



CNI

PRESS WATCH - Northern Ireland needs to revolutionise itself – but becoming a united Ireland isn't the answer

People calling for a united Ireland like to think of themselves as being revolutionary, like a pasty Che Guevera, but the real transformation would be in breaking down the barriers that we construct between our children, Michael Hugh Walker writes in The Independent

The recent **Northern** Ireland elections threw up a lot of potential stories, but the idea that it pointed to the country's inescapable fate of a united **Ireland** is entirely without merit. I am a 24 year old Northern Irish man, and far from being inevitable, as a recent (and very successful) Independent article recently suggested, it continues to be a fantasy that there will be a **united Ireland in my lifetime**.

Firstly, there are the polls. In November 2015, BBC and RTE jointly ran a substantial survey which asked if a united Ireland meant higher taxes, would you support it in your life time – in Northern Ireland, only 11 per cent supported a united Ireland; in the Republic of Ireland, only 31 per cent.

The reason higher taxes would be inevitable is because we are hugely subsidised by Westminster, in a way that Dublin simply could not afford to do. The distance between the amount of money raised through tax revenues that we give back to Westminster and what Westminster gives us in public funding is called the fiscal deficit. Currently, in the last available figures for 2013-14, it has hit an all-time high – it stood at £9.2bn. This is the cheque that the UK has to pick up through subvention and it is what, in a united Ireland, Dublin would need to pick up – if they think water charges are bad, a united Ireland would make that look like a drop in the ocean.

The fiscal deficit also highlights how EU membership cannot counteract the loss of UK support. Equally, the idea that leaving the EU will see a Trump-style wall with the rest of Ireland is farcical – a hard and extremely damaging border,

yes, but a physical wall, no (see Norway-Sweden border).

Secondly, the idea that the Sinn Fein electoral surge points to a united Ireland is misguided. A far higher percentage of people voted for a unionist/loyalist party (48 per cent) than voted for a nationalist/republican party (36 per cent).

Thirdly, if there is ever to be a united Ireland, then its proponents need to convert people like me to its cause – moderate, liberal unionists who were strong Remain voters. But there has been no attempt to; for something supposedly “inevitable”, none of the big questions have been answered. How will the country exist economically? Will there be a devolved government still in Belfast? Will there be a right of people in the six counties to get a British passport? How would the “Orange” culture be protected?

This country does needs to transform – not into a united Ireland, but into a united Northern Ireland.

If those who get furious at the idea of a united Ireland want to prevent it, there is one simple thing they need to do – compromise. Allowing a proper discussion about how we legislatively

protect the Irish language in Northern Ireland would be a good start. If you're wondering why the Sinn Fein vote sky-rocketed, look at how the DUP treated the Irish language.

While proponents are talking about road signs in Irish, and court cases, I would rather see it ensure that every school in Northern Ireland, across its segregated divide, would learn Irish in their first year. It is things like that that would be truly revolutionary.

Or what about ensuring that all Protestant and Catholic schools share sports pitches, so children from opposite communities play in the same teams? Catholic kids having an opportunity to play rugby; Protestant kids learning their Gaelic sports. What about a Northern Irish flag and anthem that could be accepted by everyone who lives in the six counties, regardless of whether they have a Irish or British passport?

People calling for a united Ireland like to think of themselves as being revolutionary, like a pasty Che Guevera, but the real transformation would be in breaking down the barriers that we construct between our children through their schooling. That would be more attainable and

more beneficial for the people who live here than ending partition ever could be.

We are sitting three years away from the 100 year anniversary of Northern Ireland; this beautiful place has never before enjoyed such peace or economic prosperity. The idea that now is the time to dismantle Northern Ireland when we are so close to achieving a strong, prosperous society is idiotic.

++++++

First published in The Independent, March 9, 2017

++++++

The inclusion of an article in Press Watch does not imply endorsement by CNI. Rather it is an endeavour to present articles from a variety of view points for consideration by CNI readers.

++++++