

Richard Digard



United islands



Talk of a united Ireland as power-sharing resumes in Stormont following the historic appointment of a republican as first minister highlights the practical and technical difficulties of coming together. Similarly, says **Richard Digard**, the Channel Islands would benefit by mapping a route to insular unity

ALITTLE over a year ago, my brother-in-law died from Covid. The care he received up to that point, which included treatment for other health issues, was exemplary. That wasn't surprising because it was a mix of private and public care as they do these things rather differently (and better) in the Republic of Ireland, where he lived. For me, his passing is a kind of double tragedy. It means we won't be able to discuss Sinn Fein's Michelle O'Neill becoming Northern Ireland's first republican first minister or the subsequent claim that a united Ireland 'is within touching distance'. These developments would not have pleased him. A few years ago, I mentioned polls that showed demographic shifts in attitudes meant younger voters on both sides of the border were increasingly hostile to the traditional political parties – not meeting their needs or expectations – while progressively warming to Sinn Fein, because of fading or no recollections of the Troubles and Sinn Fein's part in them. A lifer in the Garda Síochána, Ireland's police service, as was his father before him, Irish history ran deep and close to the surface. Denis was on duty when the British Embassy in Dublin was attacked this month in 1972 and lost a number of good colleagues over the years to IRA terror attacks. So why the reservations about a united Ireland? 'It would bankrupt us,' was the succinct response. Although separated only by a political border on paper, these are countries apart, as the latest £3.3bn from the UK to 'facilitate' the resumption of power-sharing at Stormont reminds us. I'll come on to the relevance of this for the Channel Islands in a bit but, like Scottish independence – and Brexit itself – come to that – the devil is in the detail. So before politicians start peddling dreams of unity or independence, I suggested, why not charge a joint independent commission to assess what needed to be done to achieve unity, over what time period

and at what cost? I won't labour this further, but merging things like currency, police forces, health systems, civil services, welfare benefits and even something as mundane as traffic laws and signals (kph vs mph) takes time, legislation and money. And this, of course, is exactly what Guernsey and Jersey should be doing – taking a structured look at what would need to be done, over what period and at what cost (political, emotional and financial) to unite the Channel Islands should you at some stage find that unification useful or necessary to do. Strictly, both Bailiwicks, as Alderney and Sark bring additional layers of insular independence and complexity to the mix. But for history, talk of a united Ireland wouldn't be necessary. Similarly for these islands. Pure historic happenstance alone means they are all independent and self-governing and fiercely wedded to doing things their own way. As I've mentioned before, work by consultants Critical Economics, and experience elsewhere, shows that islands below a certain size generally cannot exist or function properly without the support of a much larger external neighbour. Critical mass matters – separately, these islands don't have it – and it's really only the also historic happenstance of financial services that has got us as far as we have today. Where, for instance, would Alderney be if Guernsey wasn't able or willing to prop it up every year? As you know, there's to be a review of Guernsey having a head of law enforcement rather than separate

chiefs of police and customs. I'm suspicious of that, as we never properly merged the two operations following the initial appointment or pursued merging the two fire services, so don't be surprised if the process recommends going back to the old system, with all the additional cost and rivalries that implies. The default here, and in Jersey, is knee-jerk DIY, rarely to look more widely at what might be gained by collaborating with Jersey or asking the other island to provide a service for us. Just look at the hot water former Treasury lead Mark Helyar got into for daring to suggest Guernsey Electricity be merged with Jersey Electricity to form a single CI entity. For you and me, I suspect, cost and quality/reliability of a service is far more important than where it's headquartered and Jersey, after all, has the ambitious plans for a wind farm which, conveniently, only they would be able to see. Prestige-hungry politicians view these things differently, however, while many islanders also wouldn't want to be 'run from Jersey'. I get that, but would anyone other than a few deputies really give a damn if the next head of law enforcement was based in Jersey, his or her deputy in Guernsey, and the quality of a combined CI police and border service remained unchanged? Especially with the considerable savings it could bring. A proper, rational, neutral look at some of these things in the absence of any pressure to do so seems to me to be a sensible and practical thing to do. Identifying the issues then puts decision-makers in the position of

saying '...that can't happen because...' and the rest of us saying, '...hang on, what do we need to do to make it happen?'. Such a commission could also set out extent. From sharing a few services to a combined CI government or who knows what in between. Before your eyes bulge at that, just think. Together, the islands would have a near £10bn GDP, combined annual revenues somewhat shy of £2bn – and a clear incentive to develop a tunnel between them. There is a clear imperative for this sort of thinking. As predicted by Critical Economics, Guernsey and Jersey are both struggling with budget deficits, expanding public sectors and welfare payments, housing crises and underinvestment in the public realm. Oh, plus an electorate reluctant to pay out more in taxation. Not only would centralising services reduce management overheads, it would improve economies of scale and maximise procurement opportunities. History suggests this is inevitable anyway, so taking a structured look now at the when and how at least provides an element of control that will be lost if something happens to force it upon us. Ports of Jersey, for instance, is pressing ahead with its plan to position its budget airline-friendly airport as the regional hub for 'destination Channel Islands', irrespective of what Guernsey thinks about it. Why not? Our sub-standard runway marks us out, literally, as the weakest link and ripe to be exploited. Another reason for that tunnel and a 20-minute drive from the CI's airport to Guernsey, turning that weakness into a strength and freeing up scarce land for other uses? For the reasons I've outlined, a united Ireland remains a long way off, not least because suspicion, hostility and different cultures separate them. That's very much like these islands too. Which, when you think about it, is pretty sad as well. In short, just think how much better off we'd all be if we could work towards turning Jersey into collaborators rather than keeping them as competitors.

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