



CNI

PRESSS WATCH -

Are there really 150,000 unionists who are persuadable for a united Ireland?

Last month's blog was based on a most interesting conversation with the widely-read unionist commentator Alex Kane, in which he estimated that there were now 150,000 'soft' unionists who were persuadable of the merits of Irish unity, and that he expected to see this outcome in his lifetime, Andy Pollak writes on his 2 Irelands blog.

This month I am going to cast a cold eye on this surprising thesis and ask about Kane's evidence for it. In an *Irish Times* article three weeks after that conversation, he wisely omitted any figures and the 'unity in my lifetime' comment. But he repeated that in a post-Brexit Border Poll, Remain-voting unionists "may conclude that a bigger broader union embracing Ireland and the

European Union is preferable to a smaller, narrower union of the UK out on its own.” He said “the next five years will represent the biggest challenge to the union in my lifetime.”¹

So what is the evidence for the 150,000 unionists who may now be ‘soft’ on the idea of a united Ireland? The first thing I should say is that in nearly 40 years of living in and regularly travelling to the North, I have never met a single unionist who has told me s/he has changed her/his mind and is now in favour of unity. And as a Dublin-resident, northern-born Protestant (and proud Irish citizen), I regularly put that question to unionist friends and relatives.

I put it again to three moderate, thoughtful unionist friends in recent weeks. Trevor Ringland, Belfast solicitor, former international rugby player and worker for cross-community reconciliation, was unperturbed by the Brexit vote. He continues to believe that the present post-Belfast.

Agreement political structures, with some minor changes, are “probably the solution to the ‘Irish Question’ for the foreseeable future and perhaps forever. We should focus on building relationships in Northern Ireland and across this island and these islands, essentially uniting

people first and foremost even if constitutionally we remain apart.”

David Campbell, Ulster Unionist Party grandee and David Trimble’s chief of staff in the talks which led to the Belfast Agreement, is equally unworried. For his community, Irish unity is “not on our radar screen at all. I don’t know a single unionist, including those who voted to remain in the EU, who would remotely consider a united Ireland.” He believes that if there was another Northern Assembly election (as opposed to a British general election) in the near future, there would be “a massive vote for the DUP to keep Sinn Fein out, and this would probably impact again negatively on the Ulster Unionists.”

Among the younger generation, Brian John Spencer, a 29 year old artist and video maker (who calls himself an Irish unionist and recently travelled through Ireland’s 32 counties in 32 days, doing a painting in each one), has a softer view. He thinks Irish unity might become more attractive to some unionists if its principal spokesman was not Gerry Adams. “He’s the worst front man a united Ireland could have. He conjurs up ancestral fear and loathing among Protestant unionists that is similar to Cromwell for

Catholic nationalists. If the political leader making the argument was a balanced, cosmopolitan figure like Michael McDowell (who has said there is an “under appreciation” of the Orange tradition in Ireland) – or Leo Varadkar or Micheál Martin – the kind of middle-class, rugby-playing people I went to school with might find it more acceptable.”

I agree completely that Gerry Adams is a major blockage to persuading unionists of the merits of unity. He is somebody – unlike Martin McGuinness, I would suggest – who is utterly uninterested in reconciliation *within* Northern Ireland as a necessary precursor to all-Ireland reconciliation and unity. What motivates Adams is the realpolitik of demographic arithmetic, the persuasion of just enough Northern Protestants to join the growing Catholic nationalist population to vote for unity in a Border Poll, thus pushing the result over the fateful 50% mark in order to trigger the British government’s Belfast Agreement pledge to move towards unity. And damn the consequent unionist backlash.

This is the numbers game: traditional, ugly and unadorned. This is the republican aim of *Tiocfaidh ár La* (‘Our Day will Come’) being

achieved not through violence, but through nationalists outbreeding and outsmarting unionists. That wise commentator Olivia O’Leary, who knows the North well from her time covering it in the violent 1970s and 1980s, referred to this when commenting recently on the unionist parties losing their parliamentary majority in last month’s Assembly election for the first time since partition. “Catholics winning the population game” made her “deeply uncomfortable”, she said.² Agriculture Minister Michael Creed made the same point in a sharp radio exchange with Fianna Fail TD Niamh Smyth, who had welcomed the growth of the nationalist vote in the North, commenting that he found “this sort of sectarian headcount approach profoundly depressing.”

Depressing or not, this is what we can expect from Sinn Fein for the foreseeable future. That’s why Adams and his little Tyrone henchwoman, Michelle O’Neill, are delighted with the prospect of another election on 8th June. With the unionists currently in some disarray and Sinn Fein’s popular vote only 1,200 behind the DUP, the more elections the better as far as they are concerned, until the day when their vote inches ahead of the DUP’s, and they can, with complete

legitimacy, demand a Border Poll. That is also why I believe we will not see any quick return to a power-sharing Executive. Adams and company have bigger all-Ireland fish in mind.

However Sinn Fein should not count those fishes too soon. I suggest that the figure for Northern Protestants – not unionists – deciding to vote for unity in a Border Poll is likely to be under 50,000. I arrive at this calculation by taking the non-voting children away from the 70,000 who declared themselves Protestant and nationalist in the 2011 Northern Ireland census, and adding a few thousand ‘change of mind’ unionists . This is insufficient to push the vote over 50% (even assuming that the vast majority of Catholics and nationalists vote for unity, which is not a given).

That said, there are other small straws in the wind. I heard recently about a leading member of a small unionist party with loyalist paramilitary connections who resigned after tweeting that she was now in favour of a united Ireland.

One thing I do agree with Alex Kane about is that Brexit will change everything. As he says in his *Irish Times* article, a post-Brexit Border Poll would centre around the following question: “Do

you support a united Ireland (inside the European Union, protective of a multiplicity of identities and supported by the Republic's political/business establishment) or do you support the union (outside the EU, possibly diminished by the departure of Scotland, and with the rise of a new form of English nationalism which will have no interest in the Celtic fringes)? All this sudden talk of a united Ireland reminds me of the astonishment and unpreparedness of the great majority of German people at the prospect of immediate unity following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. That will be nothing compared to the unpreparedness of the 'switched off' people of the Republic of Ireland if unity with the deeply fractious, potentially violent and economically parasitical North suddenly appears on the horizon. Truly, powerful outside events rather than unthinking inside opinion more often than not shape the fate of nations.

PS What is there fresh to say about Theresa May's announcement of a British general election on 8th June? With customary total British insouciance towards its Northern Irish province, this shows the most abominable timing – as the North's politicians are once again trying to cobble together a way to learn jointly to govern the

place. It will be the most bitter and divisive election for years, with huge pressure on the moderate elements in the two blocs, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP, to go into pacts with the larger extreme parties to maximise the tribal vote. We have truly fallen back into the sectarian swamp since the hopeful days of renewed and improved consensus government following the last Stormont election just 12 short months ago.

1 *Irish Times*, 14 April

2 RTE Drivetime. 4 April

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