



CNI

PRESS WATCH - Shameless Stormont has only itself to blame for this mess

Around about 1997-98, a whole twenty years ago, the ambition that helped steer negotiations was a Stormont with fairness built into it; a practical civics class, that in time might bolster the shaky peace with the beginnings of reconciliation, Fionnuala O Connor writes in The Irish News

As the parties worked together to deliver devolved government it would encourage civility between politicians, between nationalists and unionists and even republicans. A new Stormont could just about be sold to unionists, with nationalists and republicans deciding to make the best of it.

Look at it now. Shamelessness as well as sheer old-fashioned bigotry did the damage, the cavalcade of scandals along those grand corridors and down the marble staircase; Red

Sky, Nama, Renewable Heating. Raking in expenses proved the most sizeable cross-community, civic-type enterprise. Not that the biggest parties openly cooperated, even there, except to agree without ever saying so that nobody would pay back a penny.

The best that can be said for the devolved institution is that it gave the media here the opportunity to do a good job, indeed that sheer Stormont shamelessness nudged investigations into being. This paper, several sections of the BBC, the News Letter, occasionally the Belfast Telegraph, have demonstrated more civic spirit in single stories, in series and programmes than the entire duration of devolution to date.

Michelle O'Neill is making a good start by sounding direct and civil at the same time, surely not much to ask but refreshing, after the past few months, and welcome. How she thinks a workable new Stormont can be sorted out inside three weeks after the election, though, is a mystery. Why she thinks it needs to be done swiftly is almost as mysterious. Unless on reflection she does agonise, about the health service in the hands of civil servants without a minister to ask questions.

‘Direct rule,’ said a smart, lively, retired social worker in conversation the other day, ‘will do us rightly.’ It is of course what unionists twenty years back would have preferred to sharing power at Stormont, or having to pretend to share power, but this was no unionist.

Nationalists in general feel no warmth about the likes of James Brokenshire assuring the population of Northern Ireland that he knows their feelings. But when another stretch with Sinn Féin/DUP is the alternative, faceless Westminster arrivals seem less offensive.

O’Neill’s negotiating team might be desperately light and there may be few enough lines worked out. The imminent collapse of a Dublin government has no doubt been bad for concentration. Who can imagine their supporters are telling them to get back up those steps and into those offices pronto?

One good thing about an election campaign post-Stormont collapse, is that people are talking about basic differences. Nothing, arguably, engages people as much as ignorant opposition. The DUP and Arlene Foster have arguably done more for Irish through sheer bad manners than the Republic’s years of bureaucratic, cold-hearted support.

Half-awareness, buried feelings; Foster hoked it to the surface. That questionnaire on ability in spoken Irish in these pages yesterday was fascinating in several ways, including the civility of most unionists.

Stormont has ended with a bang, at least temporarily, not from any cool Sinn Féin analysis of how modest the achievements of ten years had been – except for those immodest expenses. The bang came from a bad case of first ministerial hubris, and exasperated grassroots.

But the DUP's MLA class must still be in shock at the fallout from the Renewable Heating Incentive, as well as fears for the future. There must be something like embarrassment at disintegration of their image as being steered by smart young things, so much more clued-up than the SF advisers who owed their jobs to time served.

The outgoing DUP team may have seemed incapable of blushing. To judge from Foster's awkward broadcasts on the campaign trail, there has been an amount of panicky re-adjustment.

Knocking doors and meeting people helps some politicians to hang on to illusions about the next phase: 'they said they'd give me their vote!'

Unless faithful voters until this point have been refusing to answer doors and showing signs of intending not to vote for anyone this time.

Now the picture of devolution as an extinct parrot may be dawning in unionist minds, as it did for nationalists some time ago. The bland Brokenshire chairing negotiations is a queasy thought, though discovering Stormont has lost its allure for one side might ruffle his surface.

In the contemplation of politics these days, you take comfort wherever you can find it.

Fionnuala O Connor In The Irish News February 21, 2017