



STATISTICS: The combined three-party total in a LucidTalk poll just over a month ago, with Sinn Féin on 25 points and Alliance and the SDLP on 13 each, was 51 per cent. Pictured is Alliance leader Naomi Long

Time for republicans to woo Alliance over border poll

HERE'S some good news for a change. Unlike former DUP leader Arlene Foster, who said she would "probably have to move" if there was a referendum majority for a United Ireland, her successor Sir Jeffrey Donaldson says he has no intention of going anywhere.

Another encouraging development at time of writing is that the Irish government is expected to respond positively to an invitation, by sending a senior minister to the interdenominational service at Armagh Church of Ireland Cathedral in three weeks' time.

Benjamin Franklin, a founding father of the United States, famously said that "in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes". In the same spirit it can be stated that Irish unity is not an inevitable development. At the same time, however, it has never seemed a more likely prospect than at present, although the timing is far from clear.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement provides of course for a referendum in which the voters of Northern Ireland can make a decision on this matter. If a majority is in favour and a similar positive vote takes place across the border, then a 32-county state is on the cards. The road-map is clear: the challenge is to avoid messing it up.

Nothing can be taken for granted but it is pretty safe to assume that, if and when the question is put, the overwhelming majority of nationalists will vote Yes. Otherwise they can't really call themselves nationalists, can they? You should never bet the house on an opinion poll but surveys north and south suggest at present that Sinn Féin, the most nationalist/republican party at least in conventional politics, will have the largest number of seats following the next general election in each jurisdiction.

Imagine a situation where Mary Lou

Deaglán DE BRÉADÚN



McDonald is taoiseach and Michelle O'Neill takes over as first minister. It's a distinct possibility on the Leinster House front and can't be ruled out in the north either, if SF get the numbers, although I note that Jim Allister of the TUV is saying unionists should block Michelle's promotion by refusing to nominate a deputy first minister, since the two positions are a joint office.

Given the way things are developing and the balance of political forces, it makes even more sense than usual for nationalists to show their appreciation and understanding of unionist concerns about an Irish unity scenario. It should be possible to adopt a conciliatory, sympathetic and accommodating approach without giving way on the fundamental demand for a united Ireland to be achieved by democratic constitutional

It's hard to think of any secretary of state being enthusiastic about Irish unity, so the evidence of a fairly widespread appetite for change needs to be convincing

means.

That's why it would be good if an Irish cabinet minister was at the event in Armagh on October 21. Although it is a pity that President Higgins turned down the invitation, he has certainly done his bit for the peace process in the past. One thinks for example of his courageous role in January 1994 as the government minister in charge of broadcasting when the Section 31 ban on interviews or reports of interviews with Sinn Féin in the southern jurisdiction was dropped after 18 years.

The authority rests with the British secretary of state for Northern Ireland to call a border poll if it appears likely to him or her "that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland".

The criteria for making that judgment are not spelt out. Presumably opinion surveys would be a factor and there would need to be a solid and consistent majority over a significant period for a 32-county Ireland in the polls. Persuading a significant number of unionists to cross the line would be very helpful, to put it no stronger. The number of MLAs from each party would surely also have to be a factor. It's hard to think of any secretary of state being enthusiastic about Irish unity, so the evidence of a fairly widespread appetite for change needs to be convincing.

The Alliance Party, for example, is currently designated neither nationalist nor unionist but "Other" at the Stormont Assembly. That makes them an obvious candidate for polite but persistent wooing. The combined three-party total in a LucidTalk poll just over a month ago, with Sinn Féin on 25 points and Alliance and the SDLP on 13 each, was 51 per cent. It's time for republicans to launch a charm offensive.

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 29 1921

Wild Funeral Scenes

SCENES of a most disgraceful character, leading to a shooting affair in which four persons were injured, one fatally, occurred yesterday afternoon in connection with the funeral of Alexander Harrison, one of the victims of the recent bomb explosion on the Newtownards Road.

From the deceased's residence in Frazer Street onwards, the cortege was preceded by a disorderly mob, hundreds strong, many of them armed with revolvers. Their conduct from the outset was of a most unseemly character. It became worse as they emerged from the Donegall Road onto the Falls Road where their demeanour was outrageous. Numbers of them rushed up to inoffensive passers-by and, pointing revolvers at their heads, ordered them to uncover. The mob were representative of the familiar type of hooligan.

Yelling, shouting and jeering, they surged along Bridgend, closely scrutinising pedestrians meeting the funeral to see if they saluted in the usual way. As they passed along they smashed the windows of a Catholic shopkeeper. Passing into Victoria Square, the mob swept every person, irrespective of age or sex, out of their path, many being knocked down. Unfortunately, three members of a religious order who had emerged from a by-street, were caught in the thick of the mob. Efforts were made by the crowd to strike the inoffensive religious who put up their walking sticks to ward off the blows.

Belfast Protest to President

A DEPUTATION from Belfast waited on President de Valera yesterday afternoon, representing 100,000 citizens of Belfast. It included James McKernan (Alderman), John Harkin (Alderman), James Baird (Councillor), Joseph Cosgrove (Councillor), Denis McCullough (Councillor).

The deputation were introduced by Professor MacNeill and urged the Dáil not to agree to any system of government that would partition Belfast and the six counties from the government of the majority of the Irish people. Councillor James Baird said Partition would place power in the hands of those responsible for the pogroms which had driven all known opponents of Carsonism from their work and, in many cases, their homes. It would leave the minority entirely at the mercy of those from whom, judging from their past and present actions, they had no right to expect either justice or mercy. ... (Since Victorian times the funerals of Belfast riot victims had often sparked serious sectarian disturbances. Indeed, a 'mock funeral' to Friar's Bush Graveyard in 1864 in which a mob from Sandy Row carried a charred effigy of Daniel O'Connell provoked major rioting. In the delegation to de Valera, Labour councillor James Baird was one of several hundred Protestant trade unionists expelled from the shipyards in 1920.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com