

Thursday 15 August 2019

**The “flexing of English nationalist muscles” will damage the UK,
says Diarmuid Ferriter.**

Acclaimed historian Diarmuid Ferriter and long standing Northern Irish journalist Malachi O’Doherty discussed the backstop and the state of Anglo-Irish relations as the UK moves closer to Brexit, at an event chaired by retired journalist Liz Leonard at the Edinburgh International Book Festival today.

“This flexing of English nationalist muscles is, of course, ironically going to do damage to the very thing they supposedly cherish, which is the United Kingdom. There was a particular phrase that Margaret Thatcher was fond of and now Boris Jonson is very fond of and it’s this phrase ‘the great things we once did’. That is a red flag to an Irish nationalist bull. It may also, of course, embolden Scottish Nationalists for their own particular reasons,” says Ferriter while summing up the current situation between Irish and British politics and the lack of understanding of the Northern Irish state.

“Thatcher was almost childlike in how she viewed the Irish border question, because she didn’t understand it. She actually asked this question, ‘why can we not have a straight line border in Ireland. Why is it full of all these kinks and wiggles?’”

The question of a United Ireland arose during the discussion, to which O’Doherty replied saying, “Some of the anomalies of current politics in Northern Ireland, is that interest in a United Ireland has gone up in the North and the vote for Sinn Fein is going down. This means it’s the middle classes now, it’s the ones who wouldn’t have bothered their heads about a united Ireland with normal circumstances.

“Both Sinn Fein and the DUP are facing an anomaly because we are coming up to a border poll.” He added. “There will be a referendum on a United Ireland, and Diarmuid will have lots to contribute to this I’m sure, but the only way Sinn Fein can carry a fifty percent plus majority on the issue of a United Ireland is appealing to people beyond their base and that same problem faced the DUP, and yet both are now working to the base. The base in either side is not enough to carry the vote.”

Ferriter and O'Doherty agreed that the United Ireland that has long been waxed lyrical as the "fourth green field" of Ireland, is in reality far more likely due to the fact that Ireland remains a part of the EU, which is where a large number of Northern Irish people align their identities.

"The United Ireland that is taking off right now, is an international Ireland. It's an idea of being a part of the European community by uniting Ireland to achieve that," said O'Doherty, "In contrast to the danger of sliding into a little Britain, which will maybe only England and Wales and thereby perpetually governed by all the Tories and Tory prats."

When asked how they would respond if they were a Northern Irish politician speaking to the Prime Minister right now, O'Doherty responded by saying, "I think I would probably say drop dead," to laughter, but followed it up with, "get out of our way. You're a menace, you've been elected by so few people and you've projects and plans that are entirely against the interests of the people. I'm looking at Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland's vote for remain. Even Northern Ireland MPs and the DUP are arguing that this was an all UK vote and therefore it is of no consequence that the majority of Northern Ireland voted remain. Well the political reality is that is a consequence, as it is in Scotland."

Ferriter said to laughter, "One of the big ironies is that there used to be a lot of sneering about the inability of the Irish to govern their own affairs. The important point to make is that there are many who see themselves as Ulster people. They're not British and they're not Irish and they don't trust either and that was always the case." Ferriter said.

To which O'Doherty added, "If they have any sense, they won't trust Boris."