



SERVICE: Irish minister for foreign affairs Simon Coveney will attend the church service in Armagh marking the centenary of partition on October 21. President Higgins declined the invitation

# Politicians right to attend centenary event

**T**AKE a look outside the window, dear reader. You just might see a pig flying through the air.

If not, then return to this page to witness something almost as rare: government ministers getting praised in a political column.

This arises from the controversy over the interdenominational "Service of Reflection and Hope, to mark the Centenary of the partition of Ireland and the formation of Northern Ireland" scheduled for October 21 in St Patrick's (Church of Ireland) Cathedral in Armagh.

President Michael D Higgins declined an invitation to take part because the title isn't "a neutral statement politically".

As it happens an Irish head of state from a long time back will be present: former High King of Ireland, Brian Boru, was laid to rest in St Patrick's Cathedral.

This followed his tragic death at the Battle of Clontarf against the Danes on Good Friday, April 23 1014 (we might call it the Good Friday Disagreement.)

Returning to the present day, some of us respectfully dissented from the president's decision whilst bearing in mind the excellent work he has done over the years for peace and reconciliation.

However, it must be said that you could hardly get a more neutral word than "mark", especially in the context of "reflection and hope" at an inter-faith service that would also be acknowledging the "failures and hurts" of the last 100 years.

Given also the history of sectarianism in our part of the world, inter-faith services need to be especially prized.

Opinion polls subsequent to the president's decision reported very considerable support for his position. An Ireland Thinks survey in the *Irish Mail on Sunday* last month showed 81 per cent backing for his stance and, in an Ipsos MRBI poll published in the *Irish Times* last week, 68 per cent agreed that

Deaglán  
DE BRÉADÚN



he was "right to decline the invitation".

Although it's not a label one would ever apply to President Higgins, who was aptly described by Pope Francis as a "wise man of today", these poll figures evoke the description "windbag nationalism".

Irish unity has actually never been closer, but we need to play down the rhetorical aspect.

Against all that background, allow me to give commendation for once to Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney of Fine Gael and government chief whip Jack Chambers of Fianna Fáil who are planning, in line with a government decision, to attend the Armagh service, along with the SDLP. Sinn Féin will not attend although they did have a representative at a similar centenary event organised by the Presbyterian Church last month at the Union Theological College where the Parliament of Northern Ireland had its

early sittings.

If the opportunity arises on the day in Armagh, ministers Coveney and Chambers should emphasise that they are not celebrating partition in any shape or form but simply taking part in a reflective event aimed at generating hope for cross-community cooperation to achieve a brighter future for everyone on this island.

Mr Coveney might even have a word with Queen Elizabeth, assuming she is there, about the current state of EU-UK relations.

There was another interesting set of figures in the aforementioned Ipsos MRBI poll where people were asked about their voting intentions in the next general election south of the border.

Sinn Féin scored 32 per cent, ten points ahead of Fine Gael, with Fianna Fáil in third place at 20 per cent.

Younger readers may not fully appreciate the extent to which this is the world turned upside down.

In the 1997 general election, for example, Sinn Féin won a single solitary seat in a Dáil of 166 members, scoring 2.5 per cent of the vote. This was at a time when SF were still being treated as little more than pariahs in some quarters while journalists who tried to let the Shinners have their say could also encounter disapproval.

For anyone who was around in those days, the fact that Sinn Féin now looks set to take over the reins of power in Dublin is mind-spinning. Will it really happen after all? One thinks of Salvador Allende who was ousted as President of Chile in a coup d'état on September 11 (that fateful date), 1973. Thankfully we're above all that on this lovely green island.

As for potential coalition partners, when asked recently by the *Sunday Independent* about the issue, Sinn Féin finance spokesperson Pearse Doherty did not rule out even going in with Fine Gael: now that would be a sight to behold.

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## ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 13 1921

### 'Victims of Murder Gang'

THE deaths of six victims, including two women, of the rioting in various parts of Belfast during August and September were inquired into yesterday by Dr James Graham, City Coroner.

At the Mater Infirmary Hospital the inquest was opened into the death of Murtagh McAstocker, Moira Street.

District Inspector Spiers said the victim was shot by a Webley bullet. John Dougan swore that on the evening of 24th September he was with the deceased.

He saw a crowd at Wolff Street and noticed a young man with a red face. The man drew a revolver and deliberately fired at them. McAstocker fell.

Mr Spiers - It appears to be deliberate murder. Foreman - My opinion in regard to the death of this gentleman is that he fell at the hands of a murder gang of Orangemen. A Juror - What about the other murder gang? Another Juror - What constitutes murder? The Coroner - If a man deliberately fires at another man and kills him, it is murder. I am not supposed to have religion or politics here....

The shooting of Mrs Elizabeth Jane Kelly (32) of Seaforde Street was then investigated. Jim Kelly said his wife was coming out of the scullery when a bullet came through the front door and wounded her. The Coroner said - They are deplorable cases. They seem very respectable people. D I Spiers - Very respectable indeed.

An inquest was held into the death of Thomas McMullen (34), barman, shot at his residence at North Queen St. Margaret McMullen (wife) said that her husband was manager of a public house.

On the evening of August 30th about 6 p.m., she saw a motor lorry of Crown forces stop and heard shots. She found him lying wounded in the bar.

A Juror said that for some time past there seemed to have been no law and order in Belfast. He felt strongly that when any man was caught with a revolver in his pocket, that rascal should be hung. The Coroner - Hooliganism on both sides should be put down with a very firm hand.

THESE inquests marked a typical day in the Belfast Coroner's Court during 1920-22 with tempers flaring among the jurors themselves. Murtagh McAstocker (21) was an IRA volunteer, shot dead during a sustained loyalist attack on the Short Strand as violence escalated despite the Truce. A leading member of the Loyalist paramilitary Ulster Protestant Association was charged with his murder but later acquitted. Craig persuaded Dublin Castle to allow the remobilisation of the B Specials to the horror of nationalists who saw this as 'a reward for loyalist aggression against Catholics'.

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