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## It can be as easy to build bridges as walls

**Fergal Hallahan**

By Fergal Hallahan The Friday Column

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DUP claims that a documentary about the Maze escape rode roughshod over unionist sensitivities seem a bit rich in the context of Gregory Campbell's reaction to Tyrone winning the All-Ireland this week.

As delighted fans welcomed the team home the minister for sport, no less, did his best to prick their celebratory balloon with some blatant Croppy-lie-down-ism.

Tyrone won an “international competition”, the minister decreed, before condescending to acknowledge that “it is important that home talent is recognised”.

“It is a factual position that Tyrone is a county in Northern Ireland and Kerry is a county in the Republic of Ireland,” he said.

That meant the Kerry team was from “another country” he explained – in case any of the beaming children in Aughnacloy failed to get the message.

To grudgingly congratulate the All-Ireland champions would be one thing but to antagonise even people beyond the GAA in the process takes quite a bit of doing.

Good God, Gregory, could you not have given it a rest for one day? Technically, legally, politically – yes, you get a gold star. We all know where you stand – and you’re entitled to stand there.

However, there isn’t the remotest possibility that any sympathy for your position could be fostered among nationalists by alienating them.

There’s certainly a debate to be had about certain GAA clubs’ association with militant republicanism but there’s a time and a place.

Some occasions call for generosity and this was one.

All you would have had to do to appear magnanimous and ministerial is say the bare minimum.

Another brick in the peace wall that separates the two communities, then, when it could so easily have gone towards bridge-building.

THAT said, unionists had a point about Breakout, a programme about the IRA mass escape from the H-blocks in 1983, broadcast on BBC1 on Monday.

The film focused on three senior republicans involved in the escape – Gerry Kelly, Bobby Storey and Brendan McFarlane.

One former prison officer was interviewed and gave some idea of what it was like to be on the ‘other side’. But the story was told primarily from the perspective of the IRA prisoners.

And what a tale it was: 38 men breaking out in the biggest escape in UK penal history; smuggling guns into a top-security jail, capturing warders, hiding in a truck, lying under the floorboards of a house for weeks and walking cross-country to the border by night.

The three ex-IRA men came across like desperados who'd long since hung up their spurs – by turns romantic and ruthless.

Particularly chilling was McFarlane's account of giving a family whose house the escapers had taken over the choice of having their child kidnapped as insurance or swearing on the Bible not to contact police once they'd left.

The story of the break-out was told in terms of military-precision timing and the psychology of control. Kelly recounted a conversation he'd had with a 'screw' at whom he was pointing a gun with humour and even affection. The men clearly regarded their feat as legendary.

And so it is, from the republican perspective. In the context of a homogeneous Northern Ireland, in fact, it would have been a ripping yarn well told and that would be that.

But being where we are, it was another case of the sensibilities of half the population treated in a cavalier fashion.

If you'd gone to put the kettle on you would have missed all reference to the fact that one prison officer, James Ferris, died during the escape. Kelly's shooting of another was dealt with swiftly.

People are entitled to make up their own minds, sure, but here at least half the community already has. Rather than persuade them that there is any merit in the republican point of view, such a platform risks reinforcing the perception that Kelly and Co are just a bunch of cowboys.

On the radio the next day, director Brendan Byrne said Breakout's makers hadn't been able to get more prison officers or government officials to tell their side of the story.

However, this wasn't made explicit in the film, which concentrated on the IRA version of events.

In the absence of substantial input from the authorities, I mistakenly assumed as a viewer that this was the first instalment of a

two-part documentary, the second part to detail how it felt to be at the business end of the guns.


That would be a good story too. Perhaps it can still be told.

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