



CNI

COMMENT -

Not helping when France is being terrorised is not neutrality

Nobody can be neutral in the face of merciless terror or injustice, says **Fergus Finlay**. You help, in whatever way you can.

LAST Friday night, I took part in a Concert for Paris in St Patrick's Cathedral. It happened because of a single Facebook post by one man, the conductor John Doyle, and because of the spontaneous reaction of dozens of musicians and singers around Ireland to the terrible things that had happened in Paris a week before.

There were a thousand people in the capacity audience. Musicians from the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and the Ulster Orchestra combined with individual players and 200 singers from 10

choirs to put on a seamless, spine-tingling performance.

I can't remember being present at a more powerful, moving occasion. Soaring classical music, wonderful singing, an enormous spirit of solidarity with the people who had been killed and bereaved — in Paris, yes, but also in Syria, Egypt, the Lebanon and elsewhere. Throughout the concert, there was an incredible sense that as regards terror and suffering, we're all on the same side.

But, later in the weekend, I watched Sunday's 9 O'Clock News on RTÉ. I found it hard to believe what I was seeing.

I know Ruth Coppinger doesn't do humour. At least, I've never seen the socialist TD crack a smile. But I honestly thought Mary Lou MacDonald was joking.

They were both responding to the possibility of Ireland being asked to help the French in their battle against Islamic State. Ms Coppinger's response was typically grim: "I think what we're seeing now is something that we warned against when the Lisbon Treaty was being debated in this country, that there were clauses there that

would require neutral countries, or small nations, to row in behind the big powers who wanted to intervene in imperial conflicts.”

And Mary Lou was as categorical: “We won’t support any action that comes under the mutual defence clause of the Lisbon Treaty. We believe that Irish neutrality needs to be protected. We will consider, very positively, anything coming from the United Nations.”

Throughout this week, President Hollande, of France, will criss-cross the world as he seeks to build a global alliance against the most serious and brutal terror threat the world has seen in many years. He is travelling in pursuit of a unanimous motion adopted by the United Nations Security Council, which (a) described Islamic State as representing a “global and unprecedented threat to international peace and security”, (b) that said IS retains the capacity and intent to carry out further atrocities, and (c) called on all member states “that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures, in compliance with international law, in particular international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law” ... to “eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of

Iraq and Syria”. I’m wondering what bit of that Mary Lou and Ruth Coppinger choose not to understand. What imperial conflict are they talking about? And what has Irish neutrality got to do with it? Does anyone really believe that there is room or space to be neutral where IS is concerned?

The questions only arise because the French government has reportedly asked Ireland to consider sending more troops to UN peace-keeping operations in Mali or the Lebanon (where we are already involved under UN mandates), in order that French troops could be moved out of both places, presumably to strengthen other French military operations.

If we agree, the decision will require a Dáil vote, because the deployment of Irish troops abroad always does. Any such vote should be unanimous. We need to play whatever small part we’re asked in ensuring that Islamic State safe havens are, in the words of the UN, eradicated.

But the signs are that the vote won’t be unanimous, unless we go through some charade of getting the United Nations to ask us, rather than respond to a request for help from one of our closest neighbours and allies.

That's because, apparently, if we respond to a French request, it will be through the mutual-assistance clauses of the Lisbon Treaty. If we respond to the same request, but from the UN, we'll be responding to our obligations as a UN member. One approach, it seems, compromises our neutrality; the other doesn't. The nature of the request doesn't matter — it's who asks us for help.

What absolute nonsense. If our friend and ally, France, needs help, and we're in a position to help, we must help. Getting involved in spurious nonsense about the language in which the request is couched would be utter hypocrisy. That sort of game-playing does more to undermine the spirit of neutrality than anything else.

We voted for the Lisbon Treaty. That treaty introduced a solidarity clause and a mutual-assistance clause. The solidarity clause can be invoked (to ask for our help) in situations where any member state is "the object of a terrorist attack or the victim of a natural or man-made disaster".

The mutual-assistance clause can come into play "if a member state is the victim of armed

aggression on its territory”. In those circumstances, the Treaty says, “other member states shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 [the right to self-defence] of the United Nations Charter”.

But the Treaty also says, quite specifically — and this was written in part at Ireland’s insistence — “this shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain member states”. In short, France has been attacked. It has the right to ask for our help, to whatever extent we can give it. We have an obligation to come to the aid of France, in whatever way we can.

In the face of a form of terrorism and aggression that knows no borders, and has no mercy, there is probably little doubt that we need to redefine what we mean by Irish neutrality. That may be a big debate, the sort of debate we need to have in a calmer atmosphere. We’ve played our part in the world, and been able to do it because we’ve always been seen as a non-aggressor. But nobody can be neutral in the face of merciless terror or injustice. Nobody can be neutral when their neighbour is being attacked.

Under the Lisbon Treaty, we can't be asked to join an imperial conflict, or to become the aggressor against anyone. Nobody is asking us to do either of those things. Nobody is asking us to row in behind the big powers so they can rule the world. Nobody is asking us to compromise anything. We're being asked to come to the assistance of a friend who has been wounded and hurt.

You don't grandstand at moments like that. You help, in whatever way you can. As a small country that's never taken an aggressive role in the world, the help we'll be able to give is modest enough. But we have to give it.

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