't even tell the time once a day then Johnson is the DUP's man.

Unionism also needs a good election result in the next assembly election: an increase in its overall vote/share of the vote; an increase in its number of seats; and a stalling of SF's electoral progress. Interestingly, the overall unionist/pro-union vote is more likely to grow if there is a very clear choice between the two lead brands of unionism: which might happen

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if the UUP continues with its approach to the protocol (as set out in the recent Doug Beattie interview in this paper), while the DUP and TUV dance close to the cliff edge.

Donaldson's speech emphasised the need for unionist unity. As has just about every DUP press release since. But Doug Beattie doesn't seem to be buying it: "The UUP has a different approach. We will engage constructively and put forward practical solutions as we seek to replace the protocol. We continue to lobby rather than threaten. Unionism needs to show confidence in its abilities. Now is not the time to retreat to the trenches".

He's right, of course, not least because choice increases options and opportunities. But there will be some in his party – I've already talked to a few – who fear a standalone campaign at a moment of crisis will cost the party seats and votes. Yet it's worth bearing in mind that doing a deal with the DUP, or being seen to shuffle closer to them, could also cost the party votes and seats.

Personally, I don't see the point of belonging to a political party if you're afraid to have a clear message of your own and campaign on that platform.

Beattie is correct when he insists unionism needs to show confidence in its abilities. It needs to stop portraying everyone as the enemy. It needs to stop throwing its eggs into the one basket, too. Between 2016-19 the DUP threw its lot in with ERG Conservatives and the hardest elements of the pro-Brexit campaign and got serially shafted by both. It now seems to be throwing all of its eggs into Johnson's basket again, while threatening to topple the institutions if he doesn't boil them as hard as cement and throw them at their enemies. Hmm. I fear those eggs will end up all over the wrong faces – again.

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 17 1921

Armagh Protest to Dáil

TWO deputations, one representing the county of Armagh and the other the [parliamentary] Division of South Armagh, waited on Mr de Valera at the Mansion House. The deputation representing the county included Seamus O'Reilly, chairman of Armagh City Council; Peter McKnight, Keady; Michael Gaffney, Middletown Rural District Councillor; and Patrick Kealey, Newry Board of Guardians. They declared: 'We believe the national unity of our country is a principle which should not be violated. It destroys the principle of self-determination expressed by the great majority of the Irish people. ... [Partition] is not only wrong in principle but mischievous in design as it tends to perpetuate a system of religious bigotry and political intolerance. 'Armagh holds the most glorious landmarks of Ireland's history. South Armagh has a voting power of 16,000 – two to one against Partition – and Mid-Armagh is nearly equal... Armagh City Council has already declared its intention to make this Act inoperative as far as lies in its power. Newry Number Rural Council, Keady Urban Council and Crossmaglen Rural District Council will do the same. The partition of Armagh means ruin to the farmers of those areas.' Mr de Valera assured them that their representations 'will be kept in mind by us in any negotiations'.

Snipers Active in Belfast

AT intervals yesterday there was considerable sniping on the part of the Orange gunmen from the streets abutting off North Queen Street and, as a result, three more casualties had to be added to the long list of the past months. The sniping commenced about 11.30 am from Vere Street and continued for half an hour. The firing was directed towards North Queen Street and persons passing the corner of Vere Street along the former thoroughfare did so at very grave risk to their lives. A very large force of military and police arrived on the scene and the firing subsided. However, later on – about four o'clock – the firing was again resumed when, acting obviously on a pre-arranged plan, they opened fire into North Queen Street from both sides... The people there were in a state of the utmost terror during this siege and, after some minutes, they began to return the fire. (These reports emphasise the very different experiences of the northern nationalist population during the Truce. In Belfast sectarian violence continued unabated. In nationalist heartlands like south Armagh, however, anti-partitionists joined forces to put their case for the inclusion in an Irish state to the Dáil. Behind this diplomacy lay the hope that a Boundary Commission might yet ensure the 'redemption' of majority-nationalist districts from Belfast rule.)

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