



HISTORIC: Queen Elizabeth with President Michael D Higgins at Windsor Castle during the first state visit to Britain by an Irish president in 2014

We need our key player on the pitch

ONE of the most enjoyable interviews I ever carried out was with the sports commentator Michael O'Hehir. For decades he captured the attention of radio and TV audiences with his coverage of GAA matches and horse-racing. He had a special term for the situation where players from opposing sides got themselves into a tangle at the goalmouth, calling it a "schemozzle".

The word comes back to me as I consider the recent controversy over the interdenominational "Service of Reflection and Hope", to mark the Centenary of the partition of Ireland and the formation of Northern Ireland" which is due to take place on Thursday October 21 in St Patrick's (Church of Ireland) Cathedral in Armagh.

Unless you've been closeted with an enclosed religious order and without access to your radio or mobile phone, you will know about the schemozzle that developed when President Michael D Higgins declined an invitation to take part in this event.

The president has always been a strong supporter of the peace process and his decision came as a surprise to many. The wording of the invitation was clearly a problem. No reasonable person could object to the term, "Service of Reflection and Hope" but the trouble seems to have arisen because this was intended to mark a hundred years of partition as well as the establishment of the six-county northern entity.

Marking a historical development is not the same as celebrating it, especially since the invitation states that the service of Christian worship would acknowledge "failures and hurts" of the past 100 years whilst at the same affirming a shared commitment to a future marked by peace, reconciliation and the common good.

Those hurts and failures were not

Deaglán
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confined to a single community. Nationalists and Catholics who were left on the northern side of the border were not happy with partition, of course, but Protestants and unionists cut off on the southern side were not too pleased with their situation either.

It would be unfortunate, therefore, if a diplomatic solution could not be found in the remaining four weeks that would allow the president to participate in the Armagh event. There certainly appears to have been a communications problem up to now, but you can be darn sure that, if Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair were involved, they would have resolved the issue in short order ... maybe even recruiting Bill Clinton or Joe Biden to provide back-up.

On a more positive note and given the appalling history of sectarianism in this part of the world, it's good to see Church leaders from different denominations joining together for a common purpose. Members of the clergy have contributed greatly to peace

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and reconciliation: one thinks of the former Archbishop of Armagh, Lord Robin Eames and the late Father Alec Reid, among others.

Someone in this category who is rarely mentioned nowadays is Cardinal John Francis D'Alton who was Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland from 1946 until his death in 1963, aged 80 years. In March 1957 the cardinal issued a set of proposals aimed at ending partition. In summary, he was calling for a United Federal Ireland which would be a member of the Commonwealth on the same basis as the Republic of India. He also proposed that the 32-county state would join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and allow NATO to set up bases on its territory: this reflected the Cold War situation at the time, when the Soviet Union still existed and was a rival superpower to the USA.

The D'Alton proposals were published just days before a general election in the Republic and three months after what became known as "The Fifties Campaign" began on December 12 1956 with attacks by more than 100 IRA activists on a range of targets in the border area.

The Commonwealth aspect attracted most attention, partly no doubt because Queen Elizabeth II was – and still is – head of that organisation. What's interesting about the D'Alton Plan, as we might call it, is the open and clear acknowledgement that significant concessions would have to be made to unionists as part of the effort to achieve territorial unity.

In that general context, it would be unfortunate if the British monarch ended up as the only head of state at the Armagh service of worship. If Michael O'Hehir were still on the scene, he might have to call it a "walkover". We really need to see our own key player on the pitch. He is, after all, the President of Ireland.

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 22 1921

Special's Stolen Guns

IN BELFAST Custody Court yesterday, Mr James Roche, RM, presiding, Francis Doran, Mount Street, was charged with taking into his possession six Webley revolvers, the property of the Commandant of the Belfast Specials, knowing them to have been stolen. Mr Graham – I ask that bail be allowed. – District Inspector Lynn – I oppose bail in this case when there is so much shooting and – Mr Graham – District Inspector Lynn opposes bail when he sees the magistrates shaking their heads negatively at me. The man in the dock declares his absolute innocence of the charge against him. The allegation against him of receiving the revolvers – stolen property – he denies.

South Derry Deputation to President

THE publicity department of Dail Eireann issued the following statement: Today at 3 p.m. a deputation from South County Derry waited upon President de Valera at the Mansion House, Dublin. The deputation consisted of Mr George Leeke [Nationalist MP, Derry]; Mr John Walsh, CC [Maghera] and Louis Smyth, chairman Magherafelt Board of Guardians. Mr George Leeke, in introducing the deputation stated that, although he himself belonged to a party which did not entirely believe in the Sinn Féin policy, he was no less opposed to the partition of his country than were the other members of the deputation. [Councillor] Michael Lynch stated: 'As a representative from North Derry, we claim with South Derry and Derry City that the partition of any part of our country would only lead to the perpetuation of internal strife and obstruct that unity and peace which we all desire...' President de Valera, replying, said: 'It is well that the world should be made aware of... this attempt to partition our nation against the express will of our people.'

Anti-Belfast Boycott Campaign

COPIES of a notice based somewhat on the lines of the declaration which has to be signed by applicants for work at the shipyards were served yesterday on shopkeepers in various parts of the city, especially in York Street.

The document, headed: 'Anti-Belfast Boycott' and signed, 'Belfast Watch Committee', purports to pledge those who display it in their shop windows to cease purchasing goods or material from any firm in Ireland outside North-East Ulster and not to resume such dealings until the boycott of Belfast is removed....

IN THE run-up to the 1921 Treaty negotiations a stream of nationalist deputations from every part of the North met President de Valera to protest against partition. Despite the president's assurances, Sinn Féin had failed to grapple with the Ulster Question and would subordinate it to independence at the subsequent Conference.

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