

## Beál na Blath – August 2023

Thank you for the invitation.

I'm honoured by it. I hope I can say something useful.

I admire Christy Moore.

At 78 he's getting better.

His song that's a guiding star to me is *North and South of the River*.

It includes the lines

*'there is no feeling so alone as when the one you are hurting is your own...'*

On this very road, one hundred and one years ago during a gun battle with former colleagues, Michael Collins was shot and mortally wounded.

When we gather here, we are acutely conscious of that time when friends became foes and as many as two thousand lives were ended prematurely.

Our civil war from June 1922 to May 1923 included assassinations, executions, bombings, robberies and the wholesale destruction of infrastructure and property.

As well as the deaths, the conflict created deep emotional and physical wounds.

Thankfully the guns went silent in the summer of 1923.

With the amnesty that followed was an unspoken, unwritten sense that the full truth about who did what might never be fully told.

Last year, the centenary of Béal na Bláth, the leaders of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil came here together.

It was a powerful example of reconciliation.

Their predecessors were on different sides in the Civil War.

Three years ago, for the first time, they became the main participants in a 3 party coalition government with the Greens.

That situation continues today.

A third grouping, Sinn Féin, can also trace its roots back to that conflict.

It has never been part of a government in this state.

It voted to end its policy of abstentionism in 1986.

It was a further eleven years before it won its first Dáil seat.

In the 2020 general election it received the highest first preference vote -24.5%.

Less than two years before the next general election, it is the main party of opposition.

We know how our system works.

Before an election the different parties make their case for our support.

We listen.

We can exercise our right to cast our votes and in doing so, we decide who governs us.

After an administration is formed, we observe and make our judgements, based on criteria that include competence, integrity and the relationship between promises and delivery.

It is popular to criticise politicians.

I respect them.

I've spent four decades observing their difficult trade.

I'm not drawn to it, I'm not attached to any party, but I'm thankful for the role of democracy in our history.

After our civil war it took the gun out of politics.

Twenty five years ago, a similar transformation took place in Northern Ireland.

The power-sharing system of devolved government at Stormont was the most significant structure established by the Good Friday Agreement.

It is a mandatory coalition model – difficult to operate with no template from elsewhere to act as guidance.

None of the various iterations of power-sharing has functioned smoothly.

But it is more than a coincidence that while the politicians debated, disagreed and sulked in Stormont, the killing on the streets stopped.

My work as a reporter gave me access to Ian Paisley, Martin McGuinness, David Trimble and Seamus Mallon during what were the final years of their lives.

Each one of them was grateful for the compromises that brought an end to violence.

They were thankful for the role they played in those dramatic changes.

If they had a regret, it was that the shifts had not taken place sooner.

Brexit, Britain's decision to leave the European Union and the fall-out from that change, are at the heart of the current political stalemate in Northern Ireland.

Fifty years ago, along with the UK and Denmark, Ireland joined the European Community.

For us it was a watershed moment in our evolution as an independent state.

One of the main attractions of membership was it offered our farmers guaranteed prices and markets for their produce.

For the agriculture sector this was a significant improvement.

Jacques Delors became President of the European Commission in the mid 80's. During his decade in the role he championed policies that redistributed wealth and resources from the rich centre to peripheral regions and countries.

In those times Ireland developed in the most dramatic way since the foundation of the state.

Infrastructure improved and employment increased. Inequality was addressed through EU-linked legislation.

Our exports and our wealth grew.

So too did our sense of self-worth.

In that EU setting, our relationship with Britain changed. As equals around our table, we realised we had common interests and traits.

On the margins of every summit of European leaders, successive Taoisigh and prime ministers discussed British-Irish relation with Northern Ireland usually the dominant issue.

That chemistry had a role in the successful Good Friday Agreement of April 1998.

John Hume's ideas light up that Agreement. His views about reconciliation were shaped by his understanding of the European Union and his experiences as an SDLP member of the European Parliament.

That's where he saw the idea of 'spilling our sweat, not our blood' in action.

A feature of the Agreement is it allows citizens of Northern Ireland to be Irish, or British or both.

Hume often spoke about another important element – it took account of the fact that all of us on this island and in Great Britain were European.

EU membership gave all of us something in common.

Just as we didn't know it at the time that EU membership would help the British-Irish relationship, it would also change it.

Opinion polls consistently indicate we are a pro EU country.

Our views were influenced by our knowledge of our circumstances before we joined and what has happened to us since.

Britain's history before EC membership in 1973 and its story since differ from ours.

There was a straw in the wind on January 1st 1999.

We met the criteria for membership of the EU's Single Currency and we joined the Euro zone.

The UK opted to keep its pound and remain outside.

The Brexit debate reflected Britain's discontent about its changing status and circumstances. And frustration with its ability to alter it.

As a sovereign nation, it exercised its right to put the issue to the people.

Britain is adjusting to the consequences of Brexit as it begins a new phase outside the European Union and pursues a different relationship with it.

We too are adapting to the circumstances where the neighbouring island is no longer in the EU. It presents very practical challenges. But our status as an English-speaking country, with guaranteed access to EU markets, now has enhanced weight when seeking foreign direct investment.

The Brexit decision has been made and the challenge now is to deal with the consequences.

Michael Collins was a pragmatist.

In conflict he had a ruthless streak to match his adversaries.

He was among those who negotiated and then championed The Treaty, knowing it might cost him his life.

Last month, at Barnsbury Street in Islington, where Collins was initiated into the IRB in 1909, a plaque honouring him was unveiled with the support of Islington Council.

It is part of Islington's Irish Trail, that honours the history of the Irish community in the area.

As a 16 year old Collins went to London from Cork in 1906 and got a job as a post office clerk.

It was a city where emigrants, Irish included, were not always welcomed.

It was also where at times during our lifetime Irish men and women planted bombs whose victims included civilians.

The erection of that Collins plaque last month illustrates the potential of British-Irish relations.

Our past happened. It should not be denied or glossed over.

But now is different and the future can be even better.

Given the ties of kinship between us and the practical benefits of cordial relations, being anti-British or anti-Irish makes no practical sense.

Earlier this month Leo Varadkar indicated frustration about his government's limited engagements with London.

At the time of the Good Friday Agreement the British-Irish relationship at government level provide positive example and leadership.

That relationship needs to continue inspiring the necessary reconciliation between unionism and nationalism.

The latest stalemate at Stormont is caused by the consequences of Brexit, as they affect Northern Ireland.

The last Assembly election was held fifteen months ago.

In the time since, the DUP has not taken its seats, effectively preventing the formation of a government. There was a similar vacuum, lasting three years, that ended in January 2020.

In that instance, Sinn Féin had pulled out of power-sharing.

The DUP may now be mulling over staying away from Stormont until beyond its party conference in the autumn. Then the temptation might be to delay returning until beyond the British general election.

But dysfunction has consequences. The DUP may decide stalemate serves its short-term interests, maintaining a united party included. But sitting on the side-lines, it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant. The unique trading relationship with the EU on offer to Northern Ireland is an opportunity, not a trap.

On this island we have new challenges and our collective energy is required to deal with them.

Last year we reached an important milestone. For the first time since the Famine, our population is above 7 million. 5.1 million plus in the Republic and more than 1.9 in Northern Ireland.

In the period since the 1840's, the population of most Western European countries doubled, trebled or quadrupled. The world's population increased more than six-fold.

For the first since that awful cycle of crop failure, hunger, disease, death and mass emigration, we have 7 million people on this island.

The growth in our population will continue.

This is a new territory for us.

Many of us grew up in an Ireland where rural communities were affected by the drift towards the towns and cities and in many cases a life beyond our shores.

The weeds were growing through huge swathes of our closed railways network.

Schools, post offices, Garda stations were being shut.

Now the challenge is to provide infrastructure and services that will allow communities a chance to grow and thrive.

It is absurd to suggest that Ireland is full.  
But it is a different question to ask is it adequately prepared for growth.

Here in the south, on many fronts there are worrying signs that we are struggling to adjust to our new circumstances.

The housing situation is an obvious example.  
In a twenty year period that included the Celtic Tiger phase, we built up to 100,000 sub-standard apartments and thousands of homes with defective materials in Donegal and other counties.

The repair bill for the state will be in excess of six billion euro.  
People like me see the rising value of the properties we own.  
Is it a case of fools' gold, when our children and generations after them will be unable to buy their own homes?

It would be failure if the Ireland we are shaping facilitated or acquiesced to 'winner takes all' values that create an underclass.  
Given our back story, at home and abroad, it would also be beyond tragic.

It would be an unacceptable Ireland if it created 800,000 politically homeless unionists, with a burning sense of grievance.  
It is in the long-term interests of unionism that it finds a capacity to opt in and to contribute as neighbours and equals to the challenges we all face.

In many respects, there has never been a better time for our island.  
We are supposedly one of the richest places in the world.  
We have peace.  
We have space.  
We have resources, including the untapped potential of wind and wave around us.  
In our home in the north west, supposedly the wettest region in the country, I am discovering the benefits of solar power.

Circumstances have presented us with the role of builders. None of us would want history to remember us as the generation of dodgy builders, who wasted opportunities.

That is a risk, a real risk, if we fail to adapt to the pace of change.

For those who argue for constitutional change, how this jurisdiction deals with growth and resources may be the acid test, a case of show, don't tell – a defining way to influence doubters and skeptics, north of the border.

I sometimes wonder where would Collins' political loyalties lie today.

It's impossible to answer the question.

But we do know that he lived and died for his vision of an Ireland with fairness and respect at its core.

In a letter he wrote to W T Cosgrove the day before he was killed, he was worrying about the revenues of the new state and the customs and excises situation. He wrote "we shall need three first class men" - and in those days they were nearly always men – to oversee the work.

Bearing in mind that Collins was Minister for Finance at the time, it can be said this was the origins of our structure of 3 independent Revenue Commissioners.

He had been travelling around his home county. His final line in that letter, dated Cork, 3.30pm, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1922, was "the people are splendid."

I take two things from that Collins letter.

Like the line in Christy Moore's song, they act as ballast and guiding stars.

It reminds us that

- we are all just passing through
- and in those final hours of his life, Collins had the desire to leave things better for those coming after him.

That's our task too.