

32: A future history of the reunification of Ireland (and other matters), 2030.

Jason O'Mahony

Introduction.

This is not a prediction, nor a comprehensive analysis of how a united Ireland would come about.

It is instead a highly fictional attempt to explore some of the many forces and variables that will come into play during the reunification process.

Jason O'Mahony
Dublin, Ireland

November 2021

T: @jasonmahony

Prologue: A port in Morocco.

If someone had told you that the British withdrawal from Ireland after 800 years of what could be called a “complex relationship” would be triggered by a satellite photo of a port in Morocco, you’d be forgiven for being surprised.

It had been the French prime minister who had notified his British counterpart as to developments in the North African country, an area of the world in whose stability France had a particular interest.

The British PM had been irritated by the fact that he was not dealing with his actual political equal, the President of France, but the president had mischievously suggested that if he could lend his British counterpart a guillotine to deal with that particular nicety of diplomatic protocol, if he so wished. “In fairness, mon ami: the English were cutting heads of royalty before we were.”

The French PM advised him that the French external security service, the DGSE, had analysed photos from their “Mitterand” satellite and passed it onto the British SIS, who confirmed the findings.

The Chinese were building a naval base in Tetouan in Morocco.

Right across from Gibraltar.

The UK PM had treaded carefully with the Chinese, especially given their level of investment in England and Wales. It was, after all, a big deal.

The Chinese, as part of their expansion into their new role of leading global superpower, had been very swift in seizing the opportunity of the UK stepping down to second tier after Brexit. One key moment had been the Chinese assistant deputy vice minister for external affairs (north eastern European islands division) noticing that the Welsh national symbol was a red dragon and had regarded it as quite pretty but also as an omen of good fortune.

Billions in Chinese investment funds ploughed into the valleys. Thousands of Chinese students arrived under new visa-free arrangements made between the Welsh First minister and the Assistant Deputy Vice Minister.

For decades later hundreds of Chinese diplomats would speak English with a Michael Sheen lilt, and warn other nations' ambassadors to "Be careful there, boyo", as well as having an ability to belt out tear-filled renditions of "Men of Harlech" after a sup of beverage.

The investment went elsewhere in the UK too.

The Chinese police came later.

Initially in a *respectful* advisory capacity to assist British police with Chinese workers and students and tourists, it wasn't long before Chinese police were *respectfully* but firmly warning their British partners that crimes involving Chinese citizens would be *respectfully* investigated by the People's Police (England & Wales division)

Chinese judges started to *respectfully* take over the prosecutions, and the PM quietly turned a blind eye as long as the Chinese police didn't interfere with British citizens.

But this was different.

NATO had been aware that the Chinese were using Morocco as a base for commercial shipping, much of it going to Europe. The arrival of Chinese troops to "secure" the base caused uneasiness. The PM, on seeing images of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) unloading what seemed like an overly-generous contribution of tanks in their new naval base, urgently summoned the Chinese ambassador.

The ambassador could not be disturbed. He was very busy, a stony-faced lackey told the foreign secretary.

If the situation was worrying London, Paris and Madrid were not exactly thrilled either. Unlike their EU counterparts, the English did have access to better data via the US National Security Agency (NSA), and they didn't like what they were seeing. It was a relatively small force, the analysts concluded. But with enough oomph to certainly defeat anything the Moroccans could throw at them.

There was a lot of building going on inside the base. Mostly using Chinese labourers but with material bought from local suppliers to keep the Moroccans happy.

“The capitalists shall sell us the rope with which to hang them,” a general muttered.

The Royal Navy base in Gibraltar was now reporting that Chinese surveillance drones from Morocco were a regular occurrence, “respectfully” (the Chinese authorities liked that word) surveying the British crown dependency’s defences.

The prime minister did not take the news well. This was not the first time he had to handle the media getting hysterical about foreign troops in Britain.

Scotland had been very fast to sign up to the European Defence Force (EDF), and the PM was absolutely certain that the exercises carried out by the EDF on the Anglo-Scottish border had been a deliberate wind up by the German Chancellor and French President.

The sight of the new Pan-European Charlemagne tank putting through its paces on what was formerly British soil with French, German and Polish flags on it did not make for low blood pressure among Daily Express leaders.

But he knew that at least the EU would never actually invade England. It was too busy keeping the Russians out (when not buying their gas) and keeping the EU’s refugee safezone in Libya from being overrun by Islamist crazies.

This was different.

“The Americans are pretty sure the Chinese have an amphibious battle group on the way to Morocco,” the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI) said.

“They’re going to invade Gibraltar?” the PM asked, his mouth actually hanging open.

“Possible but unlikely,” DNI said.

“Not immediately anyway. More of a message to us to keep our nose out of Asia. Of course, if they thought Gibraltar was vulnerable they might have a go.”

“And is it?”

The naval men and women all looked at one another.

“I’ll take that as yes.”

“Prime minister, we’re very tight on resources. Keeping the aircraft carriers in Asia and the Trident fleet and the Royal Yacht and that flotilla in the English channel to stop migrants is...well...costly.”

“Can’t we send one of the aircraft carriers? I mean, they cost a bloody emperor’s ransom. Can’t they fly the flag, show Johnny Chinaman that if he comes at the Rock we’ll give him what-for?”

Most of the Royal Navy was in mothballs to fund the huge running costs of the two aircraft carriers and their ever-more expensive escort groups. Since the Taiwan War the hugely impressive and expensive ships had been kept well away from anything resembling danger. The Pentagon was actively debating whether the damn things were more trouble than they were worth, and were looking at automated airborne drone carriers that could move faster and not put US service personnel at risk.

The PM doubted a United Kingdom government could survive the sinking of one of its paramount ships, and certainly not the Queen Elizabeth.

Then there was Trident, England (and Wales)’s nuclear deterrent, the Schrodinger’s Cat of weapons system, which only served its purpose as the world’s most lethal weapon by never actually being used, but was “hoovering up money like a Kardashian” the defence minister had pointed out.

“Ah, yes, the problem with that is that the Chinese base is bristling with long-range hypersonic anti-ship missiles. And the aircraft carrier is rather a big target. Very bad for morale to see it, you know, doing a James Cameron.”

He made the gesture of a ship rising up out of the water as it sank.

“Then what’s the point of having them if they can’t go near anything?”

“That’s hardly fair, prime minister,” the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) said.

“The carriers still pack a punch with countries not as well equipped as China.”

“Like whom?”

“Well....eh....Iceland?”

“No, they took delivery of the new Exocets last week,” said DNI.

“Oh...not Iceland. Well, anyway, the best way to defend the Rock is to fight fire with fire. A full array of air-defence and anti-ship missiles. Blow them out of the water as they come across. Even in port.”

“That sounds expensive.”

“In strategic terms, relatively cheap.”

“How much?”

“Oh, no more than...ten billion should do it.”

“Ten billion!”

“Not all at once, obviously, but layered. We’d need to upgrade the current air defence detection system, build hardened bunkers and silos, and probably compensate civilians to move. I mean, this is China: they’re spending about that on the base. It’s going to be their Mediterranean base of operations.”

“What about the rest of NATO? They must be just as concerned?”

“Oh they are, prime minister. I’ve spoken to my counterpart in Madrid. They’re ready to deploy 10,000 troops and air-defence and anti-ship units into Gibraltar at 72 hours notice.”

“I’ll bet they are. We’d never get them out. The French must be concerned too?”

“They’ve said they will fully support their EU partner Spain. You know, European solidarity. Our oldest ally has offered a frigate, by the way?”

“Our oldest ally?”

“Portugal. Perfectly good ship, Portuguese Navy good solid outfit. But it is, you know, just one ship.”

“Oh, yes, of course, yes, good chaps, the Ports, very decent of them. Ten billion quid. Where the bloody hell are we going to get ten billion quid?”

The chancellor shifted in his seat.

“I have an idea, prime minister.”

In Belfast the leader of the DUP felt someone suddenly walk over her grave...

Chapter 1: Scotland the Brave.

Lenin once said that “everything is connected to everything else”.

There’s some truth to that observation, especially in the context of how a group of hard-line nationalists obsessed with taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union ended up breaking up the country they purported to love. Of course, there are many who will argue that they never really loved the United Kingdom but actually “Great Britain”, which in their minds really meant “Greater England”.

It would be crude to claim that they actively wanted to break up the union, and there were many Brexiteers in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales who wanted to maintain the UK outside of Europe, but the new disposition was not a union of equals.

In reality it was to be Greater England, with her junior partners who knew their place. To put it in context, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had less actual power over their constitutions as states in the UK than they would have as states in the European Union.

The EU can’t abolish Dail Eireann or the Bundestag. Westminster could abolish Holyrood.

The Brexiteers were quick to sneer at the suggestion, and point out that the European Union was dominated by France and Germany, but that argument didn’t carry much water.

Between them France and Germany had a combined population of 150m in an EU of 440m, compared to England’s 56m out of a UK population of 66m.

Germany has 19% of the population of the EU.

But more importantly, the argument didn’t take into account that France and Germany were two separate nations that often had different agendas. It also failed to grasp that of the 27 member states of the EU 21 of them have populations of less than 20m, and the clear majority of them with populations under 12m. Couple that with political systems mostly built on proportional representation and coalition and you get a political culture where, unlike the UK, outright domination by a single nation is simply impossible.

For Scotland's first minister and leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party the resurgence of English nationalism presented an opportunity.

The stakes were high for her for one simple reason: one referendum had already been defeated, and she could make an argument that Brexit had been such a radical change to the constitutional structure of the UK that it warranted a second vote.

But that would be it. Lose a second time and it would be closed as an issue for a decade at least, and she would be to her SNP voters the woman who blew it. It had to work this time.

What also had changed since the 2013 referendum had been the Trump and Leave campaigns, based on emotion and button-pushing and at times barefaced lies.

In Edinburgh and Glasgow young and savvy nationalist activists had learned the lesson of Farage and Cummings.

Fact loses to heart every single time, and they were going to heed that fact this time.

The 2013 referendum had been lost for many reasons, but one had been the fact that the financial argument for independence was not as robust as it needed to be, nor was there any reason to believe it would be. Scotland was subsidised by English voters.

So the cybernats, as they called themselves, decided to hang a lantern on their problems, by creating an overwhelming emotional case for Scotland leaving that would sweep every statistic away.

Over many a debate the consensus was formed: we will not drag Scotland out of the union.

We will make the English demand we go.

The lesson from the Brexit referendum and the Trump election campaign had been very clear.

There was a push factor in politics that worked on an emotional level. The more Trump annoyed and was attacked by his political opponents, the more his own base became energised.

In short, they liked that he annoyed his opponents because they hated them just as much.

The more shrill his opponents became, the more his base delighted.

It was like a form of political judo, using one's opponent's strength against him.

The Brexit campaign had been different, primarily because the fissure crossed the political spectrum and nearly all parties. They had devised a different strategy, of micro-targeting voters with specific online messages tailored to their own particular grievances.

Worried about housing? Ads about Eastern Europeans flooding in and taking all the jobs and houses. Worried about healthcare? Ads about A&E filled with swarthy young men with dead eyes and struggling nurses.

Worried about Islam? Ads about 70m Turks all coming to live in your hometown.

All visible to you and just you on your Facebook.

Thousands of bots on Twitter not only pushing the Brexit message but also others, supposedly pro-Remain, pushing the most insulting observations about Leave voters being ignorant bigots, pushing soft Leave voters away.

The cybernats therefore started not with their own side, which they left to the official independence campaigns.

They started by creating an entire England First campaign, dedicated to corralling and stirring every English grievance. Ads started appearing about how the NHS in Scotland got far more per person than the NHS in England.

Pictures of a nice Scottish gran being cared for in a state-of-the-art bright and breezy clinic contrasted with a frightened and ignored English gran in a dilapidated English A&E crushed by other distraught looking people, many with brown skin.

The truth didn't matter, that was the lesson from Brexit.

The truth can be manufactured, or at least, a feeling that resonates.

The campaign continued: Ads of the first minister (who polls showed really irritated a certain type of white English male) listing out all of Scotland's grievances as vast sums of money from English taxpayers scrolled by on the screen.

The ads were specifically targeted to marginal Conservative constituencies, and soon Tory backbenchers were raising the issue of why was Scotland, a country with no sense of gratitude (their words) getting so much English money?

Scotland, they said, should start to pull its own weight.

We might if you hadn't stolen our oil, some in the SNP retorted, and within a month of the ads running there had been a brawl on the floor on the Commons between SNP and Tory MPs during which one Tory had his nose broken with a Glasgow kiss.

Once again, as with Brexit before, the Labour party was paralysed, its loyalty to Scotland and hopes of restoring its fortunes there forcing it to once again sit on the fence.

The cybernat ads didn't even have to run that long, as the reaction from some in England was so aggressive as to take on its own momentum. Scottish campaigners struck back with tales of English perfidy, and cinemas in Scotland started holding "Braveheart" nights.

Within the Conservative parliamentary party a new group advocating England First began meeting and preparing policy documents.

The cybernats leapt on this with a new batch of ads demanding why only Scotland was allowed a vote on the union? Let England Vote became the new cry, and caused a panic amongst unionists in Belfast and Cardiff, especially when new ads started highlighting how much Wales and Northern Ireland were being subsidised.

The reality was that the cybernats didn't really care about how much either cost, but they knew it would wind up a certain type of English nationalist no end, and they were right.

Across opinion polls in England, "English taxes for English towns" was now polling as a significant issue.

As expected, this played just nicely into the hands of the official Scottish Independence campaign, who were able to counter the economic attacks of Scottish unionists by pointing out that English voters were demanding spending cuts in Scotland anyway.

Almost overnight the Scottish Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties were paralysed by the need not to piss off their voters in England. Coupled with every English politician's attack on Scotland being broadcast by the Independence campaign as yet more proof, polls now started to show a regular 2-3% lead for independence, and this was even before a poll had been officially called.

For the prime minister in London it was a brand new dilemma. He'd been elected on, among other things, a platform of opposing a second Scottish referendum.

Yet now he found himself under huge pressure from within his own parliamentary party for just such a thing. In particular his new MPs in the north of England, many in former working-class Labour strongholds, were proving particularly receptive to the message of keeping English funds in England, and so he pulled another of the rabbits out of his hat that his political career had been built on.

He declared that he would allow a free vote on a new Scottish referendum when the SNP proposed their next bill. He personally would vote against, keeping his promise, but sure enough, it passed.

The second independence referendum campaign differed greatly from the first, in that the Scottish unionist parties were effectively abandoned by their UK parent parties.

The cybernats employed a technique of using every Scottish unionist argument in ads in England which then provoked a response primarily from English Tories which was then used for ads in Scotland.

The first minister, following the lead of the British prime minister in the previous UK general election simply refused to do interviews with difficult interviewers, and the economic arguments, which were very real, just never got traction.

Instead the campaign focussed on the SNP campaign, "Take Control". Many of the celebrities who had participated in the first campaign to keep Scotland in the UK had, as a result of Brexit, either dropped out or defected.

Despite the polls showing an independence lead throughout the campaign, it wasn't until the exit poll on referendum day showing a 52% vote for independence that the independence campaign

finally believed it, with Perth & Kinross being the district swinging sharply to independence and finally putting the independence vote over the top.

In Edinburgh, which had also sharply swung to independence, the crowd went wild when Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt, bete noire of Brexiteers and who had played a prominent role in not campaigning for independence but assuring Scottish voters that the new country would be fast-tracked into the EU appeared on stage with the first minister. He carried on a flagpole with an EU flag which he then placed beside the Saltire behind the first minister, and took the microphone handed to him.

“My friends: Scotland’s coming home!”

The crowd went wild.

One of his officials was later heard to remark, about Brexiteers who had pledged to break up the EU, that “You pull a knife, we pull a gun. You put one of ours in the hospital, we put one of yours in the morgue: that’s the Brussels way.”

The response outside Scotland was varied.

In East Belfast rioting broke out, and the DUP and various loyalist affiliated organisations made remarks about how nothing should be read into the result.

But in the more thinking unionist circles, conversations never had before started being quietly had in corners of pubs and golf clubs.

In Derry and West Belfast, and in parts of the republic, Scottish flags were being waved by cheering crowds chanting “the North is next!”

On Merrion square, the seat of the Irish government, the response was more restrained, for a number of reasons.

It had not gone unnoticed by the Irish government that a Scotland in the EU, English-speaking and with a land border with one of the most populous parts of the region, would be a direct rival for foreign investment. One Irish government paper had even laid out the grounds for Ireland vetoing

Scottish membership. But the Taoiseach and others knew that the Irish people would never tolerate that, seeing in Scotland a kindred cultural spirit.

The real issue for Dublin, however, was what Scottish independence would mean for Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland didn't exactly roll off the tongue.

"UKOEWANI? Sounds like a former British colony in a Carry On film," one Irish diplomat remarked.

Sean McIntyre, Former Irish Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

"In the weeks after the Scottish results it felt like a great seal had been broken. We had very good relations with British members of parliament from all sides and so when the results had come through we had sat down and decided to conduct a series of soundings to see what the feeling was as to the future of the United Kingdom.

Obviously the landscape was literally changing before our eyes, but we were still nevertheless able to get a feeling very quickly that more radical change was now on the cards. The Labour party, having lost Scotland, was now in a mad rush to almost disinfect itself as to having ever been a party with Scottish leanings and this meant that the Conservatives pretty much had the political running to itself. It was looking very much like going in an "England First" direction.

The negotiations with the Scottish government on things such as citizens rights, etc, actually went quite smoothly in that once the decision has been made about the core question the governments were happy to get on with it quite quickly. There were British citizens in Scotland and Scottish citizens in the UK so it wasn't a huge deal. But what became very very apparent very very quickly was that Northern Ireland was not featuring in the thinking of English MPs at all.

What I mean by that is that is Northern Ireland had tried to keep quiet and stay under the radar. It might have gotten away with it because it has been my experience that Northern Ireland does not feature on the radar of most British politicians and the vast majority of the British population. The problem for unionists was that, of course, Sinn Fein and other united Ireland activists had recognised very quickly the skill with which the more radical elements of the Independence campaign had used online to stir up anti-Scottish thinking in England. DUP MPs seemed almost paralysed as to what to do because anytime they demanded more money for public services for Northern Ireland, SF activists turned it into an online ad targeting Brexit-style voters in England. It wasn't long before there was muttering about how much Northern Ireland was subsidised.

It wasn't helped by the absolute refusal of the DUP to grasp that for the great majority of English MPs and their voters they do not distinguish between unionist and nationalist. They just see a bunch

of Paddies and now they were being reminded that an awful lot of their English taxes were being handed over to Paddies. It started to have the exact same effect over weeks and months, with resentment amongst English MPs, English tabloid newspapers and finally English voters towards the constant demands for more and more money for “the Irish”.

This, of course, led to that great fear that the DUP have never really quite understood.

That it is not just a question of Northern Ireland voting to remain or leave the Union but also the possibility that England could itself vote to leave the Union. After all, the people of Northern Ireland do not have a God-given right to English taxes. United Ireland campaigners found that such an argument repeated online started to gain considerable traction. ”

Chapter 2: The Border Poll.

The speed with which the Scottish departure from the UK was concluded surprised everyone. Both teams negotiated a final settlement with minimum rancour and Scottish departure agreed for 18 months after the referendum.

In Northern Ireland, the DUP looked on the process with horror and the always suspected realisation that the English didn't really care that much about Ulster one way or the other. As one DUP MP was quoted: "It was always about English pride. As long as the IRA were bombing them they'd stay out of sheer bloody-mindedness. But now that is no longer at stake, they don't really give a toss."

The new batch of Northern England Tory MPs elected from the Brexit heartland quickly focussed on the vast sums of money going to Northern Ireland and decided that it would be better spent in their constituencies.

When a private members motion was moved by one of the Tory MPs to request the secretary of state to trigger a border poll, DUP MPs went ballistic, accusing all around them of treachery, especially as, following a secret agreement with the government as part of the independence negotiations SNP MPs voted in favour and the motion passed.

Once again it showed the desperate inability of the DUP and Ulster unionism generally to engage in any sort of strategic thought. The knee-jerk support for Brexit had been the catalyst that had started the disintegration of the United Kingdom, and yet still the DUP could not grasp their situation.

A whole generation of Tory MPs, the people they had relied upon to act as the parliamentary rampart against a United Ireland simply saw nothing in common with them. They were just another bunch of Paddies, and weird ones at that, with their bibles and sashes and marches and obsessions about abortion and homosexuality. As if that wasn't bad enough, it was the unionists in Northern Ireland who had resulted in the UK being humiliated in its post-Brexit negotiations with the EU, and finding that the Dublin government, thanks to its EU membership, had to be treated as an equal.

It was all well and good banging on that Ireland was being used as an EU puppet until a 600 pound French gorilla arrives and slaps you around the room on behalf of the Irish.

It was time, the secretary of state announced. A border poll would be held 12 months later.

James Joyce, Former Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach.

“This was the nightmare the DUP strangely never saw coming. The reality is that a prospect of a united Ireland was the pole around which they had built an entire political movement and yet they never really had any plan as to what to do if it looked like it would happen. It was Brexit 2.0: banging on and on about something and as soon as they catch the car they don’t know what to do with it. The constant flag-waving didn’t take into account the fact that political unionism was no longer the majority belief in the north. It was true, support for a United Ireland wasn’t a majority belief either, but the fact was that nationalists knew that and knew they had to convince middle of the road voters to come on-board.

The DUP did, to their credit, latch onto the idea of running hours of clips of Sinn Fein in opposition in the south complaining about how awful the public services was, how there was no “Irish NHS” and problems with housing and all the rest. That had some impact, but they just couldn’t help themselves.

They kept going back to the queen and the union jack and banging on about stuff like the Irish language act and they simply missed the point. They were campaigning, for the most part, against an Ireland that existed thirty years ago.

One unionist commentator savaged his own side for not grasping this. He pointed out that thousands of liberal young unionists were perfectly comfortable going south and regarded Dublin as a lively and cosmopolitan city. He also pointed out there were people in Northern Ireland who wanted to remain in the UK for economic reasons, but regarded themselves as Irish nationalists, had Irish passports and even spoke Irish, and unionism offered nothing to them.

They couldn’t grasp the idea of a non-British unionist.

The No campaign wasn’t helped by the fact that the Yes campaign then responded with clips of DUP MPs in Westminster complaining about public services, and Tory MPs speaking about how overindulged Northern Ireland was. They were, in a word, fucked.”

The Sinn Fein/Fine Gael coalition in power in Dublin had been well aware of the changing situation in UK politics, and had not been surprised when the border poll had been announced. Although it had a solid majority in the Dail, given the sharp political differences that exist between the two parties, the constant suspicion in the media that the government could collapse was only mitigated by the refusal of every other party to participate in talks after the general election.

The Alphabet Left of minor far-left parties were joined by the Labour Party and Greens in declaring that forming a government was a problem for the big parties. The fact that Fianna Fail also declared the same feeling came as a surprise, but strategically made sense. The reality was that the leader of FF was genuinely afraid that given the ramshackle nature of the party, essentially a franchise operation of independent political entrepreneurs, the party would be infected and subsumed by Sinn Fein in government. A spell in the opposition would do them the world of good, as well as giving them a chance at winning back some of their working class voters who had gone over to Sinn Fein when the party inevitably didn't live up to its expectations.

This left the issue of government formation in the hands of the two main parties, the two parties who had based most of their campaigns around how awful/dangerous/Tory bastards/Commie bastards the other crowd were. The idea of going into coalition together caused outrage among the members of both parties, with threats of mass resignations bandied about. Many of Sinn Fein's younger supporters struggled to understand how the party could come first in terms of votes and yet not automatically have won all the power. It had to be pointed out to them that they didn't live in Britain.

After a month of "for-show" negotiations between the two main parties and the smaller parties, the consensus was that there would either be a Sinn Fein Fine Gael understanding, or else another election. The grassroots of both parties were gung ho about going back to the people, but the opinion polls gave a different view: in a second election both main parties would lose seats, and find themselves back in the same position. The two party leaders confronted the inevitable, each

despatching a trusted advisor to meet in an isolated holiday home in Longford to sit down around a table and see what really could be arrived at. Both men knew each other well enough to be able to be blunt and without grandstanding. Both outlined to each other what was a real red line, and after a number of hours and a Chinese takeaway a draft document was sent to the two respective leaders. They then consulted with a wider circle of confidants.

Five days later, the leaders of Sinn Fein and Fine Gael appeared jointly to announce a draft programme for government that would go to their respective parties. Both parties had compromised on issues, with a rotating Taoiseach after two and a half years. A Sinn Fein minister for finance was the quid pro quo for Fine Gael ministers of justice and defence. The agreement caused outrage in the parties, with both leaders facing internal calls for their resignation, but both leaders had expected that, and had a clear response to it. If either parties' convention rejected the coalition deal, both party leaders agreed to inform the president that they recommended another election. The deal got through both conventions with under 60% of the vote, and both parties did have considerable resignations. And then Ireland got its first female Sinn Fein Taoiseach.

Although preparations for a united Ireland were in the agreement at the insistence of Sinn Fein, the actual detail was very limited, heavy on aspiration and carefully tip-toeing around decisions that might require unpopular choices to be made. For example, nobody had bothered to determine what would happen if there was a border poll in the North and whether it would require a matching poll in the south? Indeed, some had attempted to brand anybody seeking a referendum in the south as being against a united Ireland as there was no legal requirement for a referendum in the south. In effect, the understanding was that a vote in the north in favour of a change in the constitutional status was the change itself. That was it: Ireland was reunited in theory if not in terms of the day to day.

The secretary of state announced that a yes result would trigger a 12 month period after which UK jurisdiction over the north would cease, and there would be a year to come to conclusions and arrangements with regard to outstanding debts, pensions etc.

The Irish cabinet had been warned in advance that any attempt by the Irish government to delay the poll through back-channels to the British would almost certainly be leaked by the British, who wanted out fast. The Taoiseach in particular knew that her own party would never tolerate anything that would delay the British departure. As a result, an emergency task force was immediately assembled from all departments to look at what was needed to be done.

James Joyce, former Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach.

“You won’t find it written anywhere, because of Freedom of Information, but we were all praying for a No vote. Even some of the Sinn Fein ministers. People don’t realise what a shock the announcement of the border poll was. Reunification nearly throttled Germany, the richest country in Europe, and now we were having to do it all in 12 months, with, possibly, a very substantial section of the north violently opposed. The truth is that the failure of a generation of Irish politicians from the Good Friday Agreement onwards to prepare for this was an outrage. They simply didn’t want to get into the nitty-gritty because they knew it would involve very tricky decisions. And now it had arrived.

Of course, the initial polls had shown that the No vote might just win, but then the DUP couldn’t help themselves. It turned into a shit-show of “flegs” and tricolours being burned and “fuck the IRA” and “Kill all Taigs”. Meanwhile nationalists were laying wreaths at Somme commemorations. It really was incredible: the DUP had been preparing for this moment their entire lives, to “Save the union”, and then they made a bollocks of it.”

The exit poll predicted a Yes vote of 52%, which was confirmed by lunchtime of the day of the count. The celebrations in Derry and West Belfast, as well as in the south, were matched by rioting in East Belfast and other parts east of the Bann.

James Joyce, Former Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach.

“ You would think if there was one thing we could’ve learned it would’ve been the lessons of Brexit.

That you don’t have referendums on things for which you don’t know or have a plan for.

We basically woke up in the morning and found our country had grown by one and a half million people, of whom half of them did not actually want to be in the country.

The British prime minister was very quick the following day to come out and wholeheartedly endorse the result and wish the Irish people are very best in the future and that was pretty much that. Perfidious Albion had managed to dump the last big problem on top of us, and we welcomed it with open arms.

As with so many issues in Irish politics the “It’ll be alright on the night” merchants, the armchair republicans who shouted down anybody you asked about the details of this project suddenly vanished in the cold light of the morning.

The discussions with the UK government as to the handover was blasé to the point of being almost horizontal. The British proposed to transfer the entire pension liability of Northern Ireland, both civil and public sector, as well as a proportion of the British national debt, which cleverly was less marginally than the cost of the pension.

All our arguments about how the pension liability was run up on the British rule and that the debt belongs to the British state and not to us was met with a wry smile from the British delegation who pointed out to us that they cannot force us to take the debt but then we cannot force them to pay the pensions and so that meant we were going to be leaving with one or the other. We pointed out that as former British citizens who had paid National Insurance they could probably take the UK government to court. Indeed, one of our people mischievously suggested that not paying the pension could be a way of forcing unionists to move to England, where they would be entitled, but the Brits held firm.

“That’s the joys of having no written constitution: we could just strip them of their citizenship and that’s that. And don’t forget, in England they’d just be a bunch of Paddies looking for a handout. We can handle that.”

It came down to either a chunk of the British national debt added to our own or 1.5m people in Northern Ireland being told that the first great benefit of being citizens of the republic of Ireland was that they all lose their pension entitlements. Aside from issues of finance and a few other cross-border issues in terms of trade between Britain and Ireland which were already pretty much settled thanks to the Irish Sea Border, the UK government were not actually that interested in anything else. Certainly not any issues with regard to the now designated British Minority in Ireland.

As the UK minister in charge told us “Sure you’re all Irish now, sort it out amongst yourselves.”

We should have had that slogan put on a teeshirt.

The financial issue finally loomed out of the fog at us like an iceberg looking for Belfast steel.

All those most enthusiastic about a united Ireland had kept clinging to this bizarre idea that someone else was going to pay for it. You’d hear people saying that the British would be morally obliged to keep paying for united Ireland, or that the Americans would, or that the EU will pay and all this was revealed very quickly to be complete bullshit.

It wasn’t as if the Irish government didn’t try, of course. We went off rattling the begging bowl in all sorts of directions but nobody was having it. The British actually laughed out loud when the minister for foreign affairs went to London looking for some sort of reparations program and of course the reality was that we had no leverage whatsoever. The Americans were no more interested, with their own problems, and the rest of the EU told us to go ask Apple or Google for the money.

As the Greek finance minister remarked at an EcoFin meeting: “You can hardly buy an American SUV then complain that other people won’t fill it with gas for you.”

We were going to have to increase taxes very sharply in the south in order to engage in an East German style wealth transfer of billions of euros every year to fund Northern Ireland. And don’t forget, that was just to keep public services and public sector wages as they were on the day of the

border poll, and not counting the fact that Sinn Fein and the unionist parties had been telling their voters for years that they were living in one of the most neglected parts of the United Kingdom, and huge amounts of extra spending were needed. And that was before the security implications and costs attached to them were even identified, never mind funded.”

Ernest R. Chivers IV, former United States Ambassador to Ireland.

“ It was, I suppose, simple good luck that I was appointed US ambassador to the republic. I’ve been a career diplomat for 30 years in the State Department, and I was well briefed on Ireland having been on the Europe desk for most of my career. Having said that, the fact that I was appointed to Dublin tells you a lot about the state of my country at the time. You see, you have to realise how the Dublin ambassadorship is seen in DC. To their credit, the Irish don’t have any false notions about who gets sent here. Dublin is seen as a reward post, to be given to supporters of the president who normally raised a lot of money for his or her campaign. They’re usually Irish-American, and have a bit of “ a ghra” for the Old Country. It’s also helpful that it is not too far away from the East Coast and everyone speaks English and Americans are if not popular than at least tolerated. The Irish know that this is not a big stress job. The president can speak directly to the Taoiseach on anything that actually matters and in all my time I have never ever heard an Irish Taoiseach refuse a request from an American president.

Which all goes to show how bad things were going in the states at the time, because nobody of any consequence wanted to be ambassador to Ireland or London or anywhere, because everybody wanted to be at home.

The Taiwan War had humiliated the administration, and the footage of the two carriers sinking was up there with Iran in ‘79 or the helicopters on the roof in Saigon. China had beaten us, and the red flag flew over Taiwan.

In fairness, it wasn’t the president’s fault. When the Chinese had invaded, our forces put up a solid fight, but the reality was that China was right beside Taiwan, and within 12 hours of their forces landing the Taiwanese had surrendered. You could hardly blame them. Their army fought hard, but the casualties were enormous and once civilians started dying in their thousands that was that.

Nor were people aware of Operation Window. They couldn’t be, given that its very existence meant that the United States had known that it was not going to be able to prevent the Chinese taking Taiwan. But it was a huge success. It was a simple enough idea: we knew we were going to lose, so

use the opportunity of open conflict to absolutely hammer Chinese military assets where we could. We couldn't hit their ports, because that would escalate. But everything at sea and in the air and space was fair game, and we made the opportunity count. They lost 19 major ships and seven submarines, over 150 planes and a load of satellites. They also took far higher casualties in the actual landings than they admit, including 70% of their landing craft AFTER the invasion. Our anti-personnel drones cut them to ribbons, and it was only sheer numbers that allowed them to secure the beaches. Their attack on the carriers, which were outside the combat area, was a fit of pique because they knew what we were doing, but couldn't admit it in public. The PLA was set back a decade in terms of actual physical capabilities.

But that was not what the visually-obsessed American public saw. Not statistics showing huge Chinese losses, but two huge symbols of American power on fire, then rolling over or in the case of the Reagan lifting stern first out of the water like the Titanic, then snapping in two live on TV, that sent the country into hysterics.

The Republicans were demanding attacks on China, even nuclear attacks. It was incredible, because there were Republicans who knew they were asking for the impossible and were just trying to damage the president's re-election campaign. That's politics. But there were others, actual members of Congress, who genuinely didn't seem to know that China had nuclear weapons too and were calling the president a coward for not nuking Beijing in revenge for the Reagan. Even Fox News backed off when the Murdochs apparently realised that even their wealth wouldn't shield them from the outcome of a nuclear war. But the disease was already in the system, and the election was vicious. You remember it, the whole world remembered it. The gun attacks on rallies, the attacks on polling stations, then the hysteria during the counting.

As the polls had predicted, she scraped through in the electoral college and slightly better in the popular vote. There are still rational voters in America and being the anti-nuclear annihilation candidate still counts for something. But the Carlson-Trump ticket wasn't having it, and nor were the

GOP-controlled State legislatures in Arizona, Michigan or Georgia. They voted to set aside the results and appoint new Carlson-Trump delegates to the electoral college, and it all kicked off.

I was watching all this from the Phoenix Park, surrounded by the skeleton staff that I'd kept back after letting most return to the US. The threat of nuclear war will do that, the desire to be near family.

But you know how it all ended up. The governors of New York and California and others, the face-off at the Capitol (again!) and the constitutional convention.

But it answers a question that's constantly put in Irish politics. Who will pay for a United Ireland? I have no idea, but I tell you for certain who won't. The now-reduced United States, and nor will the Constitutional States of America. The US won't because US money is going to fund the US Federal Health Service and something akin to a European welfare system, now that there's no blocking Republican majority anymore. Even the US Conservative Party in the Congress are closer to British Tories. As for the CSA: they've a whole heap of problems. All those red states complaining about socialism suddenly realising that their social security and Medicare was being paid by the blue states are getting a shock.

So they're not paying for it either.

Nor will the EU. As Europe has discovered, all those people delighting in the US withdrawing from world policeman status have discovered that there's a price to be paid for that. Now Europe has to defend itself, and the European Defence Force is hoovering up money despite all the Irish protests. You know, I love the Irish, but you can't expect other countries to share your "ah, sure, it'll be grand" attitude to national defence. The Baltics and Finns have had Russian tanks in their streets in the last 100 years. So have the Poles and even the Germans are now taking this stuff seriously, especially now that they can't trust the French with Marechal Le Pen in the Elysee. The next generation of AI-driven drones and armoured vehicles and cyber defences is hideously expensive. But even more than that, they're not going to fund a United Ireland simply because the Irish want it but are unwilling to pay for it themselves. That's the bottom line: you want it, you pay for it."

Tarquín Jennings, Private Secretary to the (then) Prime Minister of the (then) United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

“It was certainly one of the more surreal meetings I have attended. The DUP leader read out a very odd statement, all florid and formal, about Ulster’s loyalty and place in Britain (her words), and it was only when she turned onto the second page that the prime minister put up a hand. He was not a fan of florid.

He told them that the deadline was not up for negotiation, and that Northern Ireland would revert to the republic on the day agreed.

The DUP leader was on her feet, pointing her finger, and the PM jumped up too, and read them the riot act.

You have to understand, he has no sense of loyalty all about Ulster. He’s not a big fan of history, and as far as he sees it, it’s just one bunch of Paddies knocking seven bells of shit out of another bunch of Paddies, and he told them that his people weren’t going to pay for it.

“Your people?” the DUP leader shouted at him. “We are your people.”

No, no you’re not. The English are my people. The Irish are your people.

We’re British, one of the DUP leader’s associates, some red-faced man with a mullet, shouted, and then it happened.

The PM looked at him.

There’s no such thing anymore.

That’s what he said.

There’s no such thing anymore.

He’s right, of course. One of the unforeseen consequences of Brexit. It became such an obsession for some, particularly on the right of the Tories, that they were actually willing to trade Britain itself. If Scotland and Northern Ireland were the price, so be it, and once you start saying things like that in public...

But that wasn’t even the moment of truth.

The DUP leader seemed to regain some of her composure, as if some vital piece of information had entered her head.

She then quietly warned the PM that Northern Ireland would descend into chaos, including a return to paramilitary violence.

Then the PM said it.

Even I shifted uneasily.

So what, he said.

There was an actual silence for a moment.

I mean it, the DUP leader said. Bombings and shootings. A return to the seventies and eighties.

Won't be our problem, the PM said, and actually smiled.

I think it was at that moment that the proverbial penny dropped for the DUP.

The PM was an Englishman, not a Brit. He genuinely didn't give a toss about Northern Ireland not because he was callous but simply because he didn't see it as his country.

There'll be bombs on the mainland! Red-faced mullet man said.

The smile evaporated from the PM's face, and he leaned forward, and spoke very slowly.

You will plant bombs in English towns and cities to force us to pay for your country? How do you think that will work out for you? You do that, then tell me this. How will the English people respond if I answer those attacks by bombing East Belfast? Answer me that, Paddy?"

The red-faced man went a very pale white.

Chapter 3: Israel-on-the-Atlantic.

You would have thought that given the lessons of Brexit the process would have been very clearly defined. First a border poll on the question of a United Ireland, and then a follow-up on the actual agreement that would reunite the two parts of the island.

That would have made sense.

The problem was that every Irish nationalist pol was terrified of being accused of being the guy against a united Ireland. That and the fact that the Irish, as a nation, have a bizzare susceptibility to group-think. Once something becomes an accepted mainstream opinion in Ireland it is impossible to question until the whole thing explodes in the nation's face. At that point the whole nation pretends that whilst other people may have believed and benefitted from such an idea, they never did. See Irish property boom 1997-2011.

James Joyce, former Secretary General to the Department of the Taoiseach

“The Combined Loyalist Military Command, or Combined Loyalist Forces (CLF) as they came to call themselves, issued a warning within hours of the result. That it did not accept the result and would regard any Irish soldier, civil servant or police officer that crossed the border as a legitimate military target. The Irish government immediately invited the DUP to Dublin for talks on the transition, which the DUP refused to attend, instead despatching a delegation to Downing Street to inform the UK Government that it would not accept the result. We knew they wouldn’t get anywhere with that, because our ambassador in London was well-connected with the Tories and had the temperature of the party. Today’s Tories aren’t our dad’s Tories. They’re just as likely to be a self-employed car mechanic from Leeds, and have no emotional connection to the DUP. Truth be told, whenever they met DUP MPs it hurt unionism, because most of them are so fucking odd. We had to sort of hope that the DUP would simply wake up and smell the coffee. A come to Jehovah moment, if you will.”

Lieutenant-General Joe Staunton, former Chief of Defence Staff, Permanent Defence Forces

Ireland.

“Ready? Of course we weren’t ready! As always with issues of national security Irish politicians don’t want to give us the money or training to do the task, then come running to us when the shit starts flying. As soon as the result of the border poll had come through I’d put together a team from DFA, Army intelligence, the Garda commissioner and SecGen Justice. We worked on the basis that the deadline from London was for real, and the Garda Commissioner, through his contacts with the PSNI, was able to arrange some serious meetings for us in Jersey with senior PSNI people. We all went over pretending to be businessmen holding some board meeting, and they gave us their assessment of potential problems.

I can tell you, it scared the shit out of me.

For a start, we weren’t even sure we could trust the PSNI. It was better than the RUC, admittedly, but still, there were a large number of officers not exactly thrilled at reunification. Many were worried about their jobs, being subsumed into the Guards, some even worried about having to learn Irish! I was able to clarify all that very quickly, and at least settle the career officers.

We actually decided that very quickly, the question of keeping the PSNI. I didn’t see the benefit of merging the two forces but I certainly saw how it would go down in some parts of the north, with Garda patrol cars driving down Sandy Row. So we agreed to kick that question ten years into the future, guarantee fellas their pensions, service etc. That calmed a lot of nerves.

The big worry was obviously the Loyalists. What would the CLMC do? The PSNI briefing would destroy your trousers. They reckoned that there were about 250 hardmen, half at least who were ex-British army, who would take up arms against us. They could organise quickly, and could source weapons from various Christian fruitcakes in the southern US states who saw their struggle as a battle between good godfearin’ Christians and us filthy liberal heathens in the south.

Garda Crime & Security Branch confirmed the analysis.

Would they have popular support among the Protestant community was the big question. They'd almost certainly start hitting Catholic targets to stir up retaliation from republican paramilitaries, and get the old ball rolling once again.

There was a tone amongst many in the south that loyalist paramilitaries are just thugs and criminals, and that with modern surveillance technology we'd be able to wrap them up quickly. There was also this idea that they were essentially stupid, whereas the Provos were big into education and college degrees in the H block and all the rest. My own feeling was that such a premise was a very dangerous one to be putting all your chips on. Al-Qaeda have proven what a small group of dedicated and organised people could do: they plunged the United States into the longest war of its history.

What was even more worrying was the sheer level of manpower, I'm sorry, personpower needed to deal with an effective loyalist terrorist operation. Back in the bad old days the British Army had 30,000 troops in the north, backed up by 15,000 RUC, half that in UDR, and MI5 and GCHQ intelligence gathering support. Just for the north, and that includes rotating those soldiers in and out with another 30,000 to replace them over their tour of active service. Just for Northern Ireland. We simply could not match that, and that's not even considering how to deal with Loyalist attacks in the south.

My recommendation to the Taoiseach was pretty straightforward: we either come to an agreed Ireland that most loyalists and unionists can feel comfortable with or else we can prepare to become the most heavily militarized society in Europe, effectively Israel with shitty weather. As far as I was concerned that was the choice. But of course, you know politicians. Every Taoiseach wanted to be go down in history as the guy who reunited Ireland. Consequences are always for later. Well, as we learnt, there was no escaping the consequences."

James Joyce, former Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach.

“As it happened, once we were sure that the British were indeed going to withdraw from Northern Ireland as per their deadline, planning took on a certain rationality. We arranged meetings with all the senior department heads of the Northern Ireland civil service alongside the PSNI and found them all to be quite reasonable. Probably because they're so used to working in a political vacuum given the hokey-cokey approach of the Stormont assembly. We moved quickly to reassure them about the housekeeping issues, you know, pensions, job security, career paths etc.

As one civil servant to another that was quite easy to do and it should also be borne in mind that a substantial proportion of senior civil servants in Northern Ireland, because of the third level education system, tended to come from a Catholic or soft nationalist background. The problem for them was literally what would the chain of command be given that the unionists refused to participate in a Northern administration which was part of the united Ireland.

Sinn Fein, the SDLP, and Alliance were all ready to take their seats and we even speculated as to the possibility of Alliance designating themselves a Unionist party under the Good Friday Agreement to give them extra seats to represent the newest community, if only at arm's length. But the basic position was for there to not be a huge amount of change on day one of the border coming down. No triumphalism or even talk of taking down Union Jacks where they were flying. They would not be replaced by tricolours. Not immediately, anyway.

Midnight of reunification day went, as you know, relatively smoothly. There were various yobbos running around with tricolours but the PSNI managed to keep them under control. The Taoiseach was very clear that law and order would be maintained in Northern Ireland regardless of what side of the sectarian divide the trouble came from, and that sent the right signal.

But as usual, summer heat managed to stir up all the trouble we need.”

Chapter 4: The Occupation.

200,000 lights gathered outside Belfast City Hall three days after reunification. It was a sea of red, white, and blue under the age-old banner of No Surrender, and the usual suspects spoke of perfidious Albion for selling them out to the Dublin government. Curiously enough, none of the speeches seemed to actually offer an alternative to the current state of play.

Various reporters noted this, asking many of the participants in the rally what it was they actually wanted now that Northern Ireland had left the United Kingdom. It became very apparent very quickly that the basic demand was that Northern Ireland be permitted to re-join the United Kingdom. They were very dismissive, even indignant at the suggestion that England did not wish for Northern Ireland to be part of a United Kingdom funded by English taxpayers, or that the people of England and Wales had a right to not pay for Northern Ireland.

Some suggested a possible role for the British monarch, and many spoke of raising a petition pleading with the monarch to instruct the prime minister to permit Northern Ireland to re-join the UK.

It became very apparent, however, that the purpose of the rally was not to debate the constitutional and fiscal future of the province but above all as an opportunity to vent anger and talk about betrayal and paint hysterical images of the future.

The rally ended relatively peacefully with the burning of an effigy of both the Taoiseach and the prime minister.

It was after the rally that the trouble started, when a counter demonstration of hard-line nationalists, unconnected it had to be said, with Sinn Fein, proceeded to taunt and engage in a street battle with the rally loyalists. The fighting escalated quickly into wide-scale disorder in central Belfast, to the extent that the PSNI struggled to maintain the peace and the chief constable then requested the permission of the Irish minister of Justice to use rubber and plastic baton rounds. This was one of the key moments for the new country and also a moment of calling the bluff of Southern nationalists who did not want to engage in deep thinking about what reunification

meant. For decades Irish governments had condemned the use of rubber and plastic baton rounds by British security forces in Northern Ireland and now those same politicians were faced with having to make the choices their British counterparts before them had wrestled with.

The gut instinct of the minister was of course to veto the use of baton rounds but that decision left him facing an even more difficult one. The chief constable of the PSNI was very clear in his assessment of what would happen: if he could not use baton rounds he would have to withdraw his officers from the central Belfast area and effectively cede control of the centre of the city to the fighting nationalists and loyalists. The option of deploying public order Gardai from across the border or indeed Irish army troops was considered but both the minister and the chief constable suspected that such an act may actually cause more problems than would resolve and so with that in mind the minister reluctantly agreed to the use of baton rounds. The PSNI then moved in to restore order in central Belfast, firing over 100 baton rounds in the process. 99 of them either did no harm or injured protesters both nationalist and loyalist but not in a serious way. One round, however, did hit an 11-year old boy in the temple and killed him. He became the first loyalist victim of what came to be known in loyalist circles as the occupation.

The PSNI was well used to having to defend the use of non-lethal weaponry when it didn't live up to its name, but for the justice minister in Dublin it was a whole new ballgame, and such was the savaging of him (especially from his Sinn Fein coalition partners) he had resigned within 36 hours of the incident.

The cabinet argued for hours as it tried to calm the situation by apologizing profusely for the death of the young boy, and about making a pledge that the use of baton rounds would be made illegal. However the chief constable, alongside his Garda commissioner and PDF chief of staff colleagues, all attended cabinet and argued forcefully that such a decision would be folly.

The use of nominally non-lethal weapons such as, for example, water cannon could, the PSNI commander said just as equally result in fatalities, a likelihood that increases with further and further use of the weapons in question.

He confronted the Irish politicians with a very uncomfortable fact. That in order to maintain order where large numbers of people were engaged in acts of public violence vandalism or destruction it meant that the options open to a police force were quite limited.

Yes, baton charges by public order squads with shields and helmets can play a role, but non-lethal weapons must be an option when a crowd threatens to overwhelm the physical presence of the police officers present. He also reminded the cabinet members present that baton rounds were brought into Northern Ireland in the 1970s as an alternative to using live ammunition on crowds.

The choice is yours, said the PSNI commander. You either permit us to use this equipment to maintain order or you surrender control of areas once a crowd reaches a certain level in terms of numbers or in terms of willingness to use violence.

This is essentially a political decision that you have to make.

But bear in mind one thing, he reminded them.

I will not permit you to put my officers in danger. I will not permit you to convey instructions to them which restricts their ability to protect themselves at the same time it restricts their ability to use non-lethal weapons. If you attempt to force me to make those decisions you will have my resignation and I will publicly state why.

As if that wasn't a big enough surprise to the cabinet, the fact that the Garda commissioner and the chief of defence staff supported their northern colleague left the politicians present in clear terms as to the difficult choices they would now have to make.

Little did they know it was about to get considerably worse.

Lieutenant-General Joe Staunton, former Chief of Defence Staff, Permanent Defence Forces

Ireland.

"I was packing my briefcase to go home, as my wife and I had been planning to go out for dinner that evening. It was about 5 to 6 when I got the call about the Barrow street bomb.

As the first attack of the CLF campaign against us, it turned out to be pretty indicative of what sort of campaign they would wage and what sort of damage it would do. Forensics later identified that the weapon had a lot of hallmarks of the sort of IED you would encounter in Iraq or Afghanistan, which to be honest didn't really surprise us given that we knew many members of the CLF were ex-British army veterans. The timing of the attack again showed a level of planning and foresight which was deeply troubling. The bomb itself exploded at 5:25, just outside Barrow Street DART station, when the station itself would be busy with people finishing up for the day but also outside the Google building which was, of course, one of the key sites of foreign direct investment in this country.

It was, in short, the perfect target, hitting both a transport hub and a major national industrial target at the same time.

Initial casualty figures suggested that about 40 people had been injured in the bomb, but as we know that would rise as more succumbed to the injuries and eventually 51 people died. They were a mixture of many nationalities, which again was a deliberate act, a direct thrust against the multinational workforce that sat at the core of our foreign direct investment strategy.

CCTV footage studied later would reveal that the loyalist terrorists who carried out the attack had actually been sitting in the car at the very end of Barrow street waiting to trigger the bomb at the most opportune moment.

As it happens, we did have a plan for this. As part of our exercises we had run some what we call red team exercises. This is a well-established NATO practice of setting up a paper-based exercise, a table-top exercise as such, where one group plays the role of the attackers and another the role of the security forces. The exercises had come up with useful response procedures to deal with specific incidents as they occur, and an attack on Barrow Street had in fact been one of the exercises that

have been carried out given the prominence of FDI in the area and so that plan was triggered into place immediately.

Of course, later on the media started suggesting that we had known the attack would happen, but the reality is that we had identified over sixty targets across the country, and at the time this country did not have the security resources to maintain a meaningful watch on sixty high-risk targets. It's as simple as that.

When you are confronted with an incident like this your training and your experience teaches you certain things, that you have clear objectives that you have to achieve in terms of securing the area, evacuating the injured, preserving evidence in an attempt to identify the attackers but also to be aware of the possibility that you are being lured into a trap. This has been a common occurrence in recent years where atrocities are carried out and the terrorists have planted a second device to await the arrival of security forces, emergency teams, etc. Sometimes they even wait for hours for specialist counter-terrorist or forensic units to arrive so that they can attack them and inflict a significant blow on the counter-terrorist capacity and capabilities of the nation in question.

We're particularly vulnerable to this given the objections Irish voters have to spending on defence capabilities. A bomb at the right time could wipe out this country's primary terrorist response capability. You can take certain measures with that in terms of securing parameters and very quickly detaining any possible suspicious individuals on the basis that they could well be the terrorist leader observing the product of their handiwork or getting ready to carry out a secondary attack on security forces but there's only so much you can do when there's people bleeding on the streets, and broken glass everywhere, screaming people begging for help, you can only be cautious to a certain degree whether it's politically or out of your own simple sense of humanity.

You have to act, you have to help people and that means yes, you are putting yourself in danger and as I arrived on the scene that occurred to me. The Garda ERU team were already in position, and regular Gardai were securing the area as Dublin ambulance and Fire Brigade were pulling people out from under various bits of debris. The bomb itself had been placed in a bin at the bottom of the stairs

leading into the DART station and beside the lift for disabled passengers and killed, as you know, a man in a wheelchair waiting for the lift.

Whilst we were engaged in handling the situation, pretty much getting it under control quite efficiently, and I have to say I took a certain amount of grim satisfaction in our professional response. I hadn't heard about the Intel bomb in Kildare, and then everybody on Barrow Street heard the muffled boom from Grand Canal Docks. I immediately got into my car and began to mobilise additional units as best I could but I was well aware that even at that stage where we had three major terrorist incidents we were now at the very edge of our capability to deal with terrorist attacks. If there had been a fourth or fifth bomb attack that day they would have been responded to by the Guards. They would have been armed and yes we probably would have mobilized some troops from the nearest barracks possible but that response would not have been a professional counter-terrorist response because all our professional counter-terrorist assets were deployed in Kildare, Barrow Street and Grand Canal Docks. This was what forced me, the Garda commissioner and the Chief Constable of the PSNI to have our showdown with the cabinet over resources."

92 people died in the Barrow street, Grand Canal Docks and Intel bombings. A statement by the CLF took full responsibility for the attacks and warned that unless the Irish government announced that it would immediately renounce the reunification of Ireland further attacks would follow.

Across the Republic the reaction of the public seem to be dominated by two different opinions.

The first was that vengeance should be sought against loyalists, with online demands for a full-scale military assault on loyalist areas in East Belfast. Many of these armchair generals calling up radio talk shows and issuing demands on Twitter seemed to have a very over-estimated view of the military capacity of their country and indeed some of them seemed genuinely surprised when challenged by radio hosts to name correctly what sort of military resources Ireland had at its disposal.

The second group of people were those who basically were very open in their hostility to a united Ireland and called for the government to renounce unity and indeed many of these people even advocated the building of a Berlin-style wall along the border to ensure the security of the State. The briefing to the full cabinet and leaders of the opposition (at the Taoiseach's request) by the three security heads in the country was widely leaked in the media.

There were actual gasps in the cabinet room when the Garda commissioner, speaking for all three, outlined what sort of spending requirements would be required to ensure national security in the current crisis. The commissioner outlined the need to increase the size of the Permanent Defence Force from its current 9,500 troops to approximately 150,000 with compatible purchase of equipment and barracks on both sides of the former border to ensure a firm presence on the ground.

Additionally they pointed out that giving the sort of security operations that would now need to be maintained being essentially of a counterinsurgency nature that the Defence Forces would require at least 70 helicopters of various sizes and also drones to allow high altitude surveillance.

The Guards themselves would require an increase from the current size of 13000 officers to something close to 45,000 with a particular focus on enlarging counter-terrorist intelligence gathering and forensic capabilities. There would also be a debate about whether it would be necessary to temporarily arm all members of an Garda Síochána, but that he felt that for the moment if there was a very substantial increase in the number of Armed Response Units (ARUs) available to local Garda commanders that such an action would suffice in the short term.

There would also be a requirement for a dedicated national internal security agency with considerable surveillance capabilities.

In short, the three security chiefs outlined a national security budget which would move the country's security spending into the single largest item in the national budget and effectively make Ireland the most heavily-armed and militarized nation in the whole of Western Europe.

The chief of defence staff also added that even if the security forces received all these resources the reality was, as the British had proven from 1969 up to the end of The Troubles, that any solution which will end violence will almost certainly have to be a political one and that the danger of responding too heavily to terrorist activity could be that one ends up recruiting yet more soldiers to the cause of the enemy. As he pointed out, that has always been the lesson of Irish history when the British tried to suppress Irish insurgency.

The response of the cabinet to the briefing, once they got over the huge sums involved, was mixed. The minister for finance was quick to point out that given as the state was already borrowing heavily to fund Northern Ireland, this additional huge increase in expenditure would bring into question in the bond markets the state's ability to meet its debt interest obligations. It will almost certainly require, the minister said, some sort of temporary Emergency Security Levy on all income, including welfare and state pensions, to raise revenue but also show the markets that the state is serious about its borrowing obligations.

Sorry, but who exactly elected these bond markets anyway, the most-left wing SF member, the minister for housing, asked his party colleague.

We do when we go asking them for money, the finance minister replied, and a row broke out, with the FG ministers coming to their SF colleague's defence.

This is all a securocrat power-grab, the minister for housing declared. There's no way we could possibly need that amount of troops.

We can reduce the figure, the CDS said. Just give us a list of which of Ireland's 849 towns we are not required to patrol. Then I'll give you a new figure, minister.

Why can't the usual suspects be rounded up, a Fine Gael minister asked the PSNI chief. Your intelligence people must have a good idea as to who the loyalist terrorists are?

Probably in the same lodge, the minister for housing murmured.

The PSNI chief leapt to his feet in protest, and the minister to his, and it was only the Taoiseach shouting at them both to sit down that calmed the situation. He then suggested that everybody take a 15 minute break before resuming.

After another hour and a half of questioning by the cabinet the three security chiefs left to allow their political masters debate and make their decisions. In the classic Irish political sense a compromise was arrived at: emergency funding would be made available for immediate requirements but that the longer term investment required would be delayed for final decision for a number of weeks, to allow colleagues to consult but also to see how the situation developed. They would not have to wait long.

Lieutenant-General Joe Staunton, former Chief of Defence Staff, Permanent Defence Forces

Ireland.

“Once the politicians had decided to open the fount to at least some degree we were able to move quickly on some things that we felt would be of immediate use.

The first was the setting up of the Central intelligence unit North and South (CIUNAS) which allowed us to have a central unit for intelligence that was coming in from both sides of the border, but in particular it allowed us to better integrate PSNI intelligence with our own army and Garda intelligence.

We immediately discovered, of course, that one of the major problems was that they had relied quite a bit on the electronic intelligence-gathering capabilities of MI5 and GCHQ which of course were no longer available to us. Having said that, our good connections with the US meant that the FBI were able to second some people to us to allow us to set up, with significant additional funding now available, a fast wiretapping and electronic surveillance unit which can be utilised very quickly against suspected CLF members and their families etc. It was CIUNAS that first alerted us to the possibility of drone use by the CLF. Apparently British forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and to a lesser extent Syria had encountered increasingly sophisticated use of drones by Islamic State operatives against security forces and as a result it was quite possible that there were CLF operatives with considerable experience in the construction of weaponized drones.

That’s the thing about Irish neutrality. It’s bollocks. Genuinely neutral countries take it seriously. The Finns have over 70 modern interceptors. The Swedes build their own. The Swiss have armed every adult man in the country with a military issue rifle and the training to go with it.

We’re not neutral. We’re militarily negligent, based on a frankly moronic idea that if you don’t like war then war won’t bother you, which coming from a country that had to shoot its way out of the British Empire is an extraordinary piece of self-delusion. But it was where we were, and that caused us a lot of problems.

One of those problems is that many of your older military officers do not have it have extensive exposure to the newer tactics and equipment used in the modern battlefield and so there's always a danger that once some new piece of technology starts to come on stream that they will dismiss it as some sort of fad or toy that can be ignored.

Whilst the Garda, PDF and PSNI officers certainly took the threat seriously, I have to admit that there were a significant number of my subordinates who sort of rolled their eyes at the Intelligence analysis coming through suggesting that such a drone weapon could be deployed.

It's very hard to plan a strategy to counter the deployment of a weapon if the people who are supposed to be carrying out a strategy don't even believe in the threat itself.

That pretty much meant that when the attack on Croke Park on the All-Ireland occurred we were certainly not ready for it.

The reality, of course, is that we were effectively warned about the attack.

With the benefit of hindsight it is bloody apparent that we seriously underestimated the sophisticated capability and skills of the CLF. Because we mocked their ideology and their beliefs as being nonsensical we led ourselves into believing that they themselves in terms of their own skills were not up to par.

They proved us to be very much mistaken in that regard.

In the run-up to the All-Ireland Twitter noise increased about the possibilities of the CLF carrying out some form of chemical attack. We dismissed these warnings as just bragging from some armchair warriors as we had no indication that the CLF had in fact any capability to produce chemical weapons. What we failed to grasp was that the British army veterans in the CLF had not only an astute grasp not just of terrorism but of how to utilise it in its purest form. In other words, not as a means of being delivered by actual weaponry, but that terror itself becomes the weapon to be delivered.

The attack itself was a model of simplicity.

They dressed up a commercial drone with various loyalist symbols and flags specifically for the purpose of it being identified as such by the crowds as it flew over Croke Park.

As is well-known by your readers, the liquid it sprayed was a harmless mixture of water, vinegar, and colour dye, the purpose of which was to panic people in the stadium into believing it was some form of chemical attack and of course that is exactly what happened.

The crowd stampeded, and 27 people including 9 children died and hundreds more were injured.

Two days later elements of the dissident nationalist paramilitary organisations carried out a series of shootings and bombings in East Belfast and that I think most people regard as the beginning of what became colloquially known as the New Troubles. It was in this context that we had to take over the sovereignty of Northern Ireland.”

The continued escalation of the situation in Northern Ireland led to the British government announcing to its Irish counterpart that whilst it had been willing to deploy additional British troops to the north during the transition the situation now required extra troops and they would have to be Irish.

The Irish government, after hours of debate, agreed to activate the Reserve Defence Force, calling up the additional 3000 reservists to barracks for possible deployment to the north in support of the PDF and the PSNI.

The announcement caused an immediate outcry in the public, given the disruption it caused to businesses and families. Many reservists called up the very popular RTE Radio programme “Liveline” presented by Joe Duffy to complain that although they’d signed up to RDF they certainly didn’t expect it to result in them being sent into danger.

One conversation with the mother of a full-time new PDF recruit summed up many of the challenges facing the government.

Mary: I'm just saying Joe, why should my son have to go fight in the north of Ireland?

Joe: But Mary, he is a professional soldier, I mean, didn't he sign for this sort of thing?

Mary: He's only 27 Joe, he's barely a child. How can he be expected to know what he's doing?

And another thing Joe: the minister for finance was on the telly talking about us having to spend millions extra on tanks and helicopters and guns and that we're not getting our pension increase now. I thought we're supposed to be neutral, Joe. Why are we spending all this money on war? Why isn't the EU or the US sending soldiers? Or the United Nations? Why do I have to pay the Security Levy Joe?

Joe: But Mary, it's our country. Surely we have to pay for our own country's security?

Mary: No, Joe, you're wrong. The EU or the Germans or the Americans are being selfish and looking after themselves as usual. Putting themselves first. It's typical Joe.

Following the Croke Park attack a large mob of thousands proceeded to march from nationalist areas into loyalist areas in East Belfast, resulting in the PSNI having to put a defensive perimeter around the area.

The chief constable, within 12 hours of the fighting, had contacted the minister for justice to inform him that it was his opinion that his forces could not hold the line and in order to prevent possible wide-scale injury and possibly even a pogrom against the Protestant community Irish soldiers must be deployed to protect East Belfast.

The three security chiefs, now referred to as The Troika, knew exactly what the implications of flying Irish soldiers into loyalist areas would mean.

On the one hand, it would immediately relieve pressure on the PSNI and ensure the protection of the minority.

On the other hand, it was exactly the sort of symbolic gesture that the CLF had been hoping for, the sign of Irish soldiers in armoured personnel carriers with Irish flags on them driving down the streets of Northern Ireland and starting what is referred to as the occupation.

The minister consulted with the Taoiseach and a decision was made to deploy Irish troops under the command of the chief constable of the PSNI, armed with non-lethal weapons. The chief of defence staff had immediately begun training of PDF forces in urban riot control alongside the same training standards and techniques used by the Garda and the PSNI and so there was not a shortage of trained Irish troops ready to integrate alongside the PSNI in their task.

The arrival of Irish troops in East Belfast certainly provided for some of the more surreal images, being pelted with stones, rotting fruit and in some cases human faeces. Loyalists were very quick to hurl abuse and taunt the Irish troops even as they were setting up barricades at the end of their streets to protect them from the nationalist mob trying to storm the street. Sinn Fein, in particular, found itself in a very difficult position with some of its members expressing outrage at the idea that Irish troops were effectively been used to prevent some of their activists from marching on East Belfast.

There were blazing rows in Sinn Fein between southern and north activists.

A series of car bombs, in Enniscorthy, Nenagh and Fermoy all on a single busy shopping caused a small number of casualties but shocking images on the TV and online. In the Dail, deputy after deputy rose in the chamber and demanded that the towns in their constituencies be given priority in terms of security patrols.

Dissident IRA attacks on Loyalist areas were quick and brutal, exactly as the CLF wanted.

Lieutenant-General Joe Staunton, former Chief of Defence Staff, Permanent Defence Forces Ireland.

“We had not got the troops. It was as simple as that. When every town in Ireland is demanding visible armed military or police patrols on a 24/7 basis that isn't just adding up the towns and adding a half dozen soldiers to each. You need somewhere for them to sleep and wash and eat, you need to be able to rotate them in and out so they get some leave and see their families. It's a huge logistical operation, and something Irish politicians had always ignored.

This was the tipping point where they had to recognise that if they wanted to have their constituents be able to see armed patrol vehicles going up and down the main streets of Belmullet or Lifford or Berehaven that we need a security force of between 150 and 200,000 full-time men and women to be able to deliver that, and the budget to resource it.

Of course, the politicians don't believe you when you tell them something like that, so I took out a map of Gort, and spread it on the table.

How many troops will you need to secure Gort, I asked them.

Twenty, thirty, they suggested.

I asked them where, if they were terrorists, where would they plant a bomb. They all pointed at the square. I then asked them how would you stop a bomber planting the bomb: where would you put checkpoints?

They start sealing off the roads coming into Gort.

Right, says I. So you're going to search every car at every checkpoint?

Not everyone, the minister for housing says.

Which ones, the PSNI CC asks.

The ones with young men.

Why? The PSNI man asked.

Because there aren't any female loyalist terrorists.

The PSNI man actually laughed.

There was actually a silence around the cabinet table.

Well, anyway, I said, you're talking five troops per checkpoint at a minimum, plus rest, toilet and food facilities, and what about searching people on foot? You can carry a bomb in a backpack, you know.

And what about this?

I tapped the train station, that led right into the centre of the town.

Then there's the collateral targets you are creating: every checkpoint creates a traffic jam. A bomb in a bin alongside any road packed with cars could cause major carnage, and that's assuming only a single weapon, and not secondary devices timed to go off half an hour after the initial blast.

So you're going to need armed patrols on each route checking the bins. And an Explosive Ordnance unit within 30m drive. In short, Gort will need, maybe 120 men on 24/7 rotation.

A town the size of Gort. Big Towns will need more, cities will need thousands.

We have effectively three to four thousand active troops we can put on the ground, and another two thousand reservists.

In short, I told them, we simply haven't the resources. We have not got the bodies nor the equipment.

And we're not going to pretend otherwise, in front of an Oireachtas committee or elsewhere. We need the money, we need to start recruiting and training, and we may need conscription.

As expected, the C word caused ructions, as I knew it would.

The three of us had agreed that I'd throw it out, if only to ensure it leaked. We wanted the seal broken on it just in case.

In fairness to the Taoiseach he actually recognised that this country was in a serious situation, and it was his job to deal with it. He agreed to the emergency funding but asked that we play down the conscription, and I agreed. But it was the head of the PSNI who left them with something to ponder.

Ladies and gentlemen, he said. I'd be remiss in my duty if I didn't leave you with this clear assessment. We are talking about moving from a country with a very modest security capability to something resembling Israel: a quasi-militarized society. You need to realise that.

As it turned out, he was right in more ways than one."

Within a week of the passing of the emergency security budget and the National Security Act things started to physically change.

The security forces had two challenges: the first was dealing with the CLF attacks, aimed primarily in the south. The second was preparations for Unification Day (UD), when the British formally pulled out and the south took formal jurisdiction. The PSNI Chief Constable insisted that a substantial number of properly equipped PDF troops be ready to deploy in support of the PSNI. Whilst there were already troops in the north, they were relatively small in number and the British Army were still doing the heavy lifting. But that was about to change.

News reports showed plane after plane arriving in Dublin, Knock and Shannon with new armoured vehicles, drones, helicopters and other equipment. Every single media outlet was inundated with advertisements to joining the special full-time reserves of the PDF and Garda Siochana, although CIUNAS warned of attempts by nationalist extremists to penetrate the security forces, and this meant that additional screening of social media had to be done to weed out in particular anti-Protestant fanatics.

With every day, the capability of the security forces grew, and slowly checkpoints and hovering Army and Garda drones became the norm.

In the run up to Unification Day, helicopters ferried more and more troops into barracks in the UK as equal numbers of British troops pulled back to England.

The rules of engagement had to be agreed with cabinet, and the chief of defence staff was authorised to use tear gas, baton rounds and water cannon if necessary. The water cannon vehicles, all French-made, were flown in by the French Air Force to Belfast.

On UD, crowds gathered in most cities and towns on the island, and just after 11:35 the British secretary of state and the commander of British Forces shook hands with the minister for foreign affairs who had arrived to take ownership of Stormont.

“Best of luck,” the British general said to his Irish counterpart as he climbed into a helicopter with the Secretary of State.

“Don’t you want the flag?” the minister asked. The secretary shook his head.

“Not my flag, mate.” he replied, and signalled the pilot to take off. The helicopter was up and gone in moments.

The minister looked at his watch. 11:55.

He nodded to the colonel, who waved at the Irish soldier, and it happened. The union jack came down, and the tricolour went up, and on another pole nearby, at a lower height as was befitting, the EU flag went up. The Irish soldiers respectfully folded the union jack, and put it in a box.

“Keep an eye on that: I don’t want to see it up on fucking eBay,” the colonel warned his subordinates.

Large crowds had gathered as midnight approached. As a precaution, the Garda had sealed off the street in front of the British embassy in Ballsbridge, and it had turned out to be a wise decision as a large group of young men, many drunk, had turned up to taunt and abuse those inside. The Guards held the line, but it got ugly. As the crowd got bigger, many in it started a synchronised jab at the police officers as they chanted that they’d “have your jobs next”.

In Belfast, a large crowd once again attempted to storm East Belfast, to be met by PSNI and large numbers of PDF with riot gear. This time, the Irish soldiers were not abused by the loyalist residents, and instead were called traitors and west brits by the mob. As the crowd grew larger and larger the commanding officer, in consultation with the PSNI officer in charge, fired tear gas into the crowd. Suddenly, the tell-tale rattle of a machine gun cut through the shouting. To the rear of the PDF lines a group of soldiers, dismounting from an APC, were cut down. A second burst seemed to hit no other target as the other soldiers scattered for cover behind APCs.

Ten minutes later, coming from the direction of East Belfast, a car sped towards a PDF checkpoint. The corporal in charge waved at the car to stop, but it accelerated. The soldiers, on edge with news of the attack in East Belfast, opened fire just as the car passed them, killing the occupants, three

teenage boys and a teenage girl. All were Protestant. It was later revealed that they had raced at the checkpoint as a dare.

The dissident IRA responded two days later, shooting dead a DUP councillor in North Antrim.

James Joyce, former Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach.

“To anyone over 55, this was all very familiar. Tit for tat killings, bomb threats, and constantly waiting for what we used to call “a spectacular”, another Barrow street or Croke Park. A list of codenames from the CLF was communicated to us quickly, and was used. To be honest, most of the bombs planted by the CLF were dummies: maybe one in seven were actually armed devices. But the CLF knew we had to respond to each, and each caused a public panic. They would detonate the occasional one but after Barrow street no one actually died in a bombing, as we got very good at evacuation.

It was very apparent that the CLF had a clear economic strategy. They were going after FDI in a very public way, and that forced us to respond very publicly. Every major economic target was heavily patrolled, and all this was burning through public funds, as it was designed to do.

When the CLF announced the death list, stating that all multinational employees in Ireland were regarded as fair targets, that seriously scared the shit out of us.

It wasn't that we thought they'd do it, but the effect on FDI...CEO after CEO issued ultimatums to the Taoiseach...we literally had weeks to solve this situation or the country's entire economic base was going under. They deliberately targeted hotels too, strangling the tourist trade. We were haemorrhaging money, in the north bringing public sector pay and social welfare up to our levels, on security, and now on an emergency fund to bail out businesses affected by the terror campaign. The bond markets started growling at us, and the minister for finance had aged ten years in six months. Politically, the strain of soldiers on the streets, checkpoints, ID cards, drones forever hovering had put the country on edge. In the Dail, two clear extremes were emerging: one group advocating we withdraw from the north, and a bigger group demanding we “get tough”. Bring in internment, restore the death penalty. The security forces were already rounding up all sorts. Both dissident IRA and CLF suspects. Then the Americans arrived.”

The Newry ambush occurred when a drone from the Special Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Agency (SUAVA), which operated national security drones on behalf of the security forces spotted a suspicious vehicle crossing over one of the many minor roads alongside the border into the south. The drone managed to get a clear shot of the two men in the vehicle who were identified by the CIUNAS database as former members of the British Army with connections to the CLF. The database had been secretly provided by the UK government in return for concessions on EU fishery quotas. In a textbook example of combined operations coordination, the drone operators then guided in an Army Rangers Wing unit which stopped the vehicle. A firefight ensued, killing the two occupants of the vehicle and revealing substantial amounts of explosives and IEDs being transported across the border for possible use in the south.

The reaction to the operation depended on where you are coming from: in the North DUP politicians demanded to know whether the Irish government was operating a shoot to kill policy, whilst in the south the operation was enthusiastically received by the public, with Sinn Fein and Fine Gael ministers both praising the security forces for their robust response.

Within the unionist parties, the policy of not taking up their allocated seats in the Dail pending the first All-Ireland general election was now being questioned. The Dublin government and the CLF were openly at war, and the unionist parties were simply irrelevant. On top of that, the more thoughtful elements of the two main unionist parties were coming to grips with reality. There was simply no appetite in London for a return of Northern Ireland to the UK. Visits to Westminster had struggled to find more than a half dozen older and irrelevant members of parliament willing to support it. A poll funded by a wealthy former advertising executive with unionist connections found hardly any support at all among English voters for "reintegration". Indeed, there was more open hostility from English voters who thought the whole of Ireland wanted to rejoin the UK ("They've made their EU bed: they can fack off!") and simply could not grasp the concept of Northern Ireland.

15% of voters didn't even know it had been part of the UK some months ago.

It was in this contest that they decided to start subtly talking to the CLF.

Lieutenant-General Joe Staunton, former Chief of Defence Staff, Permanent Defence Forces

Ireland.

“We’d been made aware of the American angle from the CSA embassy in Tallahassee. Once again, it showed the savviness of the CLF leadership. It was like a form of political judo, using our US connections against us. The CLF had been recruiting in churches in the deep south, the bible bashing crazies. You know, selling them a picture of good God-fearing Protestants being oppressed by us dirty liberal gay-loving southerners. #ProtestantLivesMatter had caught fire with the white supremacist lads, the real headbangers. Not only were they recruiting supporters and money, but also sourcing guns, which was very easy in the CSA. Shipping them to Ireland would be hard, but not impossible given our failure to invest in our naval service. Given that we weren’t members of the European Defence Force, we had to pay to hire a French military satellite to help cover the west coast, and run as best we could a blockade, but we knew guns were getting through.

CIUNAS were quick to identify a group of Americans travelling to Belfast through Glasgow, and the FBI confirmed that they were former US Army. Our relationship with the CSA government is not as good as with the US, and they weren’t too restrained at showing their sympathies.

When we moved on the Americans, they fought back. The farmhouse they were staying in had old stone walls and it turned into a siege, especially given they had some pretty impressive automatic weapons. Their decision to hoist a US and confederate flag up beside the Ulster flag looked awful for us on US TV and online, and when they started giving interviews about being willing to die for Jesus we had protestors outside both our American embassies. That had quite an effect: we’re not used to being the country people protest about.

The plan had been just to contain them, wait them out, but we’d not realised who we were dealing with. One was an ex-Iraq sniper, and he’d brought both his tools of the trade and a desire to meet his maker. When he started shooting, he killed five of our guys in seconds, and pinned down so many others that the commander in the field feared they might try to break out. So he drone-striked them.

It came as a shock to many Irish that we even had that capability, but we did, and the image of a farmhouse, with the flags flying suddenly exploding in an orange ball played for a week. I can honestly say it changed how the Irish people saw themselves: this wasn't us. This was the Israelis, the Americans, the sort of thing they do, not peace-loving Ireland.

Even in the Dail the hardliners were stunned by the brutality of it.

Was he wrong to do it? Yes, he was. But I understand why he did.

When the bodies were recovered we got four Americans and five nordies. Two of the Americans came from the US, so both embassies complained, and the image of Ireland bombing the shit out of some sort of US freedom fighters did not go down well. There were huge Christian demonstrations outside our embassies, and boycotts of our products. The Taoiseach was swamped with exporters complaining about Irish products being burned in front of stores. We just were not used to being this country.

The drone attacks on the Pfizer pharmaceutical plant in Cork, and on Apple's distribution centre in Cork were, effectively, the last straw. As delivery systems they weren't great, some plastic explosive packed with ball-bearings, and although they didn't kill anyone they shattered a lot of windows and made a lot of noise, but that wasn't the issue. It was where they exploded.

The objective was not as much to cause loss of life or even property damage in terms of cost value, but to spread terror.

The images of them flying over the heads of helpless Irish cops and soldiers was, the IDA warned us, costing us millions in future investments. It looks like you are incapable of defending key pieces of economic infrastructure, which in this case is true. No army in the world has yet developed an effective defence against a swarm of AI drones that don't need remote control. Shooting at them can often cause more damage and injuries than the drone themselves, especially in built up areas like a stadium or an industrial estate.

Then some bunch of fucking nutcases decided to use this as an excuse to mount an operation in North Antrim where they attacked a Free Presbyterian Church on during morning worship, killing four worshippers.”

James Joyce, former Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach.

"It was incident after incident, ratcheting up just like the old days. The attacks on churches in particular, CIUNAS told us from online analysis, really riled up both sides. But, and I hate to say this, the body-count wasn't the real issue, callous as that sounds. It was the numbers.

I read a lot of history, and I'd read books about Rhodesia and South Africa and their transition from minority rule, and what's interesting is that it is not military defeat that forces you to negotiate in the end. It's raw hard economic data. De Klerk negotiated with Mandela because whilst the South African army would never be defeated by the ANC, the cost of maintaining the South African security state was just not viable. The numbers decide wars, and the Department of Finance was adamant. Our bond yields were heading towards 7%. We were pumping near €15 billion a year in subsidies in the north as our tax revenue from exports and tourism were plummeting, and our security costs were now the number one item in the budget.

What was worse was that the Dail was being harangued every day for not doing enough. Loyalist suspects were being picked up every day for questioning, but within an hour the police station was surrounded by thousands. Some in Special Branch wanted to spirit away suspects to a secret interrogation centre, but the Taoiseach said no. He was right. The security guys were under such pressure for results that it wouldn't be long before we were attaching fellas goolies to car batteries. Then elements in the DUP made contact. The loyalists were ready to talk.

Initial reaction was the usual no negotiation with terrorists stuff but we all knew that was bollocks given the history of this island. The Taoiseach consulted with the troika and all three supported him. Joe Staunton was very clear in his belief that the situation was getting out of hand. I think he even suggested we were on the verge of a Yugoslavian-style situation and that ultimately the solution would have to be a political one.

The Scottish first minister agreed to provide a location in some secure rural area, and ground rules were agreed. The loyalists got a promise of free passage to and fro, and the Scottish Defence Force

flew them in on a helicopter, and Scottish police provided a discreet parameter for us and our own security people.

The Taoiseach decided that I should go, along with a senior army man. I joked about needing a gun, but he pointed out I was more likely to accidentally shoot myself, which was probably true.

We actually had no idea who we were meeting. CIUNAS had failed to identify the leaders of the CLF, other than we suspected senior ex-military.

The house itself was a large Victorian affair on its own grounds, and was well chosen, with room for helicopters to land, release their passengers, and then fly to a nearby Scottish base to be refuelled.

The two men met the expectations. One was stocky, red-faced with a big moustache and pretty angry eyes. The other, Edgar Craig, didn't. In his mid-forties, tall, lean, in good shape and with a shaved head with just a hint of silver hair. He was warm, polite, even joked about the bizarreness of the situation. I assumed he was probably ex-British military, probably an officer, and although with a working-class Belfast accent certainly had an air of confidence and almost middle-class expectation about him.

He surprised me with his calm, blunt opening remarks.

He accepted that the union was gone.

That surprised me, and I could see that his colleague was uncomfortable with the opening remarks, but that he had expected it.

We want to look at an agreed Ireland were we can have, within it, a British homeland.

I shifted uneasily, and asked him to clarify: was he talking about a re-partition and an independent Ulster?

He shook his head. No, this will be part of Ireland, but legally recognised as being a minority British homeland. With rights and safeguards. And some sort of link to Scotland.

He stressed he did not have details, but wanted to at least try out the concept.

I was impressed. This was not pie in the sky stuff. There was something on the table to be discussed, poked, reshaped.

We eventually broke for dinner, and the Scottish government had laid on caterers or something but anyway basically it was a sort of steak egg and chips type thing, nothing too fancy but good hearty fare and I think the loyalist guys appreciated that.

During the dinner I pointed out that the Irish government had desperately tried to engage with the unionist parties both before and after the referendum.

Craig laughed and leaned back from the table.

No one, no one, has fucked up the cause of unionism more than the unionist parties, he said. Their total inability to think strategically, and to be rogered by the Tories at every step has been the bane of unionism.

You could have approached us direct, I suggested.

Would you have listened, he asked.

Chapter 5: A New Ireland.

Following the Scottish meeting, things moved fast. Craig and Joyce struck up a rapport to such an extent that a channel of communication was opened up between them through a DUP MLA. Craig stressed that he would not participate in the talks himself, but designated three DUP MLAs who had the authority to negotiate. The question of a ceasefire was broached, and became the first obstacle, as the loyalists believed such a period would merely be used by the security forces to move on the CLF.

It was the Garda Commissioner who came up with a possible alternative: that all counter-terrorist activity would halt in Northern Ireland during the ceasefire. The PSNI would continue normal policing operations, but all raids, arrests and searches by the security forces would cease.

This leaked shortly after the agreement was made and the CLF formally announced a ceasefire, and the Taoiseach was attacked even from some of his own backbenchers, but he stood by the deal.

The second stage, formal talks between the parties, was agreed with the Scottish Government once again agreeing to host formal talks, this time at Edinburgh Castle. The unionist parties agreed to a single delegation, including two representatives nominated by Craig.

One problem for the unionists was that they lacked advisors with formal diplomatic and legal skills to negotiate with a government. Various elements of the former Brexit campaign offered to assist but the CLF turned them down on the basis that the Irish Government had run rings around them during the Brexit withdrawal negotiations. The DUP weren't particularly pleased with this observation either.

Joyce suggested that perhaps the Israeli government, no fan of the Irish government or vice versa could be contacted. This was well-received in loyalist circles especially after the outrage it caused in Dail Eireann when it emerged that the Irish government would pay the Israeli advisors expenses. The Israelis were genuinely surprised to receive the request, but after some internal debate in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tel Aviv they decided that helping create a new European country

where a section of the population would regard them as close allies was in their interest, especially given the traditional pro-Palestinian stances of Irish governments. The Israelis were on-board.

The Scottish prime minister agreed to act as host for the conference, providing a substantial house and grounds with nearby accommodation for the various delegations. Scotland, along with the European Union, United States and the UK Government agreed to send observers to assist in issues that may be relevant to them. The English had been reluctant, given that they had effectively washed their hands of Northern Ireland but given the thoughts of Dublin and Edinburgh getting very pally in the EU decided to maintain a watching brief at least.

Finally, it came to finding a figure to chair the talks that would be agreeable to all sides. The CLF ruled out various US politicians on the basis that the Irish were too skilled and well-connected in Washington DC, and after much haggling the former Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was agreed upon and arrived just as the delegation themselves took up residence.

The conference quickly agreed on the principle that Nothing Is Agreed Until Everything Is Agreed (NIAUEIA), and Trudeau implored all present on the need for confidentiality and how leaks could be damaging to the process. In the interests of narrowing the huge number of opinions present he quickly asked for the conference to split into what he called Common Values Groups to agreed common position papers, meaning that most of the Dail parties and the SDLP meeting, and the DUP, UUP and CLF meeting to attempt to agree a common unionist paper. The Alliance Party, parties of the hard left and Green parties met and agreed a shorter paper which focussed on the need for human rights. The EU, US, UK and Scottish Government delegations enjoyed a series of fine lunches and walks throughout the city.

The nationalist parties started out with a minimum change paper which they knew would act as a placeholder until the CLF revealed what they really wanted.

The Unionist parties had greater challenges.

Avi Weismann, Chief Israeli Negotiator, Unionist Delegation.

"I've had a certain degree of experience negotiating with the parties in the Knesset after elections, putting governments together. It's a painstaking process when you are dealing with a proportional voting system that can have you trying to balance the needs and demands of maybe ten different parties in a government. Especially when at least half of them hate the other half's guys for some slight that was done to them twenty years ago. Indeed, the only thing that can often hold an Israeli government together is the fact that they all collectively hate the other guys on the far side of the Knesset even more. So listening to unionists denounce and accuse each other of historical betrayal and bad faith was not particularly new. But these guys go back hundreds of years. We thought we were the only people having to listen to other guys quote scripture at each other, but these guys actually believe it.

So you start by letting them tire each other out, get all the poison out. Then you slowly build them back together, very slowly, finding the bricks they all agree on and bit by bit...

What amazed me was that they had put so little thought into what they actually wanted.

I'd played a previous role in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and they always floundered on details, reams and reams of details, lines on maps and who gets to live where and what watchtower looks over what valley. These guys had none of that. My team had briefed ourselves very thoroughly on the Irish conflict but trying to find detail on what unionists wanted other than to remain in the UK was pretty much impossible. Once the UK was gone they were pretty much standing out in the cold with their cocks in their hands.

I say the unionist parties. Craig and the CLF surprised me by arriving with the Irish so-called Red Team document under their arm. I say it surprised us, but then, as I got to know Craig better I realised that should not have surprised me at all. He was incredibly focussed on what mattered, and was quick to use resources where they would benefit him. The unionists would spend days telling you why they wouldn't use the RT document, without suggesting an alternative, whereas the CLF had obviously spent days going through it and identifying what worked for them and what didn't.

He was much sharper than he pretended. Not university educated, I understand. Apparently that was regarded as something Catholics did which we found a bit surreal, but he was very well read, especially about history. Over dinner or during breaks he really enjoyed discussing Israeli history with me, and was solid on the subject. But he had convinced the loyalists to accept the Red Team document as an opening basis for their discussions.

The DUP and the UUP were more exasperating, immediately rejecting the document because it had been produced by the forum in Dublin. It was something I would encounter again and again with them, empty grandstanding and gesturing without an alternative. The two parties had their own documents and on reading them we concluded that they were basically a rewritten version of the forum report with a new cover. Rather than get into it with them my team took away all three documents and offered to merge them into an agreed unionist document, which they all agreed to.

The nationalist parties were hardly surprised about the content of the document when it was presented to them, given its source, but it still managed to cause a row when it was leaked, which was within an hour of it being presented. Not that anyone had expected any different, but the fact that the demands were now being made by a loyalist group who had shown considerable military prowess and so got a seat at the table was new for the Irish media. The proposals of the Red Team were no longer an academic exercise. They were the negotiating framework for a new country, and that sent a shiver down the Irish's backs. Shit just got real, as they say."

The leak of the Unionist proposals created far more heat in the republic than it should have, given the fact that most of it was not new. Trudeau decided to move quickly to agree some early wins. He took it upon himself to have a very large white board installed in the main plenary room where he started putting up what he thought were going to be obvious end destinations, whilst ensuring all that NIAUEIA.

Stormont would remain as part of a federal solution, as would the PSNI.

There would be a federal senate, sitting in Stormont in the old Senate chamber.

Some on the nationalist side were reluctant to even nominally accept that something was on the table, even under the Nothing Agreed principle, but Trudeau insisted that anything that either side insisted was taken off the table would be given a high value by him and would then be rightly considered if conceded later on as a major concession. Neither side was willing to use up brownie points pissing off the chair of the talks on minor issues, and so gradually a document, termed the Trudeau document, took shape outlining the key issues and possible solutions.

The Citizens' Assembly on a United Ireland, which had gathered some years previously, had been summoned into existence under the We Must Do Something, This Is Something, So We Must Do This rule of Irish politics. Parties headed into a general election where the UK departure from Europe had stirred the loins of the nation and its yearning for the fourth green field. With that in mind the idea of farming the issue out to another body to kick around the place relatively harmlessly filled the gap.

The idea had been based on the New Ireland Forum of the early 1980s, where the various nationalist parties (excluding Sinn Fein) met to discuss what a future United Ireland would look like.

What Ireland looks like now, Fianna Fail said, whilst Fine Gael, Labour and the SDLP had concluded that some sort of federal system might be needed.

The whole thing was ignored by unionists and then Mrs Thatcher had done her famous "Out, Out, Out" response to its various options, and that was, as they say, that.

This time was different because it was proposed that if unionists refused to participate then a de facto unionist delegation made up of academics, mostly from the north, would be asked to provide a "Red Team" to put the unionist case.

Given the opportunity for making a few quid, show how clever they were and spend days in Dublin in very nice accommodation, but mostly the clever bit, a delegation of 12 academics from the north took to their task.

The Red Team (known colloquially amongst the various delegates as the Red White and Blue Team) made their presentation to the assembly only after Fine Gael and Sinn Fein had presented a vision of a United Ireland that would manage to massively boost spending without raising significant tax under something called the Unity Dividend. That the north did not actually need huge amounts of subvention from southern taxpayers, but that both parties were “confident to the point of certain” that the taxpayers of the United States and the other European Union countries would be giving themselves hernias trying to keep Irish wallets in their pockets and letting them have the honour of paying for public services instead. Both parties were also certain that the Conservative Party administration in London would be absolutely overwhelmed with guilt for the 800 years of British misrule over the Irish people and would be grovelling on their knees for English taxpayers to be able to pick up the tab.

It was all a very fluffy and vague affair. The citizen participants started to get antsy at the obsession of the parties involved with discussing the injustices of the past and the potential of the future but steering away from the details of how to get there.

Then the Red Team arrived.

Their submission, “Potential Concerns of the British Minority in a United Ireland” was a relatively short document at just under 100 pages. Its brevity and the fact that it had been written in an accessible and readable style by one of the younger academics made it all the worse, as large (and more radically: easy readable) passages from the report appeared in newspapers and in news reports. The assembly secretariat declared that it was by far the most widely read document on the assembly website, “with particular interest East of the Bann”.

The government had seen the document hours before it was circulated and had a hurried debate where they had openly considered blocking the document under some pretext. It was only when their media advisers pointed out that there was no way to prevent the actual Red Team themselves releasing the document and therefore turning the intent to suppress into an even bigger story.

Instead, the government decided to hang a lantern on its problems. Before it was released the government was briefing that it was a “challenging document” and would force a lot of deep introspective discussion and self-examination within the republic in order to meet the concerns outlined.

It should be stressed and is often forgotten with the passing of time that the mandate of the Red Team was to create for nationalists a “worst case scenario” document with the idea being in the event of real negotiations with representatives of unionism that there would be no surprises or areas that nationalists had not at least been alerted to.

The document was divided into different sections dealing with the financial aspects of reunification, political structures required, and cultural issues of particular relevance to the British minority. The name of the document itself caused real agitation amongst the more excitable wings of nationalism with the idea that a section of the coming Irish nation even regarded itself as a British minority. The phrase triggered a vicious reaction online from extremists making suggestions that those who regard themselves as a British minority should be evacuated to Britain whether they liked it or not.

Within the pages of the document the Red Team outlined a series of propositions which they felt would represent objectives that would need to be met.

The more controversial of these proposals included:

A guaranteed share of national tax revenue of the entire state into perpetuity (confirmed by an article of the constitution) to be transferred to the Stormont parliament, which may not be reduced by a future Oireachtas.

The Irish government to bear 100% of the cost of the pension liabilities of all citizens of the Stormont jurisdiction up to the moment this agreement has been signed and to honour those liabilities. The liabilities will be honoured by the Irish government without affecting in any way the financial settlement with regards to public spending agreed in the Stormont jurisdiction going forward.

Her Majesty's armed forces shall have the right to maintain facilities within the area of Stormont jurisdiction for the purposes of recruiting into the UK armed forces.

The First minister of Northern Ireland shall have the right to nominate the head of the Civil Service within the jurisdiction as well as the chief constable of the PSNI and its successors.

A governor-general shall be appointed by the British government on the advice of the First minister to fulfill the ceremonial roles of such a position defined in other British dominions.

The Irish language, the English language and the Ulster Scots language shall be given equal standing throughout the island of Ireland. However both jurisdictions shall have the right to make the teaching of either Irish or Ulster Scot to be a matter for individual schools to decide.

There shall be a constitutional guarantee that welfare and health services within the Stormont jurisdiction shall always meet the standards available in the United Kingdom as a minimum and that this requirement shall only apply to the aforementioned jurisdiction. The government of Ireland may be required by court order to allocate additional funds to the Stormont Parliament to meet this objective if so required.

A petition of concern system operating in the assembly be given a perpetual constitutional guarantee: in short, the largest non-nationalist party having a permanent veto at Stormont.

A national flag which must be agreed by two-thirds majority in the Stormont Parliament or failing that the Union Jack be designated as a secondary national flag to be flown at all appropriate national occasions. The Tricolour may not be flown on its own at official state events.

That a new national anthem be created had to be approved by a two-thirds majority in Stormont.

The country shall be known formally as the Federal Union of Ireland.

The new state apply to re-join the commonwealth of Nations.

An article of the constitution outlining the fact that a significant minority of the population regards itself as British and maintains its allegiance to the British sovereign and that any titles of nobility granted by the British government both existing and in future will be respected throughout the island of Ireland and in law.

Also that the British government will allocate a number of honours to be filled by the leader of the two largest unionist parties every year on the occasion of the monarch's birthday.

The signatories to the agreement finally recognise on the 10th anniversary of the signing of this agreement there shall be a referendum within the Stormont jurisdiction during which the people of that jurisdiction shall be asked whenever they wish for that jurisdiction to become an independent sovereign nation. The Irish state agrees, as part of this agreement, to accommodate the decision of the jurisdiction to seek independence if that is the outcome of the referendum.

The red team presented their document to the citizens' assembly approximately one week after the document had been formally released to the public. It would probably be an understatement to say that the document had been poorly received by the southern public.

A number of impromptu demonstrations took place outside both the assembly and Leinster House and one member of the red team was physically assaulted outside Dublin Castle by a highly-excitabile member of the public who had a somewhat fragile grip on reality and the purpose of the red team.

James Joyce, former Secretary General to the Department of the Taoiseach

“When the Taoiseach asked me to lead the delegation to Scotland I had to think about it. Don’t forget, the last guy sent by an Irish leader to negotiate with the Brits got shot when he came home, and I said so.

Byrne laughed: don’t worry about it, he said. They’ll be busy stringing me up from a lamppost first. I’m sure the French will give you asylum.

I remembered that conversation specifically on the final night, because we all knew there was a big giant orange elephant in the middle of the room banging a drum.

See, the Trudeau document was lovely and all, the epitome of nice social democratic parity of esteem stuff. All the old favourites were played out. But at the end of it all, there was a reality.

Paper never refused ink.

Weismann and I, as you know, got very at ease in each other’s company. We’re both professional civil servants, both diplomats, and both pragmatic. And so a nod from him was enough for me to make my excuses, step out, and make my way to one of the many rooms the Scottish Government had set aside for these quiet chats. Every room was comfortable, with nice armchairs and a bar with the usual plus bottles of Irn-Bru and Tunnock’s tea cakes which Avi developed a particular taste for. He came to the point quickly.

What happens if it all goes Zimbabwe?

I knew what he meant. The 1980 Rhodesia-Zimbabwe Lancaster House agreement was supposed to create a model non-racial country where the black majority got their rights and the white minority were protected. It worked for a few years, then Mugabe turned on the whites. Many would say they had it coming, but that’s another debate. But they’d given up their army and when Zanu-PF came for their farms they were defenceless.

I reminded Avi that this was the land of The Field, and the rule of law. This wasn’t Zimbabwe.

Neither, he said, was Zimbabwe.

But it was a fair point. The agreement is lovely and all, but we need concrete protection. Believe me Jim, I know what it is like to live in a little country that could be overrun in hours.

Seriously? There's about three countries in the world that could take on and defeat Israel, and none of them are anywhere near it.

That's my point, he said. We're armed to the teeth. Far easier to negotiate and compromise when you're armed to the teeth.

The penny dropped for me. He pulled out a document.

The title said "East Ulster".

It wasn't a surprise. The idea had been knocking around for a while. A sort-of Quebec made up of Antrim, Down and Armagh, within a United Ireland, a cultural state where unionists could fly union jacks and control what was taught in the schools to a point, and perhaps even have a ceremonial Governor-General appointed by London. One proposal was that Stormont would become the parliament of East Ulster.

The Sinn Fein delegation mocked it, calling it East Titanica and Easteros. It wasn't dead as an idea, but it wasn't agreed to in any sense.

I rolled my eyes. Some sort of artificial cultural zone could be created, I supposed. After all, we do the same for EU regional funding.

He shook his head.

It's not enough. They need more.

I nodded at him to go on.

They want a right to leave.

They can leave whenever they want, I said.

No, you don't understand me. They want East Ulster to be able to vote to leave a United Ireland.

Ah, I said, and sat back in my seat.

To be honest, as with so many fucking things in Irish politics, old ideas keep turning up in new wrappers. The idea of counties voting themselves out of Dublin rule had been around since the 1914

Home Rule crisis. But in a country that had won a referendum on a United Ireland, I didn't see a lot of leeway.

There's more.

More, I asked, genuinely surprised.

They want an army. An East Ulster paramilitary security force.

Absolutely not, I said. I could just imagine going back to the Taoiseach telling him I'd agreed to funding the UVF.

Let me continue, said Avi. A security force, supported by Israeli troops. A small contingent.

Are you on fucking crack? I asked.

He smiled. We had a relationship where we could be robust with each other.

He slumped back in his seat, slowly unwrapping a Tunnock's and shrugging his shoulders like a rabbi giving a perplexing reading of the Torah.

It all comes down to security. What's to stop you murdering them all in their beds ten years from now? He asked.

Of course, there is an alternative to a security force.

I laughed. This was a classic. Ask for more than you want, and then offer the cheaper more reasonable alternative.

He suggested it to me.

You have got to be fucking joking! I replied.

He wasn't."

Avi Weismann, Chief Advisor, Unionist delegation.

Interviewer: Were you serious?

Weismann: Yes, of course.

Interviewer: But you can't seriously have expected them to agree to it?

Weismann: Look, this was the absolute centre of the talks. This was the deal-breaker, this was where a deal would be either made or it wouldn't. And the option I suggested was real.

Interviewer: But surely you could not really believe that the Irish Government would concede a right to bear arms for unionists? 800,000 unionists with legally-held assault rifles.

Weismann: Issued to them by the Irish state. As a gesture of how confident it was about their future in the country. Safely locked away in every home just in case.

Interviewer: And a right to form militias.

Weismann: Well-regulated militias, in fairness.

Interviewer: But wouldn't nationalists demand the same?

Weismann: Probably. I would, if I were a nationalist.

Interviewer: I'm sorry, but....can you not see the crazy here? This is bringing the gun back into Irish politics!

Weismann: The gun is already in politics here. This is regulating it.

Interviewer: But no country, other than maybe the US, would permit.

Weismann: Switzerland does. But let me put it another way. What would have been the history of Northern Ireland from partition if every Catholic had been armed and trained and in a militia? Do you think that maybe the unionist majority would have treaded a bit more lightly on civil rights issues.

Interviewer: But they'd have had their own militia.

Weismann: But they did have a militia. The B Specials. How would the B Specials have approached an armed Catholic minority, hundreds of thousands armed? I suspect

somewhat differently. Look, I'm not talking US-style gun ownership. I'm talking responsible registered and well-trained militia. Why, you could even have nationalist and British Minority militia training together! What better way for each side to learn how serious the other side is and treat them accordingly.

Interviewer: What gun would you be proposing?

Weismann: Well, there is a certain affinity in Ireland for the Armalite, so the AR-15? Much easier to get now that the US has brought in proper gun control under the Harris Act.

Interviewer: But won't this increase crime?

Weismann: It doesn't in Switzerland. And don't forget, every single gun would be test fired and its sample test rounds stored on a national database. If one was used in a crime we'd have its owner's identity within an hour. You'd require every weapon to be stored in an armoured locker, and refuse them to people with criminal records and mental health issues. Look, I'm not saying this is the only option. But if nationalists aren't willing to have an armed East Ulster Constabulary as a guarantee of the minority's physical safety, then let them do it themselves.

Interviewer: Are you not afraid that a small Israeli garrison would become a target for terrorists in its own right?

Weismann: Well, they can certainly try.

James Byrne TD/MP, former Taoiseach/Prime Minister of the Federal Union of Ireland.

"The final meeting was arranged by the Scottish Government in a Scottish Defence Force barracks outside Edinburgh, and it was just Craig, myself and a note taker from each side. I made a joke that it was like meeting the Wizard of Oz, in that while he had kept a fairly low key presence during the talks, his shadow hung over the whole thing. This was the man who was leading the paramilitary campaign against the country, and whether there was peace or war depended pretty much on him. I'd been briefed by people who'd met him before. He was personable, well-read despite not having attended university, and not a bigot. I say that because I genuinely believe it. If anything, he was more broad-minded than many in the DUP, a secular Protestant, if you will.

The meeting was about the final pieces of the puzzle that would get him to endorse the agreement and order the CLF to down arms.

Ari Weismann had shown his skill up to this point, in that when we both started talking it was very clear where the meat and potatoes was. This was a details meeting, no arguing over points of theory or historical grievance, this was what was going to appear in black and white.

I was very open about the right to bear arms. It simply wasn't going to happen, and I was very clear. If the choice was between arming hundreds of thousands of people with Armalites, or keeping up with the war, I'd fight the war. I genuinely believed it was the least worst option.

Craig smiled at me, and told me if he was in my position, he'd say the same. He was also waiting for the "but". The counter proposal.

An East Ulster Constabulary. Five thousand men and women. Armed.

Armed with what, he asked?

Sidearms, and semi-automatic rifles to be kept in barracks as standard.

And the make-up of the constabulary?

We do a census of the East Ulster area, and whatever percentage declares themselves British Minority in the area, that's the percentage.

He nodded.

Alright, but one thing. The Scots do the census and hold all the individual data. Ireland gets only raw data.

This threw me. It seemed such a strange, arcane point. A technicality, I'd no idea why something like that would even concern him.

Then suddenly I did, and I felt a shiver run up my back.

You're serious, I asked. He nodded.

A list. We'd have a list of every single person who was a declared member of the British minority, and he didn't want us to have it.

Jesus, I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

You're really that scared of us? Really? I asked.

I'm not scared of you Jim, he replied. You're a decent man. But who comes after you? There are people in the south livid over the concessions being talked about. We see them. Send them home back to England and all that. This IS my home Jim. Don't forget: in this room, I'm de Valera and you're Lloyd George. And that's why we have to have the right to secede.

The final piece of the puzzle. Stormont would have jurisdiction over East Ulster, and could vote for East Ulster to become an independent state in a referendum to be held in East Ulster.

The ejector seat, some called it. Craig called it the safety brake.

It was a very unpopular idea with nationalists. Many were calling it re-partition, and vowing to vote against the whole deal because of it. The East Ulster as Quebec/Catalunya idea was not enthusiastically received either, but this really set tempers going.

But the unionists had held out. It was a deal-breaker, and also, they pointed out, the ultimate teller of truths. If nationalists believe that the British Minority would be happy in a united Ireland, and have nothing to fear, then what's the problem? This is the life jacket under the seat on a plane, the unused fire extinguisher in the corner. What was the big deal?

Craig was equally adamant. No deal without this.

I'd already made my mind up on it before I entered the room. If this was the price of peace, I could live with it. Could I get it passed in an All-Ireland referendum? That was another question.

Working Document (Version 12) of the Chair (Mr. J Trudeau MP) of the Multi-Party Talks on an Agreed Settlement on the Island of Ireland and Associated Matters (MPT).

The following executive summary is of the issues currently open for discussion and possible areas for exploration. The legal text shall be drafted after agreement of the heads outlined below.

Note: Nothing in this document is agreed or conceded by any of the parties until a single document is agreed by all parties.

1. A unified federal state to be known as the Federal Union of Ireland, shall be created consisting of the area of Ireland/Eire as recognised by international treaty ("The South") and the part of Ireland designated Northern Ireland and formerly part of the then United Kingdom of England and Northern Ireland ("The North" "Northern Ireland").
2. The area comprising Antrim, Down and Armagh shall be designated a region to be known as "East Ulster". East Ulster shall be governed by a parliament sitting in Stormont and elected from within the region. The East Ulster Parliament may not pass any laws in contravention of the Federal Constitution of Ireland. The East Ulster Parliament may nominate a Governor General to act as a ceremonial figurehead of East Ulster. The Governor General shall be recognised as the second citizen after the President of the Federal Union of Ireland.
3. The flag of the new state shall be agreed by a commission agreed by two-thirds majority of both the Oireachtas/Federal Parliament and East Ulster Parliament. Any proposed flag shall require similar approval. Until a flag is agreed, all state buildings on both sides of the border shall fly the tricolour and Ulster flag. The national anthem shall be chosen by a similar method.
4. English and Irish shall be equal languages on the island. No one resident in Northern Ireland shall be compelled to learn the Irish nor Ulster-Scots language, nor shall it be a requirement to hold a job in the federal or any devolved government. Every student shall have the right to be taught Irish and Ulster-Scots in any school on the island.
5. All communications by the federal state shall be bi-lingual based on the Canadian model.
6. There shall be a federal parliament comprising a lower house, Dail Eireann/Federal House of Representatives of Ireland and an upper house, Seanad Eireann/Federal Senate of Ireland.
7. The lower house shall be elected by PR-STV with no constituency smaller than six seats. The North shall be guaranteed its proportional share of seats in the lower house but that share shall not be less than 20% of all seats in the house.
8. The upper house shall be composed of equal members of members from the North and South. They shall be elected by party list from two separate constituencies. A non-money bill shall require the votes of 55% of the members of the upper house to pass.
9. There shall be an office of Taoiseach/Federal Prime Minister and Tanaiste/Federal Deputy Prime Minister elected as a group by the votes of a majority of the lower house and a majority of the upper house.
10. The candidates nominated to federal ministers of Justice, Defence or any security related portfolio including the heads of An Garda Siochana or the Police Service of Northern Ireland or their successors, and any judicial appointments, may be vetoed by a vote of one quarter of the Federal Senate.
11. There shall be a new constitution agreed by a majority in the south and a majority not less than 62% in the north.
12. The new constitution shall explicitly recognise the existence and entitlement to mutual respect of a minority of the population who regard themselves as culturally British. It shall also recognise "the special position of the British monarch as the guardian of the culture professed by a significant minority of citizens."

13. The East Ulster Parliament may nominate an individual as Governor-General to represent the British monarch in a purely ceremonial capacity in Northern Ireland.
14. There shall be a constitutional guarantee that the current level of public funding subsidy in Northern Ireland provided by the British Exchequer shall be maintained and increased every year by a sum of not less than 1.5% in addition to the prevailing rate of inflation at that time. At no time shall the East Ulster Parliament be required to increase taxation or introduce new forms of taxation to fund that spending formula. Additional funds for Northern Ireland may be funded by additional or new taxation in the south or by the south appealing to other nations to fund it.
15. The British armed forces shall have the right to maintain a recruiting facility in Northern Ireland.
16. The Federal Government shall honour all pension liabilities pertaining to residents of Northern Ireland or those born there agreed by His Majesty's Government before reunification.
17. The Federal Government shall also honour all legacy and victims compensation agreements made by His Majesty's Government and its predecessors.
18. Titles of nobility and other honours granted by the British Government to residents of Northern Ireland before or after the reunification shall be permissible and respected by the state. The state itself shall not issue titles of nobility. The state may do the same with honours issued by other countries.
19. A pardon shall be issued by the state to all loyalist and nationalist combatants as certified by themselves for any criminal actions taken from the result of the border poll until the ceasefire called by the CLMC at the beginning of this process. However, all those claiming a pardon must declare fully all the details of the crime for which they are seeking a pardon, and no further pardons may be sought 12 months after the adoption of this agreement.

Chapter 6: The Second Referendum.

The Federal Constitution, as it became known, was put to the people after it had passed the Oireachtas. Although there had been a considerable amount of opposition from the right of Fine Gael (who didn't fancy the tax bill attached to it) and the hard-left of Sinn Fein (who regarded it as a sell-out) it exceeded two thirds of the vote in both houses, and went to the president to sign it. It was not missed by the assembled media that there was symmetry, him having been one of the original negotiators and signatories of the Good Friday Agreement some 30 years previously.

The referendum was set for eight weeks after the parties signed the Edinburgh Agreement, which gave the government time to print and circulate a copy of the new constitution to every voter in the country. The Electoral Commission hired over a 100 part-time staff to handle online and phone queries about the details, and ran well-attended public meetings explaining the text.

As was the case in all modern political settings, there was a concerted online campaign to lie and misinform about the document, but the Electoral Commission, backed up by the National Cyber Defence Service and the EU Cyber Defence Agency, put up a solid defence, blocking the sites and correcting their lies as fast as they went up.

The issuing of a final text forced politicians in the south to finally start taking positions as to the referendum. Every party had issues with various aspects of the agreement and the new constitution, but on presenting it in a live broadcast the Taoiseach was adamant. There was no more negotiating or deal-making. The documents were closed, and people had to make a decision as to whether to vote for it, or vote them down an in effect vote for the status quo and a continuation of the war.

Craig put out a to-camera message on the internet, and for many, especially in the south, it was the first time that the man who had led a war against the country was seen. Many people were surprised at his eloquence and calm, rational demeanour. But it was his message that surprised.

He endorsed the agreement, as he had promised the Taoiseach, and took people through the various concessions that had been sought in order to make "the new Ireland a warmer place for those of us who are both British and yes, Irish." The Taoiseach smiled when Craig, pointing out the ejector seat clause in the agreement, pointed out that while he hoped it would never be used "it would be, in the words of Michael Collins, a stepping stone" if it had to be.

Craig's address was nearly an hour long, and a detailed but accessible tour through the agreement, ending with his endorsement and, if adopted, grounds for the CLF to dump arms.

Within an hour Deepfake versions were all over the web, with Craig demanding everything from total surrender to our masters in Dublin to King Charles to be installed in Dublin Castle. Cyber Security went after them with a vengeance, and a number of individuals were arrested under the Defence of Democracy Act, 2025.

As is the usual in Irish politics, the fact that the referendum was on a binary question did not mean that there was, in fact, merely two sides to the debate. Most of the parties in the Dail, in various conventions of their members voted to advocate a Yes in the referendum. But each main party had a significant minority who campaigned to oppose it for varying reasons.

The Sinn Fein No campaign ran primarily against the concept of East Ulster and the right to secede, under the slogan of "No to re-partition". The rogue campaign of Sinn Fein TDs were very quick to use the Craig broadcast as proof that there had indeed been too many concessions, on the basis that if unionists were happy then it must be a bad deal.

A harder-line nationalist campaign ran to the right of the Sinn Fein No campaign objecting to any concessions under the simple slogan "Brits go home!"

The Fine Gael refuseniks, unenthused about the huge cost reunification and the need to prop up the north's economy ran as the "Ireland, not Albania!" campaign, which caused an uproar in that small Adriatic nation. The prime minister of Albania sent a formal demand for an apology to the Taoiseach at the comparison of Albania to Northern Ireland.

A group of liberals ran a minor campaign advocating a No vote as protest against the DUP having a say in the social policy of the republic. Their poster, of a sweaty southern US pastor clutching a huge bible, declared "Ireland, not Alabama!" and got considerable international coverage.

In the north, the atmosphere had changed considerably from the heady times of the border poll. The fact that the region resembled the bad old days of the Troubles with police stations once again fortified and army vehicles and soldiers (now in the uniform of the Irish state) patrolling the streets did a lot to dampen enthusiasm. Nationalists were far less enthused given the details of the agreement, and both the Alliance and moderate unionists had come out in support. There was also a loyalist campaign in favour, although it was noted by CIUNAS that East Belfast had been covered with posters of Craig with a "Wanted for Treason" banner. Already a number of statements from self-styled new loyalist paramilitary groups had announced their opposition to the deal and pledged to continue fighting, although they hadn't mounted any attacks yet.

Polls showed that the agreement was seen differently on either side of the border, and with that were differing levels of support. In the north, a steady 62%-65% of voters were declaring for the agreement. One surprising feature was that former unionists were considerably more enthused. Focus groups showed that a majority of unionists now regarded the British government in a less favourable light than the Irish government, with the Taoiseach in particular scoring well. A significant minority of nationalists opposed the agreement and instead called for tougher security measures against loyalists including a restoration of the death penalty.

In the south, the cost of the war and the Emergency Security Levy on all wages, pensions and welfare payments was the key reason for supporting the agreement. Focus groups told interviewers that they simply did not believe that the security war was sustainable, and its continuation would do further damage to the economy. Opposition to the agreement was, surprisingly, equal from high income sections who objected to the fiscal cost of unity, and low income groups who objected to the wealth transfer to the north. The cultural concessions to the British Minority, especially in East Ulster, generated a lot of attention and heat from small but very vocal groups.

The direct bloodline descendants of some 1916 participants were mobilised to object to the idea of any sort of based-on-birth royalist or monarchist concessions.

Polls showed much more substantial opposition in the south, with one poll showing support as low as 53%. Some pollsters speculated that with the margin of error at 3% and shy nationalists it could be even lower.

Craig's comment about the Taoiseach being in Lloyd George's shoes was echoed throughout the campaign, especially by himself. He was determined to kill a tendency in Irish referendums that you can just vote no without consequence, and that a better offer will be brought back later, primarily because he did not believe the agreement could be opened up again. Indeed, he wasn't even sure if he could get the same agreement again given the huge pressures and criticisms of the campaign.

But he was very clear: A No vote does not guarantee a different agreement. All it guaranteed was the status quo and Ireland to remain in a state of emergency with all the costs fiscally and in humanity that cost.

The opponents to the agreements on all sides were all very quick to condemn the Taoiseach's message as Project Fear, although given the outcome of Brexit that slur did not carry the weight it once did. But as they made the charge, every single opponent of the agreement failed to answer credibly the question put to them by the media: what concessions are you demanding from your opponents that you are confident they will concede. The answer was bluster about how the

Taoiseach or the unionist delegation had not been “tough enough” with the other side and “put their foot down”.

It simply didn't carry weight, especially as the various Yes campaigns told voters to actually read the agreement and see how carefully detailed it was. Hand on heart, they asked voters, do you really believe this can be casually unpicked without tearing the whole thing apart?

As has become usual in modern politics, a message aimed to encourage one side of a political debate can be weaponised to be used against another. The Yes campaign was very quick to transmit online ads from nationalists attacking the agreement as a sell out to loyalists to Loyalist voters, and vice versa, to such a degree that the No to Re-Partition campaign attempted to take the Yes campaign to court for copyright infringement.

Three days before polling, Craig was gunned down in a street in East Belfast as he got into his car.

The murder sent the campaigns into freefall, nobody quite sure what the impact would be, especially as the security forces had no idea as to who was responsible.

A day later, the arrival of the Taoiseach with a single bodyguard to pay his respects to the widow and young children became a defining image of the campaign. There had been some jeers from the loyalist crowd, but equally they'd been shouted down by others, and accompanied by a pastor he had sat with the family for 45 minutes.

When he left a few hands were offered, which he shook, and left without saying a word. Pollsters after the result detected a clear impact on loyalist voters from his visit. Two weeks later, an excitable loyalist teenager radicalised by online content was arrested and charged with the murder.

The day after polling, the ballot boxes were opened and counting began, with Dublin Castle acting as the central result centre. Within three hours of counting it was clear that the agreement would pass comfortably with 62% in the north. But in the south wide variations in the vote made it much harder to predict. The Yes side started out with a clear 60% lead in early boxes but as more boxes opened up, the lead started to fall. Working class areas came out narrowly on both sides, and there was a clear No vote in areas of high welfare dependency which Sinn Fein had transformed in many incidences

into single party areas. One analyst pointed out that whilst Sinn Fein was officially in favour of a Yes vote, the divisions in the party were such that large parts of the party apparatus were campaigning for a No vote or not at all. It was also highlighted that the party had built so much of its young base or a permanently agitated and re-energised Anglophobic base that those voters then rebelled against an agreement seen as giving concessions to the British Minority, despite the endorsement of the party leadership.

It was not until the large middle class areas of the cities, in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway came in was the Yes margin reassured, and the agreement passed by 55% in the south. Although there were celebrations in Dublin Castle itself, with the draft red, white, orange, green and blue flag being waved, there was not much enthusiasm shown on the streets, as there had been on the night of the border poll result.

The Taoiseach made and took a few calls to various people on the Yes side, and took calls from both President Ocasio-Cortez and President Donohoe in Brussels, shared a glass of champagne with his campaign staff, and then went to bed early.

Because tomorrow he had to go to the Park and call elections for the Dail, Seanad and Presidency.

Chapter 7: The All-Ireland election of 2029.

The elections were held nine months after the referendum, and were the most contested and noisy elections of a generation. Sinn Fein, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour, the Greens and various minor left and far-left and far-right parties contested as before in the south, but this time accompanied by the New Ireland Party (the new name for the various merged former unionist groups) and the Alliance party.

The New Ireland Party quickly eclipsed the tiny anti-agreement unionist parties, and its leader quickly moved to broaden the parties appeal. Yes, it was the party of the British Minority but not only that. It declared itself to be the party of minority rights and civil liberties, a decision which caused a number of hard-line evangelical Protestants to quit the party and form a Protestant People's Party advocating a return to the UK. The PPP struggled to get candidates, never mind votes, and found itself quickly embroiled in a sex scandal when its rabidly anti-LGBT leader was found, to the surprise of few, to have a penchant for gay sex in public toilets.

Campaigning was relatively peaceful, with one of the big surprises being Craig's widow being selected to run for the NIP in East Belfast.

The question of coalitions dominated the debate throughout the campaign, and also the question of transfers, especially as the outgoing government had introduced an Australian-style feature on the ballot paper where a voter had the choice of just ticking a party's name on the ballot which automatically triggered a pre-declared order of preferences to other parties. FF and FG quickly agreed a pact, and the Alliance came to a similar arrangement with the Greens and the Labour Party.

Sinn Fein, struggling to find a transfer partner and unwilling to agree one with anti-agreement parties surprised everyone by announcing that it would direct its transfers to the New Ireland Party as a gesture of its commitment to the new nation. The NIP did not reciprocate, and indeed the announcement delighted the PPP, but Sinn Fein had decided to turn a negative into a positive.

Turnout was over 80% on polling day, with queues gathering because of the fact that voters were dealing with three ballot papers each (four in East Ulster as they elected a new reduced parliament in Stormont).

The Seanad/Federal Senate of Ireland elections received a different type of attention. Being national party lists, every party was eager to get a number of high profile candidates onto their lists, and so a selection of sporting and social media celebrities found themselves recruited, peppered in with academics and technical experts to provide heft to the list. The launch of the lists in itself provided great entertainment value as everyone from the leading European law barrister in the country found himself sharing a platform with a bionically-enhanced transgender Instagram model. Journalists were quick to point out that covering the new senate was looking like it would be more fun than the lower house especially given that the dull PPP list looked like the cast of a film about Cromwell. Ballot boxes opened across the island on Saturday morning, with the Dail count happening first, and by lunchtime patterns were becoming clear.

Sinn Fein remained the largest party, with Fine Gael in a close second place, but the real breakthrough of the count was the Alliance party winning a handful of seats south of the old border. Although the party's first preference vote in the south was modest, the party showed itself to be remarkably transfer-friendly, and crept into a number of final seats in constituencies as a result. The two main anti-agreement parties, the anti-agreement Real Sinn Fein and the Protestant People's Party, took a mere six seats out of 200 between them in the Dail, which was taken as a final endorsement of the agreement and the new constitution.

The hours after the results became clear also had a story to tell, as Sinn Fein voters and party members began to realise that there was a clear anti-Sinn Fein majority in the new Dail.

This was not really a surprise given that the opinion polls in the run-up to the election had predicted a very similar outcome, SF supporters online tended to be more willing to believe conspiracy theories that the opinion polls were rigged, and many had convinced themselves that a Sinn Fein majority was a done deal. In the hours and days after the counting had concluded social media was awash with

claims that the election had been rigged. Many of the claims were based on the idea that when all Sinn Fein's northern votes were added to its southern tally, that would automatically lead to a majority of the vote. The fact that hundreds of thousands of non-SF votes would also be counted seemed to have genuinely surprised them, with many assuming that those voters would "go home to England".

If that wasn't bad enough, the third set of election results, to fill the new head of state office of President of the Federal Union of Ireland, caused those same activists to explode in outrage.

From the first count, former First minister and DUP leader Arlene Foster, running as an independent but endorsed by both the NIP and Fine Gael, led throughout the count, finally defeating Sinn Fein's Eoin O'Broin in the last count with transfers from Fianna Fail's Malcolm Byrne. This was the final straw, and led to considerable public disorder in Sinn Fein areas both north and south.

One month after the result, President Foster received Taoiseach/Prime Minister Byrne in Aras an Uachtaran to present him and his FG/FF/NIP/Alliance coalition their seals of office. The first minister of East Ulster, Ms Eastwood MEUP, attended with the Governor General of East Ulster, Liam Neeson.

General Election 2029-Results Dail Eireann/Federal House of Representatives of Ireland (200 seats)

Sinn Fein (Pro-Agreement)	50
Fine Gael	45
New Ireland Party	24
Fianna Fail	24
Alliance	18
Labour	9
Green	9
Protestant People's Party	3
Sinn Fein (Anti-Agreement)	3
Assorted Left.	5
Independents	10

General Election 2029-Results Seanad Eireann/ Federal Senate of Ireland (60 seats)

Sinn Fein (Pro-Agreement)	17
New Ireland Party	10
Fine Gael	10
Alliance	9
Fianna Fail	6
Protestant People's Party	3
Labour	1
Green	1
Sinn Fein (Anti-Agreement)	1
Assorted Left.	1
Independents	1