



RELATIONSHIPS:
First Minister
Paul Givan greets
Minister for Foreign
Affairs Simon
Coveney during an
event hosted by
the Presbyterian
Church to mark
the centenary of
Northern Ireland at
Union Theological
College, Belfast

PICTURE: Peter
Morrison/PA

Dublin and unionists must rebuild trust

LAST Friday Simon Coveney, the Irish foreign affairs minister, described the relationship between the British and Irish governments as "probably as distant as I can remember". "It's not that there's any animosity there but it's not a close one in the way that it has been in the past."

While admitting that the 'polarised environment' in Northern Ireland had been contributed to by comments in London, Dublin and from the EU, he stopped short – well short, in fact – of accepting that some of his own contributions since 2017 (when he was appointed to foreign affairs) may have fuelled the fires and encouraged the polarisation.

He didn't actually go into much detail about why the relationships between the governments and between the Irish government and unionism/loyalism had become so bad, but he did express hope that he and Conor Burns (the newly-appointed NIO minister) could work on improving them. Ironically, he was talking about improving relationships on the very day that President Higgins's refusal to attend a church service to 'mark' (not celebrate, commemorate or champion) partition was annoying even the most liberal of unionists.

Another irony, of course, is that unionist anger should probably be directed more at Boris Johnson than at the EU and the Irish government.

They are doing exactly what you would expect them to do after the Brexit result: protecting and promoting their own interests. Why wouldn't they? Johnson, on the other hand, has decided to act in the particular interests of his voting base across England.

If 'getting Brexit done' meant hanging out unionists – along with their multiplicity of flags – then hanging them out is what he would do.

There are no votes for him in Northern Ireland.

Indeed, I'm pretty sure my cat Wink – who still doesn't do much more

Alex
KANE



than lie around and lick his bits – would get more votes if he were allowed to stand in east Belfast, than the entire vote for every Conservative candidate in the next assembly election.

He would certainly make more sense. But in the absence of votes and seats Johnson has no interest in the place.

He has even less interest in grabbing the opportunity to win votes and seats by playing the pro-Union card.

So all he does is mumble, ruffle his hair and give vague (so vague, in fact, even the political equivalent of a Satnav couldn't locate them) commitments to uphold the union. Hmmm.

But having said unionists should be more miffed by the actions and policies of Johnson than by anyone else, it is worth noting that there have been far too many moments when Varadkar, Martin and Coveney have been tone deaf and tin-eared in their approach to unionist concerns.

For example, they all knew the problems a

There have been far too many moments when Varadkar, Martin and Coveney have been tone deaf and tin-eared in their approach to unionist concerns

beefing-up of the existing border would have caused – not least in terms of the response of some version or other of the IRA; so they should have known that inventing an entirely new border and plunking it between Great Britain and Northern Ireland would cause problems for unionism.

Dismissing those concerns, or worse, blaming unionists for voting for Brexit in the first place, was stupid. The sort of stupidity which erodes trust and undermines relationships forged in the very difficult days between 1992 and 1998.

And I'm pretty sure there wouldn't have been a Good Friday Agreement had those relationships not been forged and some very unlikely friendships struck. Trust and understanding are the key to any peace process. So giving two fingers to one-time allies when they have an unexpected problem was, as I say, the most stupid response imaginable.

It's worth bearing in mind, too, that there were significant elements of unionism and loyalism which didn't support Brexit; and many of those same elements, along with softer voices from within the pro-Union community (emerging after the 2016 referendum), were also very perturbed by the uber-unionism pursued by the DUP between 2017 and 2019. Maybe if key players in the Irish government (as well as in the EU commission) had listened to the voices and concerns of anti-Brexit unionism in Northern Ireland after 2016 it might, in turn, have made them more cautious and less cantankerous in their approach to solutions.

Anyway, we are where we are and we've all passed a lot of water since the referendum. Relationships will need to be improved and recalibrated. Whatever happens re the protocol there are still huge challenges facing the British and Irish governments and even greater challenges facing unionism and the Irish government. We really do need to start work on the process of forging new friendships and cementing new trust.

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 24 1971

Faulkner Under Pressure

THERE was new hope among many Conservatives as well as Labour MPs at Westminster last night that a solution can be found to the continuing NI crisis.

The answer is likely to centre on the creation of a new system of government which would end fifty years of Unionist monopoly in the Six Counties.

Mr John Hume, who was among the SDLP MPs present in the Public Gallery for the debate said that they were heartened by the growing support among Labour MPs for their stand on the ending of internment as a precondition for any talks about a solution. A feeling of optimism stemmed from the exchange on the floor of the House between Mr Gerry Fitt, SDLP leader and the former Home Secretary, Mr James Callaghan. As the emergency debate moved into its second day, Mr Callaghan put the question directly to Mr Fitt: 'Supposing there was a solution for the problem of internment, would the SDLP be willing to participate in a NI government that would obviously include Unionists in order to bring NI and its people back from the edge of civil war?'

A crowded House listened with rapt attention as Mr Fitt replied: 'If there was a satisfactory solution to internment, the SDLP, being the largest Opposition party, in company with our members who have withdrawn from the Stormont parliament, will be willing and anxious to enter into negotiations to bring about a satisfactory solution.'

The exchange angered Unionist MPs with Mr Stratton Mills describing it as 'a spontaneous charade'. But from the Conservative side of the House, Mr Fitt's contribution was warmly welcomed. Mr Norman St John Stevas said it was the most vital contribution in the whole debate.

Two Die in Belfast House Explosion

A SEVENTEEN year old youth and a girl aged eighteen died last night in an explosion which wrecked the interior of a house in the Lower Falls. The identity of the victims was established later by police but the names are being withheld. It was suggested by residents that the couple had only moved into the house recently.

'I'll Meet IRA' says Protestant Cleric

A FORMER Church of Ireland rector has offered to meet members or sympathisers of the IRA for confidential talks on the situation in the Six Counties. He is Canon Henry Lamb, incumbent of the United parishes of Lisnadill and Kildart, outside Armagh. Canon Lamb is a pacifist.

WHILE the crisis triggered by internment deepened with the opening of a new camp at Long Kesh, the outlines of a possible settlement based on a new cross-community administration in the north were already emerging.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com