



CNI

COMMENT - Cs of I - churches of irrelevance?

Silent churches whilst international and domestic crises abound - writes Houston McKelvey

Recently Lord Richards warned about the direction Russia was going under Putin. The situation in Crimea and Ukraine has been well high-lighted in the media. So too has the buildup of NATO forces in defence of Poland and several of the smaller Baltic nations which were liberated when the USSR collapsed. The Iron Curtain which split Germany may have disappeared but something similar in mentality, politics and military alignment has emerged but located much further to the east where there is no equivalence of the old BAOR defence - the

British Army on the Rhine - with its legion of bases, forces and machinery.

The pressure exerted on the United Kingdom by the USA and some Westminster politicians to ensure that 2% of the national budget is actually spent on defence was undergirded by Lord Richard's recent statement and concern.

I doubt that the majority of church leaders in Ireland would recognise Lord Richards either by title or by his professional record. He was until a few months ago, the very top man in the UK's armed services. If he is concerned about the defence of the West and the UK in particular, any sane person should be likewise concerned.

The other major international issue impacting, apart from the unforeseeable outcomes of Greek debt which makes the Republic's disastrous national overspend seem remarkably cautious, is that of Britain's possible exit from the EC. Admittedly there are still a few thousand gallons of water to flow down the Thames past the Palace of Westminster before the referendum,

but there are already assembled in that place a considerable number of MPs who wish this exit to happen and who consider it would be in the best interests of the UK.

Figures will be bandied with greater zeal as the arguments and their lobbying groups develop further. It has been stated that only 5% of UK businesses trade with the EC and that is too low a figure in comparison to the major national contribution paid by the UK to a body which seems to be productive principally in producing regulations, most of which could readily be left to national governments.

What commenced as a free trade area with associated arrangements, it is argued, seems to have become a meddlesome bureaucratic and democratically unaccountable machine driven by unelected people who are following their own agenda. Be that as it may be, or may be contended, what cannot be ignored is that a Brit exit will impact throughout Ireland and on all the churches of Ireland.

So, there are two major international issues facing those of us who live in Northern Ireland. The defence of the realm and the relationship with the EC.

Closer to home for those living in Northern Ireland is the total mess at Stormont over the budget. The facts and the reality are simple. There is no more money from Westminster. Sinn Fein and the SDLP may wish to think it will come, but to maintain matters as they are currently a mere 600 million pounds is required. The Nationalist parties economic policies seem to have more in common with Athens than Dublin, never mind Belfast or Westminster.

Arlene Foster in presenting the so-called “fantasy” budget said the administration was looking at a 600 million blackhole. The acceptance of the “fantasy” budget has simply deferred the inevitable crisis until after a totally debilitating and inevitable sequence of financial restrictions on public spending occur . Public services simply cannot be maintained without the implementation of welfare and other cuts.

The Secretary of State has said several times in very unambiguous language that frontline services will be hit soon without a welfare deal.

Getting one's head around a 600 million figure is difficult for most people. One commentator has explained the benefits problem this way. There are 6,500 families in Northern Ireland receiving an average of 30,700 pounds per year on benefits. That is the equivalent of a 40,000 pound yearly salary. The average industrial wage in Northern Ireland is in the region of 19,000 to 20,000 pounds. It is fair to ask as some have - "Why should those people working to earn 19,000 to 20,000 pounds pay tax to pay their neighbours who do not work over 30,000 pounds?"

The sector to feel the cuts in a most open and quantifiable manner is that of university education. Queen's University has to lose 236 posts and 290 student places. The University of Ulster has to lose 210 posts this year and 1,200 student places over the next 3 years. The UU's budget from DEL is to drop from a projected 89

million pounds to 70.7 million for the coming year. Professor Alistair Adair, the Dean of the Belfast campus of the UU, said, “The Executive is disinvesting in our young people”. Professor Deirdre Hennan from the Derry campus said, “We are now presiding over a diminishing higher education sector in Northern Ireland”.

The results are easily identifiable:

- More young people will leave Northern Ireland
- The world beating researchers we need in our universities to attract bright doctoral students will be disinclined to come here, this in turn will affect the universities’ rankings
- The knowledge based economy which is needed to drive this community in a global marketplace will be much more difficult to achieve, and the economic contribution it in turn would make to social services will be unavailable.

Another indicator of the dire state of affairs is that the newly founded education body for NI has offered all non-teaching staff the possibility of unpaid leave for July and August. It has also

had to make swingeing cuts to its school estate maintenance, the impact of which will hit classroom standards.

I have looked for comment on these areas from church leaders and the boards of the various churches. Was there a Word from the Lord?

Perhaps I have missed such guidance and concern being articulated - but sadly, I don't think so.

These are the issues in the real world where the rubber hits the road. Where are those voices who would claim that the gospel is relevant to every aspect of life? Where is the gospel critique of government and the affairs of nations? Where is the concern for the system which affects the daily life of the churches' adherents and their fellow citizens?

Who will be appointed to meet the disappointed staff and students of our universities? Who will lay the gospel claims upon

our dysfunctional politicians? Who will speak up for the need to defend democracy abroad and at home? The defence of the state has protected our belief systems.

From where is the “evangelical zeal” for taking the gospel into the market place to emanate?

But hang in there... the diocese of Down and Dromore is resourcing and has appointed a panel to look into the Old Testamental interpretations of the Royal Black Preceptory...

That will not stop Mr Putin in his tracks... that will not challenge those responsible for Stormont’s financial meltdown with its direct impacts which are already destroying society in a way the PIRA’s bombing and murder campaigns never did.

This July 1 anniversary of the Irish contribution to western freedom would be an appropriate date for a change of approach by the churches on this island. Perhaps Down and

Dromore within whose boundaries Stormont is situate could give a lead.

Houston McKelvey