



THE NEW IRISH: Republic of Ireland teams at all levels today are reflecting stories of families who have moved to make Ireland their home, including Adam Idah, pictured right, with teammates Marc Walsh, centre, and Kameron Ledwidge

A new Ireland must be a warm house for all

THE pro-unity lobby group, Ireland's Future, continues to be responsible for spearheading initiatives and creating the space and opportunities for the type of detailed and considered policies to be developed and explored to help shape and stimulate discussions about constitutional change.

Over the past 11 months, Ireland's Future (of which I'm a member) has published four notable documents addressing different elements of the unity discussion: A Principled Framework for Change (December '20), Advancing the Conversation (January '21), Planning for a Strong Economy in a New Ireland (March '21) and Rights, Citizenship and Identity in a United Ireland (October '21). All of these are available to read on the organisation's website (an internet search for 'Ireland's Future' will help find it without difficulty.)

A series of public meetings are being held by Ireland's Future across the island, generating and building upon the interest in moving the conversation beyond rhetoric and towards substantive engagement to flesh out what unity could resemble for all of us, north and south.

This autumn, that has already involved a public meeting in Cork and later this week another public meeting will be held in Galway. The panellists at the Galway event will include the deputy president of NUI Galway Professor Pol O'Dochartaigh, the Indian-born writer Cauvery Madhavan, comedian and prominent member of the Travelling community, Martin Beanz Warde, and Fianna Fáil TD Eamon O Cuiv alongside Sinn Féin TD Mairead Farrell.

Ahead of that meeting, Councillor Owen Hanley tweeted last week that he was looking forward to the event, noting that a new Ireland "should be one of regional equality" and that west of Ireland voices need "to support those in the north [looking] for a decentralised, empowered, and prosperous future".

Councillor Hanley's intervention – and interest – is noteworthy because he is a young councillor for the Social Democrats representing east Galway.

His eagerness is reflective of the fact Ireland's Future has been able, over the

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past year, to tap into and channel positive interest and engagement from elected representatives and civic voices from right across the political spectrum, epitomised by the composition of the Galway panel.

The faces and voices advancing the discussion are increasingly from diverse political backgrounds. No longer can it credibly be argued that the unity discussion is one being had merely by Sinn Féin and northern nationalists.

This is important, both north and south. There is often an understandable and wholly appropriate focus on how a new Ireland must be shaped by and be reflective of the British and unionist minority of the north, but we must not forget that modern Ireland is a very different place from the Ireland that was partitioned 100 years ago.

As a season ticket holder for the Republic of Ireland football team, I am conscious that many of the rising stars of the Irish side have names not traditionally associated with the Irish nation. The sports journalist, Stephen Barry, has noted that just as the legendary Jack Charlton teams of the late 20th century told the story of the Irish diaspora returning home to represent the land of their ancestors, Republic of Ireland teams at all levels today

are reflecting stories of families who have moved to make Ireland their home. The names of our children's football heroes today and for years to come will include Idah, Ogbene, Omobamidele, Ferizaj and Zefi.

Planning for unity and a new Ireland must reflect the need to provide the new Irish a prominent place in that discussion as well.

At the launch last week of the latest Ireland's Future publication, two prominent members of the group from a northern Protestant background, Rev Karen Sutherland and Independent MLA Trevor Lunn, discussed how their own life journeys led them to support the vision of a new and agreed united Ireland whilst also discussing the central importance of anchoring that vision firmly in a rights-based framework, not least to ensure that their fellow northerners would be secure with their British and unionist identity in a new dispensation.

The backdrop to all of this is the winding up of the centenary year celebrations for the formation of the Northern Ireland state, which included the contentious church service in Armagh last week.

A false narrative that many unionists and nationalists alike continue to hold to is that only by demonstrating that the north is a failed entity can unity be achieved.

The logic of Sinn Féin and the SDLP spending most of the past two decades in government alongside unionist parties at Stormont suggests otherwise. Endeavouring to make the north's institutions work, growing the economy and building better relationships must continue to be a part of living out the vision of a new Ireland this side of unification regardless of the antics or conduct of unionist politicians.

This is important not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because pragmatically it remains the case that unity will happen only when enough people comfortable calling Northern Ireland their home determine that forging a new future on this shared island represents the best option.

By implicitly recognising that the house must accommodate a diversity of people and be warm for all, Ireland's Future continues to show the way.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 25 1921

Northern TD's Views

MR ERNEST Blythe, Minister of Trade in Dail Eireann, delivered an important address in St Mary's Hall, Belfast last night before a very large and enthusiastic audience. Mr A Savage, City Councillor, presided.

Mr Blythe, who was enthusiastically received, said what was sometimes called the Ulster Problem arose from the hostility of the big majority of the Protestant population of two or three counties in the North-East towards the Catholic minority. The problem had grown up within the past 100 years. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was not that line which marked off differences of creed and of political parties and, in 1798 and for a great number of years afterwards, perhaps half the Protestant population were with the Catholics of Ireland in their desire for freedom. Even during the Fenian times there were very large numbers of Ulster Protestants who were Republicans. During the Home Rule movement religious and political division tended to coincide and he said that the difficulty created by that division was one for which the late Parliamentary Party was largely responsible.

"The Nationalists of Belfast were in the forefront of the battle and, if they could be got rid of, the Unionists would be in a very strong position. But the Nationalist population were not going to oblige them by clearing out." (Applause.) Mr Blythe advised the Catholics of Belfast to 'stick right here' (Applause)... It would be an injury to the cause of Ireland and a triumph for the enemy for any considerable section of the Catholics of Belfast to allow themselves to be forced out and he assured them that the Nationalists of the remainder of Ireland would not desert them. (Cheers.)

If the negotiations now proceeding it is possible to get a satisfactory and honourable settlement, that settlement will be obtained and accepted.

(Ernest Blythe (1889-1974), from a Protestant farming background in Co Antrim had come to separatism via the Gaelic League, later joining the IRB, Irish Volunteers, becoming the only Ulster Protestant to serve as a Minister in the Dail. As a reporter in Newtownards between 1908 and 1911 he combined his secret IRB activities with Orange Order membership. From his cell in Crumlin Road Jail in 1919 he was critical of the declaration of a Republic, seeing partition as the real issue facing the Dail. Strongly pro-Treaty, he advocated a 'peace policy' towards the Northern government in 1922. A fluent Gaeligeoir, Blythe saw the language as the shared heritage of both traditions here. He lost his Monaghan seat in 1933 and later became manager of the Abbey Theatre.)

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