

Article For Sunday Independent 25th September 2011

There is something unusual about this Presidential election. The Constitution envisages that there could be a multiplicity of candidates by conferring a right of nomination on any twenty members of the Oireachtas (and, between TDs and Senators, there are more than 220 of them) and on 4 county councils (of which there are more than 30).

Given that relatively liberal threshold for candidacy, it should come as no surprise that there could be up to six candidates in the field when nominations close.

Our focus, then, should not really be on the number of candidates as much as on the suitability of those candidates for the highest office under our Constitution.

There is a widespread feeling, I think, that we are not being offered the best choice of President. John Bruton would, I feel, be strolling home to the Aras, had he chosen to stand. Maybe the same might have been thought about Pat Cox, had he been nominated. But these names are not before us.

The collective decision by Fianna Fail not to contest the election with a party candidate is understandable. But their decision not to influence in any way the outcome of the election by collectively abstaining from using their Oireachtas members' individual right to participate in the nomination process is unusual and far from easy to understand.

The position of President is important. Our President is head of state, first citizen, international representative, and, acting on the advice of the Government, supreme commander of our defence forces, Oglaiġ na h-Eireann.

But the President is far, far more than a figurehead.

She exercises a vital independent role under Article 26 of the Constitution to refuse to sign constitutionally suspect legislation until its constitutionality has been tested by the Supreme Court. That watchdog power is a vital safeguard against the potential tyranny of a Dail majority.

She is also entitled to refuse a dissolution of the Dail to a Taoiseach who has lost its confidence, and is entitled independently to convene a meeting of either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, to overcome an impasse on the appointment of a Taoiseach.

She also has an unused power under Article 27 to refer Bills railroaded through the Parliament against the wishes of the Seanad for decision by the People in referendum.

As a part of the Parliament, the President physically embodies the fundamental Constitutional principle that the Irish State is not the instrument or plaything of Government or a Dail majority but, rather, the *res publica*, the creation of the People whose sovereign power is superior to the day to day political majority in Dail Eireann.

The office is important; the office holder is important. It is not a token office to be given as a gesture to someone who is unsuited to discharge it.

As First Citizen, the President must be seen as a person who, in a real way, personifies what the Irish State is all about. A President should not be a figure of controversy or divisiveness or a person whose personal history has the potential to embarrass the State or to discredit it in the eyes of the citizens or the world.

A President must, I think, have shown an unambiguous loyalty to the Irish state, to its constitution and institutions, to its democratic values, to its laws and to the constitutional rights of the citizens.

A person who has for thirty years played a central role in a secret body which, both within the State and outside, murdered, maimed, tortured, kidnapped, extorted, blackmailed, destroyed, and thieved all as part of a deliberate campaign to subvert the Constitution and the legitimacy of the Irish state, could not be said to have complied with his “fundamental duty” of “loyalty to the State” under Article 9 of the Constitution.

The bodies buried in our bogs did not bury themselves. The corpses found naked, bound and without fingernails in the back lanes of the Borderlands did not sacrifice or mutilate themselves. Don Tidey, Ben Dunne, Galen Weston, and Tiede Herrema did not kidnap themselves. Nor did Leonard Kaitcer, the murdered Jewish antique dealer from Belfast for whose life one million pounds was demanded. Gordon Wilson and his daughter did not blow themselves up at Enniskillen. Nor did the children on Mountbatten’s boat or Tim Parry. Hundreds of others were killed on the say-so of the IRA Army Council, including brave members of the Defence Force and the Garda Síochána. Literally thousands were maimed. And all without mandate from history or democracy.

Anyone who directed that mayhem against the expressed wishes of the Irish people is unsuited to embody the values of the Irish people. Still less is such a person fit to personify the moral authority of the Irish people and their State when confronted with the continued dissident terrorist campaign.

Is there to be no redemption or forgiveness? There is. Are the Provos not to be let in from the cold? They are. But the Presidency is not some form of national political baptismal font.

There is a radical difference between honest forgiveness in pursuit of peace, on the one hand, and false validation and re-characterisation of evil acts, on the other. We should never forget the cost and sacrifice of maintaining our Constitution or betray the people who paid and made them and we should never succumb to some self-serving, political amnesia. Generous, Yes; Dishonest, No.

Sinn Féin hopes that their undemocratic campaign of terror will somehow become historically mainstreamed by seeking elective office on a platform of peace-making.

Let’s be very clear. As long as they murdered and maimed, they had no mandate. They were emphatically rejected in vote after vote. And murder and mayhem will not be retrospectively legitimated by seeking election now.

Like myself, Adams and McGuinness met Mandela. But no such meeting makes one his equal or his moral equivalent. Any more than Mandela’s generous conciliation of their white oppressors means that former enforcers of apartheid have become suitable to lead South Africa or to embody its ideals.

Adams and McGuinness may have forsworn future violence and terror to be reconciled with our Constitution and State; our State did not thereby agree to become reconciled with their violent, terrorist past.

The protracted process in which they disengaged from murder and terror were not, as they now claim, years of peace-making on their part

Comparisons with Collins are absurd; Collins gave his life to assert the superiority of the ballot box over the gun.

We need a person of standing, moral integrity, proven loyalty to the State and Constitution, demonstrated devotion to human rights and the rule of law to be our next President. We do not need a President of whom it can fairly be said that he not merely lacks those characteristics but personifies their very opposite.

We need a President who is not afraid of his past and who has not resorted to monstrous deceptions to cover it up.

McGuinness's campaign claim that he departed the IRA in 1974 and to have had no role in directing its campaign of killing is as threadbare and pernicious a falsehood as Adams's claim never to have been part of the IRA.

Such fresh mendacity alone disqualifies him properly fulfilling the role of President. And he has no-one to blame for that other than himself.