



# CNI



## **NEWS FOCUS - The complexity of Irish identity gets stamp of approval**

**I was delighted that last week Arlene Foster and Enda Kenny sat together in Dublin at a Church of Ireland event exploring the**

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**centenary historically, for I welcome anything that increases mutual understanding between the two main traditions on this island, writes Ruth Dudley-Edwards in the Belfast Telegraph.**

I love the Republic of Ireland (of which I am a citizen), England (where I have lived most of my adult life) and Northern Ireland, which I have spent decades trying to understand and explain.

Unionists were largely dismissed in the world in which I grew up as Protestant bigots who, in time, would come to their senses and embrace a united Ireland.

And, if they didn't, they should, for after all did the proclamation of the Irish Republic not say: "The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman"?

Even as a student I found this an extraordinarily presumptuous statement by a small group of unelected revolutionaries.

The proclamation promised all sorts of good things, like religious and civil liberty and equal rights and opportunities, and also alluded to unionists by stating its intention of "cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious

of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past".

Any unionists who ever bothered to read that paragraph resented being infantilised and snorted derisively at the suggestion that British governments were fomenting differences.

Few nationalists knew more than a few phrases from the proclamation and, in recent times, took the reference to children literally and complained about cuts in benefits.

Asked in Dublin if she knew that phrase, Mrs Foster observed that "sometimes, Sinn Fein quote that to us", but that her allegiance was to the United Kingdom.

She also pointed out crisply: "One of the things I think that concerns people in Northern Ireland about what happened here 100 years ago at Easter is the fact that it was used then in the Seventies and Eighties to justify what happened in Northern Ireland at that particular time."

It was, she said, "a very difficult thing for a lot of unionists to come to terms with: it's something that I think people here in the Republic of Ireland have to reflect on, as well".

I'd like unionists to appreciate that a lot of people in the Republic have been reflecting on this in recent years.

As the vast majority of citizens showed in their enthusiastic reaction to the Queen's visit, there is a desire to move beyond sectarianism, Anglophobia and the celebration of nationalist violence.

The commemorative stamps are a case in point. Fifty years ago the only people represented on them were the seven signatories of the proclamation.

This year there has been a genuine attempt to show something of the complexity of Irish identity.

Among those featured together are the unarmed Dublin Metropolitan Police constable James O'Brien and Sean Connolly, of the Irish Citizen Army, who shot him dead and was later killed by an Army sniper, and William Malone, of the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers, who died at Ypres in May 1915, and his brother Michael, of the Irish Volunteers, shot in battle.

In some ways the most unexpected pairing has been the pacifist Francis Sheehy-Skeffington

and Sir Francis Fletcher Vane, of the Munster Fusiliers.

Sheehy-Skeffington was one of the innocents executed on the order of Captain J C Bowen-Colthurst of the Royal Irish Rifles: it was Vane who went all the way to Lord Kitchener to ensure he was court-martialled for murder.

Sinn Fein hate this kind of inclusiveness: it would be good to see more unionists praising it.

*First published in The Belfast Telegraph  
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**Ruth Dudley Edwards' The Seven: The Lives And Legacies Of The Founding Fathers Of The Irish Republic will be published next month.**

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