

TROUBLED TIMES: It was reported this week that an official history of the Troubles is being commissioned by the British government as part of wider legacy proposals tabled by Secretary of State Brandon Lewis

Don't admit to the past, just rewrite it instead



Tom COLLINS

I DO wish someone would give Brandon Lewis something to do with his time. There he is, sitting in Stormont House, fretting over how to avoid going down in history as one of the most useless Northern Ireland secretaries of state.

In Boris Johnson's cabinet of the talentless, Lewis stands proud. He is one of those ministers who has risen without trace and whose legacy will be the chaos he bequeaths to his successor.

Alongside the equally vacuous Brexit minister David Frost and his feckless boss Johnson, Lewis has shredded any vestige of respect people might have had for the British government in Ireland.

There was a time when Tory overlords demonstrated a degree of understanding of this very un-British part of the United Kingdom. Peter Brooke – remember him? – accepted the IRA could not be defeated militarily and opened up communications with them. His speech saying Britain had no "selfish strategic or economic interest" in Northern Ireland was a game changer and one of those moves that brought about the peace process. "It is not the aspiration to a sovereign united Ireland against which we set our face," he said, "but its violent expression."

Lewis, who tried to turn this year's partition centenary into a celebratory tourist opportunity, has consistently proved himself to be tone deaf to the nuances. In the same way that one of his predecessors thought unionists wanted a united Ireland and nationalists wrapped themselves in Union flags and drank out of coronation mugs, Lewis misguidedly believes Fermanagh is as British as Finchley and that innocent people murdered by British soldiers should not get justice. If there is a misstep to be made, clueless Lewis will take it.

I imagine there are still a few people in the Northern Ireland Office who have their heads screwed on. God help them. I can just imagine what the current Sir Humphrey said when Lewis summoned him in for a briefing on his latest wheeze – no, not giving Ian Paisley jnr a knighthood for services to the travel industry.

"I've been thinking Sir Humphrey."

"I'm sorry to hear that minister. I'm sure it will pass."

"No, no. I have been thinking of our place in the history books."

"We're there already minister. I have quite a few volumes next door. Not pleasant reading I'm afraid."

"That's because it's all republican propaganda. It's time we had some propaganda of our own. I'm going to write The History of the Troubles."

"Accordin' to your Da, minister?" (Apologies to Martin Lynch.)

Politicians have a habit of trying to rewrite history: Hitler was a tourist not an invader; Stalin had an Investors in People Award; Mao loved intellectuals and culture; Donald Trump won a second term; you get the drift.

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I know what Brandon's list will be: "... the roads, now they are all new, and the great wines too... and the canals for navigation, public health for all the nation, the public baths are a great delight, and it's safe to walk in the streets at night."

Well, given he is starting in the 1960s, let's begin with sectarianism, discrimination, mass unemployment, human rights abuses, suppression of dissent, cold-blooded murder of innocent people, internment, dirty tricks, collusion...

Don't let me get started on the Brexit's full-scale assault on the peace process, and on political, social and economic stability; nor on the glorification of troops who shot innocent civilians in the back – and for whom an amnesty is planned.

According to a report in the Tory house newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, Lewis's officially sanctioned History of the Troubles would "help guard against what some ministers believe to be creeping revisionism around the role of the IRA and the atrocities it committed".

The project would focus on the role of the UK government and its armed forces. Good luck to any historian who tries to find the positives there.

Cromwell was just trying to get to the shops for a pound of butter when he entered Drogheda, the potato famine was an anti-carb initiative gone wrong; the Black and Tans were just trying to get a better view of the game; the Parachute Regiment was in Ireland to promote peace and stability.

Rather than rewriting history, Lewis would be better off reading some. Churchill quipped history was written by the victors. This would be the first time it has been written by the loser-in-chief.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 18 1921

PM Rebuffs Craig

THE British reply to the proposal of the Belfast Cabinet that the principle of Irish unity should be withdrawn from the British suggestions and the Unionist alternative, which is said to be on the lines of an'Ulster Dominion plan' was delivered yesterday. Neither proposal was accepted and the situation is stated now to have become a deadlock as far as negotiations between the British Ministers and the 'Craigites' are concerned.

Replying to Mr Ronald McNeill, MP [Unionist and Antrim landlord], Mr Austin Chamberlain [Tory leader in the Commons] declared that on the result of the Irish negotiations depends 'the issue of peace and war'. Alderman Salvidge, the Liverpool Tory leader, declared that the attempt of the diehards to use the [Tory] Conference this week to attack the Government is the work of men who 'are using Ulster as a peg for paying off old scores'.

Internee Shot Dead at Down Camp

ON the arrival of fourteen prisoners from Ballykinlar internment camp in Dublin last evening, it was learnt that just before leaving the men heard a shot and saw lying on the ground the body of a man who was bleeding copiously. They were unaware that Alderman Tadgh Barry of Cork had been shot dead.

It is alleged that Alderman Barry was standing at a certain point when he was ordered back by the sentry. He was in the act of complying with the order when the sentry raised his rifle and fired, killing him on the spot. The sentry (18) has been placed under arrest.

Church-goers Fired on in Ballymacarrett

ANOTHER determined attack was made last night in the Ballymacarrett area of Belfast, the scene of Monday night's firing and bomb-throwing. About 9.30 p.m. intense firing was opened upon Thompson Street [a Catholic area] from every vantage point in the surrounding Unionist district. Rifles were extensively used. The attack had evidently been intended for the members of St Matthew's Holy Family Confraternity leaving their weekly meeting, but the congregation had been advised to depart by another route. The disappointed gunmen, deprived of targets, opened a barrage into the adjoining Catholic streets.

AS LLOYD George struggled to keep the Anglo-Irish negotiations on track, Craig and his supporters hoped to use the Tory Party Conference in Liverpool to win right-wing Tory unionist support. Despite anti-Sinn Féin pickets, the Conference backed the the negotiations provided there was 'no coercion of Ulster'. The PM now floated the Boundary Commission and began to pressurise Sinn Féin.

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