

Two Flags and No Clue

On Wednesday the 5th May, I emerged from conducting a series of interviews, and checked my phone for news and emails. I had been occupied for around five hours, which is a long time in Northern Irish politics. However, I was unprepared for the image of two, Irish flags flying from Stormont buildings, and the nuclear fallout which resulted.

‘Someone’, possibly contractors, had hung the Irish Tricolour, and a United Irishmen flag, from the flagpoles at Stormont buildings on Wednesday. Both flags flew for around ten minutes before being spotted and subsequently removed. As with many things on this island, the act itself was relatively banal, but what it symbolizes, and how it is interpreted, is important for understanding where we are at as a post-Agreement, yet deeply divided, society.

Firstly, the divergent reactions to the flying of these flags reveal much about the attitudes of political elites and indeed, the divisions within Northern Irish society. After the Belfast Telegraph ran the story, the majority of commentators derided Unionism for calling for an investigation, and stated that there were other, more important problems to consider.



The politicians can be demarcated in this analysis, as they are in Stormont itself, along sectarian lines. Unionists, united it seemed, for the first time in months, took great offence at the act, decried it as criminal and provocative, and demanded an inquiry.

Nationalists, contrastingly, shrugged off the flag issue as inconsequential and Gerry Kelly, that well-known moderate and mediator, accused Unionism of “hysteria” and as having an irrational focus on the “wrong issues”, given the salience of Welfare Reform, and resultant existential crisis, which the Executive is currently facing.

Two points are implicit in Kelly’s comments. The first is that flags do not matter, therefore anyone who does see value in respecting a flag, or experiences positive or negative emotions when faced with particular flags, is operating under misplaced, nationalistic delusions, and really ought to consider more pressing, economic matters, should they wish to be taken seriously. Linked to this is the belief that Unionists should not, therefore, be taken seriously.

The second is that Unionism as a whole is reactionary, and by extension of this, less politically mature and adept than Republicanism. Both of these things tell us a lot about Sinn Fein's attitude towards Unionism as a political ideology, in that they see it as an unfortunate obstacle to the 'Irish awakening', which we will all, of course, undergo eventually, prior to our willing incorporation into a United Ireland.

This patronizing and demeaning disposition, whilst morally repugnant, goes some way toward explaining Sinn Fein's ungenerous treatment of Unionists, in the December 2012 Union flag debacle, in Wednesday's provocative comments, and more broadly, since 2007, when the 'new ascendancy' of Sinn Fein and the DUP, clumsily took the reins of power. Not only do Sinn Fein dislike Unionism, they also fail to understand it, and consequently fail to recognize it as a legitimate, political position.

What is ironic however, is that for the Shinnners, who have honed and crafted their own nationalist mythology, flags probably do matter. No doubt, if a vote supported flying the Tricolour at Belfast City Hall, we would see Gerry et al celebrating the symbolic victory of further 'greening' the former bastion of Unionist political and economic power, and consolidating Republicanism's place in the new Northern Ireland.



Therefore, Kelly is being deliberately disingenuous, in order to present himself and his party as serious politicians, and Unionists as flag-waving imbeciles. I'm not sure if claiming you are better at politics than the DUP is anything to boast about, but the Shinnners clearly need to take their victories where they can find them.

Indeed, there is some truth in what Kelly said. Viewing Unionist as reactionary is not an unreasonable position to take, given the lack of proactive and independent policy ideas emerging from the Unionist camp. Robinson refusing to sign the Haass Agreement because "McGuinness seemed very eager to sign it, therefore something must be up", is a depressingly accurate example of how we do politics here. If 'they' want something, it must be bad for 'us'.

Further, these perspectives on Unionist short-sightedness are voiced by the Unionist people, and fairly regularly. Much of the complaints which emanate from the electorate are that Unionism has no strategy, and tends to be pushed and pulled by the various crises which we manufacture for ourselves here in

Northern Ireland. However, that should not distract us from the fact that a substantial number of those crises are engineered by Republicanism, and for reasons which I will now outline.



Sinn Féin willingly entered into government with the DUP, on the understanding that power-sharing was a pragmatic solution to the ethno-sectarian divide. Since then, there has been little evidence of the development of a respectful, healthy politics between the two.

The question I have for Republicans is: why the small-scale, amateur attempts at winding Unionists up? Is it, perhaps because, you have found yourselves in power, ten months away from the hundredth centenary of the Easter Rising, with no idea where to go from here?

I have heard much reference to a 'New Ireland', an 'Agreed Ireland', and an 'Ireland of Equals'. These abstractions, with their implicit benefits, are regularly doled out to Republican voters, to reassure them that *this is not it*. McGuinness sitting alongside Robinson is not where the Shinner train stops. A United Ireland *will come*.

But how? And when? Who will vote for it? And what will it look like? Because, despite the demographic changes, which the esteemed and benevolent Gerry Kelly so graciously displayed in his electoral leaflets, support for the Union has *increased* steadily since 2007, when 48% of Catholics wanted unification, compared to 2013's figure of just 28%.

	%		
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion
to remain part of the United Kingdom with direct rule	4	17	10
to remain part of the United Kingdom with devolved government To remain part of the united kingdom with devolved government	35	72	61
Or, to reunify with the rest of Ireland?	47	3	21
Independent state	6	4	3
Other answer	1	1	0
Don't know	7	3	5

Professor Peter Shirlow refers to this attitudinal change as down to the “settlement”, which gave Catholics the rights and opportunities which they desired, and so removing the need to alter the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. However, that figure of just over a quarter looks positive when compared with the Protestant support for a united Ireland, which was sitting at 2% as of 2013 (Northern Ireland Life and Times online).

	%		
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion
...to remain part of the United Kingdom, with direct rule	6	19	15
...to remain part of the United Kingdom, with devolved government	46	66	50
or, to reunify with the rest of Ireland?	28	2	11
(Independent state)	8	3	6
Other answer (specify)	1	1	1
Don't know	12	8	16

How do Sinn Fein plan to persuade the reluctant, or downright opposed, 98% of Protestants, and 72% of Catholics? By continuing to pursue a schizophrenic, inconsistent approach to policymaking across the island of Ireland? Anti-austerity in the Republic, and, for the most part, implementing Tory austerity in NI? By taunting and insulting Unionists as a grouping, criticizing their attachment to the Union flag, and working, where possible, to block parades from progressing?

As a Unionist voter, I can only assume that life in a united Ireland, with Sinn Fein in power, would be very unpleasant indeed. Given their silence on what shape this Ireland would take, and how we, the irrational, but nonetheless resident, minority, would be welcomed, all we have to go on is their conduct towards Unionists to date.

In addition to this inconvenient survey data, the recent Westminster elections brought bad news for Republicans. Sinn Fein’s vote share dropped for the first time since 1987, with the Ulster Unionist Party emerging as the victors of the election. Furthermore, the votes for ‘other’ parties, that is, Alliance, the Greens, and People Before Profit, and UKIP, increased. These parties sit outside of the ‘Orange and Green’, and they too, would have to be persuaded of the merits of Irish unification.

Finally, there have been some symbolic blows to the Republican psyche in the past year, which have perhaps derailed their grand plans for 2016, and all it promised to bring. Firstly, Gerry Carroll took a West Belfast seat in 2014, no mean feat in Gerry Adam’s former fiefdom. The people of West Belfast, it appears, are disillusioned with what the Shinnners have to offer the working classes, and would prefer to lend their support to a new, genuinely socialist, candidate.

Looking east, toward the mainland, it might also be worrying Sinn Féin, that for all their supposed political capital, their tight party discipline, and their elastic approach to “talking to the Brits”, the SNP brought the Union closer to dissolution through democratic argument and persuasion, than the Shinnners ever did through force.

Switching from the Armalite to the ballot box has brought Sinn Féin into Stormont. But that appears to be the upper limit of political Republicanism’s reach. This might be why, then, such attention is paid to the ‘small victories’ of irritating Unionists, given that they have failed to achieve their objectives, and are now “the Establishment”, which they once criticized so fiercely.

Sophie Long