



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

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Pressure grows on border issue

We are approaching a crucial juncture in the Brexit negotiations with pressure growing on the British government to make significant concessions to resolve the border issue.

It is an issue that has been cranked up over recent days with a leaked European Commission document saying it is essential the UK commits to avoiding a hard border by remaining part of the EU customs union and continues to abide by the rules of the internal market.

This indicates the Irish government is pushing hard for concrete reassurances on border arrangements ahead of the EU leaders' summit in December which Theresa May hopes will open the way for trade negotiations to begin.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, speaking at a British-Irish Council meeting in Jersey yesterday, said in his view the only way to avoid a hard border is if the UK as a whole or Northern Ireland continues to apply the rules of the customs union and single market although that did not mean the British must be members of those bodies.

What he wants to see is a 'bespoke solution' while there are reports suggesting the Irish government is demanding Britain signs up to a range of EU rules to ensure an open trade border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Mr Varadkar is right to press for definite arrangements on the border that are in the best interests of everyone on this island.

The Irish government has considerable influence in the EU on this particular matter and the European leaders will know that Theresa May's position is exceptionally weak.

She is also trying to use this weakness to her advantage by setting a time for the UK to leave the EU, 11pm on March 29, 2019.

The British prime minister will be calculating that the hardline Brexiteers in her party will back her on the basis that she is their best hope of delivering an exit from the EU.

There are high stakes at play in all this and the British will want to avoid major concessions on the border but they are also keen to move to the next stage of talks.

We are on the countdown to Brexit and this is the time to safeguard the interests of citizens north and south.

Source: The Irish News

12 November 2017

Good Friday Agreement 'has not failed, people have failed it'; Watching two elder statesmen of peace cry was a moment of great emotion, writes Dearbhail McDonald

THERE'S something about watching grown men cry or struggle to contain their emotions that hits your inner core.

When it is the architects and elder statesmen of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) who struggle to maintain their composure as they recall the dark days of the Troubles, it hits you even more.

There were audible gasps, including my own, last Thursday night when Seamus Mallon recalled how his life had been saved on several occasions by his Protestant friends and neighbours in the predominantly Unionist village of Markethill, Co Armagh, where the 81-year-old titan of the peace process still lives.

One thing about Markethill, Mallon told a small audience that included the Attorney General Seamus Woulfe and Belfast-born Supreme Court Judge Mr Justice Donal O'Donnell, is that there are no hiding places, no comfort zones, no places you can sneak into after dark.

"I was among friends," said Mallon, the former deputy leader of the SDLP and the first Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland.

Fighting back a surge of emotion that appeared to catch him by surprise, Mallon continued: "Those friends were my brothers and neighbours. And I can tell you that on a number of occasions, I would not have been here now had it not been for my Protestant friends."

David Trimble, the former UUP leader, first First Minister of Northern Ireland and Nobel Peace Prize winner - who is an ardent Brexiteer - also struggled with his emotions at an event on mediation organised by the Bar of Ireland to mark the honorary benching, by the Kings Inns, of Mallon, Trimble and former Labour leader and Tanaiste Dick Spring.

The voice of the British peer, who said he still doesn't know who nominated him for his Nobel, broke when he recalled that Mallon had attended the funeral of the late UUP deputy leader Harold

McCusker, whose death at an early age from cancer paved the way for Trimble to lead the UUP for 15 years and secure his place in the history books.

"People will remember you at that funeral," Trimble said to Mallon, noting that Mallon's attendance at McCusker's funeral in 1990 - which followed one of the deadliest years of the conflict - was hugely respected by the Unionist community.

The two men broke the emotive atmosphere when Trimble said to Mallon: "I think I better follow your example," a reference to speaking briefly at the podium. "For the first time," quipped Mallon in reply, prompting warm laughter in the room.

But the political impasse in Northern Ireland is no laughing matter.

Despite the GFA, whose 20th anniversary falls next year, the two communities in Northern Ireland are more polarised than ever.

The middle ground, so vital to stability and cohesion, has been obliterated by Sinn Fein and the DUP, whose only unity is their hardline stances.

Those infamous peace walls? There are more now than at any time during the conflict. Twenty years after the GFA, more than nine out of 10 schoolchildren are educated in segregated schools.

In an area with high and persistent levels of social deprivation - Northern Ireland requires an annual £10bn subvention from London as well as critical EU funding to support the communities most at risk - more than nine out of 10 recipients of social housing are segregated along religious/sectarian lines.

It is a most fragile peace.

And it's hard to disagree with Duncan Morrow, the University of Ulster politics lecturer and conflict resolution expert. Morrow recently told the All-Island Civic Dialogue on Brexit that Northern Ireland could not, in its present guise, survive either a United Ireland or a Hard Brexit, the greatest existentialist crisis to hit the island of Ireland, arguably since partition.

Catholics and Protestants have lived cheek by jowl in Northern Ireland for more than 400 years and will continue to do so for the next 400 years, despite the chasms between 'them' and 'us'.

Mallon, taking inspiration from the Belfast poet, John Hewitt, says we have gained something from that inevitable proximity.

"It is a horror of violence," he told the Bar of Ireland, before taking a sideswipe at Sinn Fein's use of an Irish language act to stall talks in the North.

"It is my conviction that the hiatus, the failure, is more than just about the Irish language or anything else," said Mallon. "And by the way, the Irish language doesn't belong to Sinn Fein or to any political party. It belongs to the Irish people. Why should we allow them [Sinn Fein] to act like a cudgel to beat others around the head with?" Mallon, who despite his age and frailty, is still an outstanding and commanding orator, is angry at those who say the Good Friday Agreement has failed. "It has not failed," he said, urging that victory, the kind that leads to an impasse unless either side can claim one

does not - along with trophy hunting and staged handshakes in front of international media - belong in Northern Ireland anymore.

"It [the GFA] has brought peace of a kind. And anything that brings peace of a kind is successful," said Mallon, who appealed for help to deal with what he describes as the complexities of a simple problem. "People have failed it. And they are continuing to fail it."

As it slowly dawns on the British Government that the principle of consent to British sovereignty [Northern Ireland voted to remain] and an open border lie at the heart of the GFA, we desperately need to return to that landmark document whose preamble - always worth re-reading - reminds us how interlocking and interdependent the lives and livelihoods of all on this island are. Brexit poses new threats to the GFA including a border - hard or soft - that will play into the idle hands of extremists.

The prospect of a return to violence, even of a minor kind, is a price we simply cannot afford to pay.

'A border - hard or soft - will play into hands of extremists' ;

Source: The Sunday Independent

12 November 2017

Varadkar dreams of time when poppy, shamrock and lily 'can lie side by side';

Taoiseach continues tradition of attending commemoration in Enniskillen

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has spoken of his dream where the poppy, the shamrock and the Easter lily could be worn "side by side".

Mr Varadkar, who laid a laurel wreath at the war memorial in Enniskillen yesterday morning, said he travelled to the Co Fermanagh town to pay respects to the dead of the first World War and other wars and also to remember the 12 people who died as a result of the 1987 IRA Remembrance Sunday bombing.

He was following in the footsteps of former Fine Gael taoiseach Enda Kenny, who attended the 25th anniversary commemoration of the bombing and all commemorations subsequently up to last year.

The Taoiseach said the day was particularly poignant as this was the 30th anniversary of the Enniskillen bombing, in which 11 people were killed, with a 12th victim, Ronnie Hill who was in a coma, dying 13 years later.

Catholic and Protestant

Mr Varadkar wore his shamrock poppy, which he displayed in the Dáil earlier this week, as did Fine Gael senator Frank Feighan, who also attended the commemoration.

The Taoiseach said the shamrock poppy was designed in particular to remember and show respect for the many Irish people who died in the first World War. "We should not forget that they came from many backgrounds, from the North and the South, Catholic and Protestant and fought for different reasons," he said.

"The dream I have is for an Ireland in the future where the poppy, the shamrock and the lily can lie side by side and I think it is good to have those kind of dreams."

The Taoiseach, when speaking to members of the Enniskillen Royal British Legion, quoted from Willie Redmond, the Irish nationalist MP who was killed in the war in 1917. In one of his last letters home he wrote: "It would be a fine memorial to the men who died if we could over their graves build up a bridge between North and South."

DUP leader Arlene Foster and Northern Secretary James Brokenshire, who also attended the ceremony, welcomed Mr Varadkar's attendance.

They also condemned the planting of a device in Omagh which forced the cancellation of the town's Remembrance Day ceremony.

Memorial

Meanwhile, Catholic parishioners were told in Enniskillen that there is no objection to a new memorial to the 1987 bomb victims being located at church property at the bomb site.

The memorial bearing the names of the 12 who died was unveiled in Enniskillen on Wednesday on the calendar anniversary of the bombing.

However, it was taken away by forklift later in the day and put into temporary storage because those behind the project did not have permission to locate it permanently at the Clinton Centre, the site of the bombing.

The centre is owned by the local Catholic St Michael's Diocesan Trust, which has not yet made a decision on whether to grant such permission.

However, a letter was read out at weekend Masses in the Enniskillen area from Monsignor Joseph McGuinness, administrator of the Diocese of Clogher, saying the church and the trust did not object to the memorial.

"I want to state firmly that the diocesan trust has no objection whatsoever to a permanent memorial being erected to the victims of the Enniskillen bombing," he said.

'Comfort'

"The creation of a public memorial is both a way of providing solace and comfort to those who grieve, and also a way of drawing the community together in remembrance and solidarity."

Mgr McGuinness said permission was only sought in late September but before a definitive response could be issued a number of practical issues had to be addressed.

These included health and safety matters and lease arrangements.

"From all this I hope it is clear that, contrary to some comments being made, the diocesan trust is not trying to be in any way obstructive, but rather has had to begin to address complex issues which have only recently been posed to it," he said.

Source: The Irish Times