

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

We must find a way out of Brexit impasse

EVER since the UK electorate voted to leave the European Union, in June 2016, this newspaper clearly and unambiguously has pointed out that the decision inevitably would warrant the return of a tangible border on this island.

For Brexit to make any sense at all, our neighbours would have to leave the Single Market and the Customs Union, and once that day arrived, the free flow of people and goods from one jurisdiction to the other simply would have to end.

This was seen as scaremongering by some, and blithely dismissed by others. Rather more crucially, given where we now find ourselves, it was ignored by the governments in Dublin and Westminster, whose strategy appeared to consist of the words: 'It'll be grand'.

Yesterday, the EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier finally put to bed that cavalier attitude and confirmed our prediction when he said a hard Brexit simply had to lead to a hard border. That is a pretty dismal scenario for trade. It is a massive inconvenience for those who live on one side of the border but work on the other. Potentially, it is catastrophic for the hard-won peace.

When Leo Varadkar became Taoiseach, he recognised these threats and played hardball with the UK. In December, his tough stance forced extraordinary concessions that now seem to rest on very flimsy foundations.

For the UK to abide by them, it would forever more have to follow rules laid down by Brussels, and that effectively would mean there was no Brexit at all, while leaving the UK with no say in the formation of regulations.

If that now proves unacceptable to the British government and to the DUP, it leaves only one other option, a no-deal Brexit. That is a scenario with grave consequences for the economies on both sides of the border, and across the Irish Sea.

This newspaper always said Brexit would be bad for Ireland, but a no-deal Brexit would be significantly worse. That is why it is imperative our leaders focus on finding some way out of the impasse, and achieve a solution that guarantees future prosperity for everyone on the island of Ireland.

Keep up momentum

MORE than 1,000 people have now backed the Irish Daily Mail campaign to ban the sale of smartphones to children under 16. Well over 200 have taken the time and trouble, and spent the money, to post the coupon we have printed to ask the Government to legislate for this.

As we have pointed out, smartphone use leads to all sorts of problems for the young, and impacts on physical health, mental health and emotional wellbeing. It leaves them open to bullying, to pornography, to violent images and to the vile advances of sexual predators.

That so many have responded shows just how strongly they feel, and we will forward these petitions to the Government on their behalf.

We must, however, keep up the momentum. If you have signed, please also ask your families, friends and neighbours to do so. To protect our children, we must keep the pressure on.

Sinn Féin's new era

TODAY is the last day of Gerry Adams' 34-year presidency of Sinn Féin. His legacy may well be divisive, but the time has come to look to the future, not the past.

While we differ on many, many policy issues with the new leader, Mary Lou McDonald, she at least has a clean pair of hands, and is not tainted by the murder and misery of the Troubles.

We wish her well as she takes the reins in a new era for Sinn Féin.

IT was not supposed to happen like this: Gerry shuffling off to a retirement cottage in Donegal, his best buddy lying in a cold Derry graveyard, the powersharing deal at Stormont in shambles and the leadership of his precious Sinn Féin being handed over to an outsider – a 'carpetbagger', as some call Mary Lou McDonald – with no roots in the Provos' struggle or the Troubles.

It was supposed to have ended so differently, with Gerry Adams sitting at the Cabinet table in Government Buildings and Martin McGuinness sharing power with the DUP in Belfast, edging the hard men of unionism with charm and generosity towards a more charitable view of Irish republicanism. It wouldn't have been Irish unity, for sure, but it would be a historic achievement: Sinn Féin in power in both parts of Ireland at the same time.

So where did it all go wrong? I have to cast my mind all the way back to 1982 in the search for an answer, to the eve of a Northern Assembly election called by the British in what proved to be another hopeless bid for a settlement. Fresh from the hunger strikes and the election to Westminster of Bobby Sands and his comrades, Sinn Féin had embraced electoral politics and decided to field candidates who had pledged not to take their seats.

But it was a risky move. The last time the IRA had embraced parliamentary politics the result was a split which had created the Provisionals and cost the lives of more than one activist in bloody feuds. Gerry Adams had to step carefully.

The first, and really only, question the news media wanted to ask on the eve of that 1982 poll was whether he was a member of the IRA. But the answer could lead into a minefield. To admit such a thing would be the basis for a criminal charge and a minimum jail term of a year.

MOST IRA men, faced with that question, chose the same answer. 'Mind your own business', or a less polite version. It wasn't the truth, but neither was it a lie. And it meant they wouldn't have to go to jail. It was also the sort of question the media would soon tire of asking.

Instead, Adams chose to lie, and the lie has haunted him. He was never in the IRA, he told the media, and he has stuck to that answer ever since. But the answer went down well with most of the Provo grassroots; here was their leader cocking his snook at the British and the unionists, refusing to give them the slightest excuse to label him an IRA killer.

In all the subsequent years Adams' denial of IRA membership has done Sinn Féin no damage at all with Northern nationalist voters. It did not stop nor even cause SF to falter in their pursuit of the SDLP. But when, nearly two decades later, the peace process opened up the possibility of electoral success south of the border, that convenient lie from 1982

The lie that Gerry will never be able to live down

The Sinn Féin leader retires today but his past just won't go away

SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Ed
Moloney

came back to torment Gerry Adams. In the South he was not dealing with an electorate incurably divided about the legitimacy of the State, but with a consensus-based society, a large slice of which saw Sinn Féin as an existential threat: in the case of Fine Gael, to the State itself; in the case of Fianna Fáil, to that party's monopoly of the republican vote.

Not only that, but Adams' own inconstant autobiography was reflected in Sinn Féin's political opportunism, one day appealing to the electorate with a radical, left-wing programme, the next presenting SF as the party of business, that had 'no problems with capitalism'. At other times Adams' own economic illiteracy served to depict SF as a party with no fixed beliefs beyond the Northern conflict.

And so, aided by a mostly hostile media, the Southern establishment turned on Adams, using his lie about his non-membership of the IRA to brand him a liar about everything, from economic policies to his links to the IRA and especially to its atrocities.

It was the IRA excesses south of the border that were the most damaging. The

'disappearance' of alleged informer Jean McConville, dumped in a secret grave on a beach at Carlingford Lough, in Co. Louth in 1972; of prison warder Brian Stack, fatally wounded by the IRA in 1983, whose killers were supposedly known to Adams; of Garda Detective Jerry McCabe, killed by the IRA in Co. Limerick in 1996 and whose killers' release was demanded by Sinn Féin; of father-of-seven Tom Oliver, killed as an informer by the IRA in Co. Louth in 1991 after an appeal for clemency was allegedly turned down by a well-known IRA and Sinn Féin leader.

And so the breakthrough south of the border never came. The results speak for themselves. One Dáil seat in 1997; five in 2002; four in 2007; 14 in 2011 and 23 in 2016, the centenary of the Rising. A 20-year journey to win 14% of the Dáil; it was barely enough to make Sinn Féin a minority candidate for coalition government, much less the senior partner.

Not only that. The Southern parties had watched the demise of the SDLP with trepidation. John Hume's party had embraced SF in the cause of peace only to be consumed,

like a spider eating its mate, no match for a partner with a Cheka-like intelligence wing. Would the same happen to them? Keep a safe distance seemed a wiser choice, a course that did Mícheál Martin no harm at all.

If Adams' denial of IRA membership back in 1982 was the wellspring of his failure there is an irony there. While Gerry Adams was most certainly an IRA member – and over some 40 years he has held nearly every IRA rank, from battalion commander to Chief of Staff – I have never, in all my research and interaction with the IRA, come across anyone who saw Adams actually fire a gun in anger, set the fuse of a bomb or press the button that would detonate it.

Gerry Adams was always a general, directing the battle from behind the lines, never a soldier on the front line. Brendan Hughes, his former closest friend in the IRA, first encountered him during a riot in the lower Falls at the start of the Troubles, supervising the throwing of stones and petrol bombs by young kids.

That would be his role with the IRA as well, planning and directing operations from the back room of a terraced house on the Springfield or Falls Road, meeting commanders and issuing orders. Surprisingly only a few have ever questioned his apparent reluctance to get his hands dirty; most recognised that in Adams they had a general with special strategic gifts who was more