



CNI

An Editor's Journal, March 6

A substantial elephant in the Irish Brexit room - Of Phoenix choirs and fishing - Children's Ministry and most welcome visitors... Houston McKelvey writes

A substantial elephant in the Irish Brexit room

The Irish Ambassador to the UK, or to give the posting its rightful title, to the Court of St. James, recently took issue with Simon Heffer, a right of centre columnist in the Sunday Telegraph, over his remarks on Brexit and the Irish border.

Being a long term reader of said Heffer, I would not hesitate to say, "Your Excellency you may not like his style or viewpoint but he has a track record which demonstrates his knack of

putting his finger on spots others pretend are not there”.

For example, commenting on the threat of Scots Nationalists voting to leave the UK to affiliate with the EU, Heffer said in summary - Let Mrs Sturgeon take her 3.5 million people and let Westminster spend the money which it sends north of the border to a similar size of population in England, like Yorkshire.

Such a sentiment about Scotland by a columnist who is read by Westminster decision makers, should be a cause of greater reflection by those demanding a similar referendum or strategy in Northern Ireland.

I say this against a background of personal failure. Despite an extensive search over the past couple of years, I have not discovered any financial assessment by any Nationalist party in Northern Ireland, or by any Irish politician, party or government south of the border as to how they would finance Northern Ireland at the generous level the UK government does using the ring-fenced Barnett formula. I noted that in the few opinion polls conducted in the Republic there was consistently a majority supporting unification, but in tandem there was always a

majority stating that they were not willing to pay for it...

Those who are pushing their agenda in Northern Ireland, or in the Republic, to set aside the UK majority vote for Brexit in order to forward Irish unity or to maintain a status for Northern Ireland within the EU, might be better advised to let the Scottish nationalists progress their cause and monitor the consequences of the same before taking a similar path. Why risk pain when others are willing to pilot the course? Learning by observing the efforts of others is reasonable practice, and one which the old Stormont did advantageously within the UK in key areas such as education.

However, there are three substantial and salient facts which from the outset can be recognised regarding the granting of Mrs. Sturgeon's desires.

1. In terms of a monetary system if Scotland (and it is a big IF) was accepted into the EU, as Mrs. Sturgeon desires, Scotland would have to use the Euro. That is the established EU standard. There is no opt out clause for new members on this issue. With the state of finances in Greece and some other EU states, the Eurozone brings its own peculiar problems.

The Euro is an overvalued currency that would wreck what was left of Scotland's economy as it has those of so many weaker EU countries. In addition it would also create two monetary systems in what is now Great Britain.

2. It should not be assumed that all of the 27 EU nations would vote to accept a breakaway region of a state. It is easily predictable that Spain would veto same. Why? Spain has its own problem territory. Catalonia has wanted self-governing independence; a development which Spain has resolutely resisted. And there are other similar situations in other EU member states. Any application to join requires the support of all existing 27 EU members states and a breakaway part of a former member state is unlikely to attract the required unanimity.

3. An inflow of financial support to Scotland from the EU's central coffers cannot be assumed. There are many regions in the EU whose financial state is much more perilous than that of Scotland, and they will be first in line to attract assistance from Bruxelles under already established criteria. When the Republic of Ireland joined the EU it received a higher percentage of subsidy than it does today due to the extension of the EU eastwards into less developed member countries, who all had their

hands out. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Scotland would have to join the queue of small countries hoping to salve their inherent economic weaknesses by relying on German handouts.

With Sinn Fein flexing its muscles on Brexit north of the border, and a government which may be on its last legs south of the border, where is wise counsel to come from?

10 Downing Street might not be the worst of options in the circumstances. The Sturgeon option seems to indicate that she would prefer economic and political subjugation to Bruxelles rather than Westminster. It is difficult not to draw the same conclusion about Sinn Fein and its fellow travellers in Ireland on Brexit.

Of Phoenix choirs and fishing

On social media from time to time one comes across a gem which rekindles memories. One such was a recent Facebook posting about a concert promoted by the Music Society of St Nicholas Parish Church, Belfast. Following through to the society's web site, on it there was a photograph of a beautiful segment of a

memorial window to a former rector, the Venerable Jack Mercer, also sometime Archdeacon of Connor.

In his time as rector, that part of the city was more populous and with a much younger youth constituency. A two storey hall was erected to cope with burgeoning youth organisations and it included a verandah style alcove on one side to provide shelter for those waiting to play on the lawn tennis courts in the hall grounds.

This was in the days when bishops and dignitaries such as archdeacons wore gaiters and frock coats on formal occasions. I see the said archdeacon being towered over, as most of us were, by the gaitered figure of our Bishop, Cyril Elliot.

The reasons are a story for another day, but I managed to stave off any selection process for pre-ordination training until the last possible moment, in a short interval between completing written final exams at Queens and the oral defence of a thesis. One of the selectors on the panel was none other than Archdeacon Jack. He knew my home parish and that the Sixmile river flowed through it from the hills behind Larne to where it emptied out into Lough Neagh at Antrim.

He turned the chat around to fly fishing. Now the occasions on which I cast a fly on the river were few and far between. But frequently I had walked its banks with a fellow parishioner, a First World War veteran, who was one of the best. So I was able to inform the fly fishing archdeacon where the better runs or streams were below the sections where basalt rocks broke the surface and the fish dallied on their upstream journey.

Apparently one of the selectors was tasked with finding out about the breadth of each candidate's interests. Twas a good job we stuck to fly fishing, but I never had the courage to ask Jack did he ever catch anything on that river.

The article which drew my attention was a notice of a concert by the Belfast Phoenix Choir in St Nicholas Church. Emulating the Glasgow Orpheus founded in 1901 and its 're-branding' in 1951 as the Glasgow Phoenix as a tribute to their founding conductor who had died, the Belfast Phoenix likewise had a previous title. It was the Belfast Ormiston Choir.

In 1936 William Boyd, choirmaster of Kirkpatrick Presbyterian Church decided to form a choir with members from his own church and the local area. He chose a local name and so the Ormiston Choir was born. The choir flourished

under his leadership and he remained its conductor until his death in 1988.

The Facebook note recalled that the members wanted the choir to continue and so they approached Ron Porter and asked him to take over as choirmaster. It was felt that the name "Ormiston" should always be associated with Mr. Boyd so the choir was renamed and the Belfast Phoenix Choir was born.

I knew Ron as Ronnie, a faithful lay clerk for several decades of Belfast Cathedral. And I knew him before I had any clerical responsibility for said place. But when I had, it was easy to deliver his widow Mary's gentle request that a small brass plaque be placed on the north side choir stalls where Ronnie had stood to sing. I still see her gently stroking the panel. They were good people.

At the Phoenix rostrum Ronnie was followed by James Jones, Maurice Carson and Mark Mooney-Burns. Dr Emma Gibbons of St. George's took over directing the choir in 2010 until she was appointed Director of Music in Newport Cathedral, Wales in Jan 2015. The choir are now delighted to have Mark McGrath as their Musical Director.

Accompanist James McConnell, who is presently studying for a Masters in Music at Queens, is Organ Scholar at Fisherwick Presbyterian Church, Belfast and organist at Clonard Church, Belfast.

Belfast Phoenix Choir is a community-based choir bringing music to the hearts and souls of people through concerts and church praise services.

The choir is always delighted to welcome new members. Rehearsals are on Tuesday evenings at 7.30 pm in Shaftesbury Sq. Reformed Presbyterian Church Hall, Dublin Road. If you are interested in joining, please contact Christine Olver, Secretary, on 07462643412 or Jennifer Elliott, Chairperson, on 07920828608

Children's Ministry and most welcome visitors

I was delighted to read that the 2017 Children's Ministry Network Conference was held in the Gold Coast Hotel in Dungarvan last week. I had the good fortune to be a member of that network when serving as Secretary to the C of I Board of Education for N.Ireland.

The Network is sponsored by Churches together in Britain and Ireland and is made up of members from various reform traditions across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

It exists to bring together all those with national responsibility for work with children in denominations and Christian agencies who are in sympathy with the aims and objectives of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

Over the years the CM Network (or CMG Childrens Ministry Group as it was previously) has been responsible for producing several seminal documents and being the trail blazer in key areas of church life. "The Child and the Church Report" is still as relevant as when it was first published. Basically it stressed that the children are not the church of tomorrow, they are the church of today and as baptised members their spiritual needs and their contributions need to be upheld in the local church community of which they are part.

Arising out of that report a few years later came "Understanding Christian Nurture". Its message also is still relevant. What are the activities, examples and influences which promote growth in the Christian faith?

There was much more to the group than producing such reports. There was the business of supporting each other, sharing insights on new resources and most importantly sharing insights on emerging issues. One such was that of preparing the churches for child protection obligations.

This Conference in Dungarvan took account of the area and reflected on local experiences of Christian witness and faith nurture and, through conversations with local people, input from visiting speakers and visits to contemporary expressions of worship and work among children, explore the influence of time and place on how each of us meet the challenge of nurturing children in the faith.

Houston McKelvey
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