

A PEOPLE DIVIDED: The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was the precursor to the reunification of Germany

We must learn lessons of German reunification



Chris **DONNELLY**

IN A SPEECH last week, the outgoing German chancellor, Angela Merkel, made a plea to her fellow countrywomen and men asking that they continue to pursue the German unification project.

Speaking some 31 years after Germany was officially reunified, she claimed that "mentally and structurally, unification hadn't been completed yet."

She was referring to cultural and political differences that persist, as well as the fact the west remains significantly wealthier than the east more than a generation after the moment Germany again became one.

Images of the Berlin Wall being torn down by residents of a city which defined the Cold War like no other represented the beginning of a long and difficult journey to reconcile a people divided for 40 years into two separate states, systems and shared experiences.

Sound familiar?

Of course, Germans shared a common sense of national identity and were divided by the ideological stances of political elites, which should have made their union a much smoother process than what we can realistically hope for in Ireland.

Yet, just as was the case in Germany, the process in Ireland is destined to be fraught with challenges and setbacks.

When a vote is eventually won to secure Irish unity, it will almost certainly be against the wishes of some 45 per cent-plus of the population of the north of Ireland.

Regardless of the border poll's outcome, there will still be contentious parades, political disagreements over identity matters and a chasm separating opinions on commemorations and narratives of our past. Anyone who has studied the history of America's Deep South after the civil war will also appreciate this point.

In other words, the fanciful notion that Irish unity will be pre-dated by a Damascene conversion by unionists to the nationalist cause is utter nonsense.

Accepting that reality is an important step in properly and pragmatically planning for unification.

Nationalists are obliged to encourage support for the unity vision, not least amongst those who may have been hostile or indifferent to the ideal in the past. That will entail embracing new vocabulary, ideas and approaches as well as demonstrating a genuine desire to accommodate even those for whom unity will represent the doomsday scenario.

But the reality of significant communal opposition to unity should not detract supporters from working openly and enthusiastically for the objective, within the existing political institutions and across wider society more generally.

The state of Northern Ireland has existed for a century now. Almost 25 years have passed since the Good Friday Agreement yet the desire for Irish reunification has only become stronger because the logic of unity is overwhelming.

That has not prevented opponents of unity, north and south, from attempting to raise every obstacle possible in a vain effort to stymie the developing clamour for change.

A favourite tactic has been to proclaim Irish unity should not be considered until it is something actively supported by unionists, tantamount to handing a veto over discussions on unity to the Four Tops of unionism who gathered in Stormont at the Orange Order's behest on the anniversary of Ulster Day to sing the same old song last month.

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Another tactic is to claim that the time is simply not right to even discuss, never mind support, the proposal.

It was the second tactic which former DUP MP Emma Little Pengelly employed last week during a radio discussion with former Alliance MLA, Trevor Lunn. The Lagan Valley politician was in the news after he proposed a motion to the assembly calling upon politicians of all shades to support a citizens' assembly to begin exploring what Irish unity could look like. Pengelly claimed the proposal was "the wrong issue at the wrong time", suggesting people would be better discussing other matters. Her position was disingenuous. For an avowed unionist, there will never be a good time to talk about – never mind lobby – for Irish unity.

This is why the DUP seized the opportunity recently to begin an official boycott of North-South institutions. They have rarely engaged productively in these meetings and, with Sinn Féin now surging some 10 points clear as the largest political party in the south, it is unlikely any unionist party will seek to meaningfully engage with North-South bodies as to do so would be to concede to the inescapable logic that greater island-wide co-operation is an inherently good thing.

Nationalist politicians need to learn the lesson quickly.

Waiting on political unionism to signal approval for others to plan and work for Irish unity is illogical. The Irish government needs to introduce a step change in planning for unity. Their Shared Island initiative to this point remains stuck in first gear. Dublin must do more than simply regurgitate old commitments over canals, a bridge and a road yet to be built. The Irish government should be directly working with northern political parties outside of the now defunct North-South bodies to agree policies and promote effective all-island planning at council and assembly level. The lesson from Germany is clear.

Uniting Ireland is a long term project, but the act of forming a sovereign political union is the major step along that road. Irish unity will be the precursor to the eventual unity of people across Ireland.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 11 1921

Terrorised by Specials

AT DUNGANNON Quarter Sessions, Patrick Hagan of Woodhill, Dungannon claimed £500 for personal injuries received.

Hagan stated that on 18th May nine or ten men came to his house at night and when he opened the door they rushed in, one of them catching him by the throat.

They commenced to wreck the house.

Every time he turned his head to see what was going on he got a blow on the face with the butt of a rifle and one of the party struck him with a revolver.

The men, who were dressed in policemen's caps and capes, after searching the house ordered him outside and said they were going to shoot him.

Applicant's wife and children were screaming in the bedroom and he ran into the room and the men followed him and smashed three of his ribs with the butts of rifles.

Some time afterwards the party returned and, bursting in the door, rushed into the bedroom.

They threw the children out of the cot and said they were searching for arms.

They produced a paper which stated they had searched the house for arms and he was compelled at the point of a bayonet to sign it, one of the party stating they would put 'Popish notions' out of his head.

Medical evidence was given that the applicant had three fractured ribs and a severely injured arm.

The Judge said that the allegations had been made that the raid was the work of B Specials.

District Inspector Walshe said that he thought the raid was carried out by A Specials.

The Judge said the difficulty he was in was whether the raid was authorised or not.

Mr Maguire [for the applicant] argued that if the raid was authorised it would have been reported.

Instead of that the applicant had been subjected to a night of terror and had received an unmerciful beating.

His Honour reserved judgement.

Republican Defaulters in Monaghan

AT MONAGHAN County Council yesterday, the Chief Clerk reported that the arrears of the rates amounted to £41,024.

Mr Patrick Duffy proposed that defaulting ratepayers be proceeded against in Republican Courts. Dr F C Ward (chairman) added that he wished to emphasise that the impression that Unionist ratepayers were not paying up was wrong. The Unionists were paying better than the Republicans. **(In this case of this brutal attack by Specials on a Catholic farmer near Dungannon, the local District RIC Inspector was clearly disgusted. Such sectarian activities, as General Ricardo, a B Special commandant in Tyrone put it in 1922, were 'sowing blood feuds which would last for generations'.)**

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com