

TROUBLED VENUE: Planning approval for Casement Park this provided a more light-hearted demonstration of Stormont's structural limitations

PICTURE: Mal McCann



Not a perfect deal but a deal nonetheless

PEOPLE about to lose their jobs or hospital appointments can legitimately decry Stormont's latest coronavirus measures.

Others need to be more realistic about what can be achieved by a mandatory five-party devolved administration in a divided society – and in a crisis.

The DUP and Sinn Féin may have stitched up a backroom deal, bounced the rest of the executive into it, treated the assembly like a rubber stamp and made a farce of the 'new approach' promised in January's restoration.

But what matters is they reached a deal, despite differences over school closures, all-Ireland harmonisation and the economy that almost collapsed devolution on the way into lockdown in March. The compromises agreed have not compromised the effectiveness of the measures, which meet the executive's scientific advice.

Of course, Stormont's decisions can be criticised but it is absurd to expect decision-making without politicking and occasional pantomimes. If that is the standard we set for success, real failures will go unnoticed.

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PLANNING approval for Casement Park has provided a more light-hearted demonstration of Stormont's structural limitations. Sinn Féin managed to welcome the approval without mentioning it was granted by SDLP infrastructure minister Nicola Mallon. Instead, the party thanked its West Belfast MP Paul Maskey, although planning is devolved and MPs have nothing to do with it.

There is no reason to believe behaviour would be different if roles were reversed. Mandatory coalition has become a system used to spread blame yet hoard credit.

It is common in other coalitions, including recent governments in the UK and Ireland, to place senior and junior ministers from several parties in each department.

Should Stormont consider that instead of its single-minister silos?

Elsewhere, Mallon has declined to review plans for an aquarium in Belfast, despite the "serious concerns" expressed by Exploris in Portaferry that a new competitor will put it out of business.

Although the facilities will be over 30 miles apart, Exploris says both will depend on school groups from Belfast. So this all comes down to numbers of urchins.

Newton
EMERSON



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SOMETHING strange is going on at the DUP-controlled Department for the Economy.

Minister Diane Dodds has informed the assembly that petroleum company Tamboran has amended its exploration licence and no longer intends to frack for gas in Fermanagh.

However, Tamboran is still interested in drilling for gas. The department has allowed it to apply for a licence on this despite the company not supplying accounts for the past five years. Statutory regulations require accounts "no more than twelve months before the date of the application".

Environmental campaigners in Fermanagh might be wise to put their champagne back in the fridge.

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IRELAND'S finance minister Paschal Donohoe has committed €500 million over the next five years to the cross-border infrastructure projects in his government's 'shared island' programme, as well as in January's New Decade, New Approach deal.

This is a significant sum, especially in an emergency budget focused on coronavirus.

Projects first in line are believed to include the A5 dual-carriageway and university expansion in Derry.

However, it must be set against the €400 Dublin previously pledged to the A5 in

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Northern Ireland, before pulling out in 2011 due to the banking crash.

Smaller sums have since been repeatedly pledged then withdrawn, most recently last year, when Donohoe – also finance minister in the last Irish government – switched €27 million to meet cost over-runs at Dublin's new children's hospital.

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ULSTER Bank held an event in Derry in August last year to unveil the design of a new £20 polymer banknote, use of which Northern Ireland has pioneered for decades. The notes finally went into circulation this week with epically bad timing.

Last Wednesday the Australian government's scientific research organisation – which invented polymer banknotes in the 1980s – reported that coronavirus can survive on them for up to 28 days, 10 times longer than previously thought.

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Nobody is being told to 'celebrate' Northern Ireland's upcoming centenary.

Officially, the occasion is to be "marked" with "recognition" and "awareness", as determined by a cross-community and all-party Centenary Forum.

That leaves full scope for a nationalist perspective. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin and the SDLP have sent back their invitations, with the SDLP issuing a particularly strangled statement on how it still intends to "engage with the debate", just not in any way that might engage it in the debate.

Will nationalists boycott the forum then complain its discussions are unbalanced? It seems inevitable. Unionists do the same when invited to discuss a united Ireland.

No wonder partition has lasted this long.

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'ULSTER-SCOTS for Trump', a campaign by former Belfast unionist councillor Jolene Bunting, has a touch of linguistic ambiguity.

It unwittingly invites the question: what is the Ulster-Scots for Trump?

The US president had a Scottish mother and a father of German descent, whose family had Anglicised its name. So in fact, Trump is Ulster-Scots for Drumpf.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 17 1970

Dungannon Council Guilty

MR JOHN Benn, Stormont's Commissioner for Complaints, has accused Dungannon Rural Council of mal-administration – for refusing to give a family of thirteen a bigger house.

Mr and Mrs Michael Mollen and their family have been living in a prefabricated bungalow owned by the council who refused to grant them a transfer to a four-bedroomed house. Eight years ago the local Public Health Inspector recorded that the family were living in grossly overcrowded conditions. But an application then for a transfer to a larger house was ignored by the Council. The family's case was taken up by Labour Councillor Jack Hassard.

In this case the Civil Rights campaign against injustice at local government level has turned full circle. For it was in protest against action by Dungannon Rural Council in 1968 that Mr Austin Currie, MP for East Tyrone, led the first Civil Rights march.

Hume Lashes Unionist Misrule in Fermanagh

A GROUP of Paisleyites waving a Union Jack and shouting Orange slogans tried to interrupt the big Civil Rights protest meeting in Enniskillen which was attended by over 20,000 people. However, the police moved in and pushed the Paisleyites back. Mr Frank McManus, MP appealed to the crowd not to be provoked. The meeting was held to protest against the jailing of twenty Fermanagh Civil Rights men for demonstrating against the unjust and undemocratic County Council.

Mr John Hume, MP said there were still too many people in Fermanagh willing to touch the forelock and bend the knee in front of the Unionist masters. Fermanagh was the worst-hit area when it came to Unionist misrule. For many years there had been a policy of extermination of the majority of the people. Hardly a family but had a son or daughter in other lands in search of an ordinary job because of the planned campaign to deny them work at home. The Unionist right wing was opposing local government reform because, as one of them conceded, it would mean that control of local government in Fermanagh, Derry and Tyrone would fall into anti-Unionist hands. Mr Hume called on the people of Fermanagh to withdraw all recognition from Fermanagh County Council. 'No citizen should pay rent or rates or anything else to this council. ... Unless the people of Fermanagh were prepared to do that, then ... all they were doing was issuing hot air.' As Brian Faulkner struggled to get his housing reform Bill past hostile backbenchers, the past misdeeds of Unionist-controlled councils in the west continued to fuel controversy. The appalling record of the gerrymandered Fermanagh County Council attracted John Hume's particular ire.

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