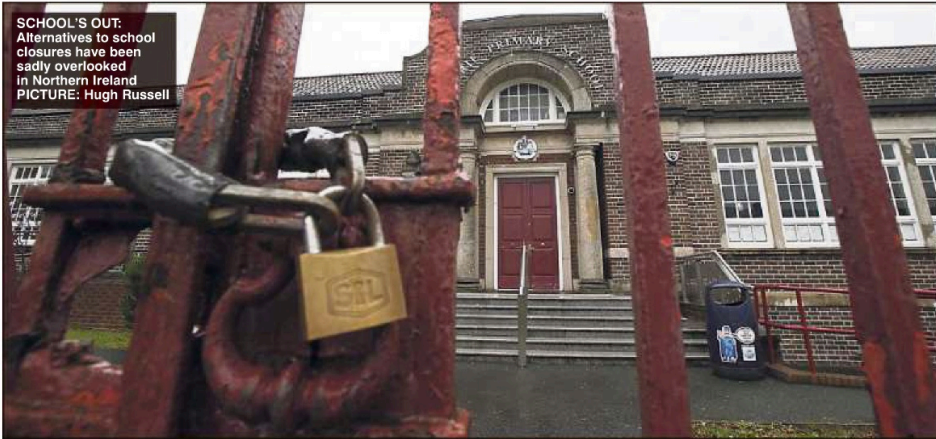


**SCHOOL'S OUT:**  
Alternatives to school  
closures have been  
sadly overlooked  
in Northern Ireland  
PICTURE: Hugh Russell



# Better planning for home schooling arrangements needed

**T**HE past fortnight's Covid school closures were designated as an extended half term holiday, swerving most of the political and practical questions involved. Future circuit breakers may not be as conveniently timed. Even if they are, the extra 'holiday' time could add up to more than a month out of the current school year. Yet no improvement in home schooling arrangements has been planned. A computer system was installed in all Northern Ireland's schools a decade ago to permit live online broadcast of classes, which would be ideal for one or two week interruptions to lessons. Teaching unions have always blocked its use, citing safeguarding concerns, but if there are no children in the classes this objection does not apply. So why has the system not been trialled?

Alternatives to closure have also been lamentably overlooked. In some European countries, schools have been given the use of museums, leisure centres and other public buildings to continue teaching with enhanced social distancing. Here, Stormont shut schools and public buildings.

In June, the Department of Education asked churches represented on school boards to make their property available but this was almost completely ignored.

■■■

THERE was a great deal of fanfare at the start of August when the executive announced a cross-departmental 'High Street Task Force' to address the impact of Covid on town and city centres. Belfast's Chamber of Commerce, headed by former DUP minister Simon Hamilton and which had lobbied for the move, said it "warmly welcomed" the chance to work with Stormont on "a proper strategy and joined up approach to saving our high streets".

Alas, as revealed by Radio Ulster's recently revamped *Evening Extra*, the Task Force has never met. It is hard to know which is worse: that the executive did absolutely nothing or that it took four months for anyone to notice.

■■■

DUE to republican abstentionism,

Newton  
EMERSON



Westminster's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is unavoidably skewed towards unionists. So it might seem odd it has condemned government legacy proposal that have also been condemned by Sinn Féin.

The proposals would see the Historical Investigations Unit in the Stormont House agreement largely pre-empted by a swift independent assessment of all 2,000 unsolved Troubles murders, with only those with "new compelling evidence and a realistic prospect of prosecution" referred on to the unit.

Alas the cross-community rejection of this is for different reasons.

Sinn Féin thinks the government wants to keep former soldiers out of court.

Unionists think the government wants to keep former paramilitaries out of court.

They are both almost certainly correct.

■■■

INTERNET-based polling in Northern Ireland is unavoidably skewed by the "politically engaged" and "progressive". That is the striking claim by More In Common, an international research initiative against "polarisation and social division". It had to exclude Northern Ireland from a report on the UK due to what it called "the self-evidently implausible distribution of responses" from

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its sample.

Pollsters have long acknowledged the issue of politically engaged people being more likely to engage with political polls - Alliance voters tend to be massively over-represented, for example - but companies claim they can adjust for it.

More In Common seems to think this is a particular challenge in Northern Ireland, which perhaps should not be surprising. One polarising effect of our politics is either to follow it obsessively or block it out entirely.

■■■

SINN Féin has accepted three resignations over Covid payments received in error.

Its swift action has headed off a story potentially as damaging as June's IRA funeral scandal and at very little cost. The only well-known head to roll is senator and former Foyle MP Elisha McCallion, whose star was already waning after losing her Westminster seat last year.

Party president Mary Lou McDonald and deputy leader Michelle O'Neill now look decisive and will benefit from favourable comparisons to the DUP, where internal discipline is clearly patchy. A wider lesson for Sinn Féin is that being seen to clean itself up works, so why stop with minor civilian matters? There are no limits to what the republican movement could achieve if it openly divested itself of its darker baggage.

Cynical calculations aside, when an apology is offered in Northern Ireland politics it should be accepted. They are rare enough.

■■■

FORMER DUP leader Peter Robinson has caused a stir with his first fortnightly *News Letter* column, by telling unionists to prepare for a border poll.

This might also have raised some eyebrows at the Guild of Newspaper Columnists, given that Robinson was just reheating the speeches he gave during his last foray into public life in June and July 2018 at Queen's University Belfast and the Gerties summer school.

How long can you keep coming up with column ideas every two weeks when you have only had one in the past two years?

## ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 31 1970

### '1 Man, 1 Vote' Conceded

THE PM, Mr James Chichester-Clark made a dramatic intervention in the debate on the Macrory Report on local government reform at Stormont last night when he intimated that legislation would be brought in to provide that all future vacancies in local government elections would be fought on a new extended 'One Man, One Vote' register. He also made the surprising disclosure that the Cabinet had given serious consideration to the policy of introducing some form of PR for both central government and local authorities. The Premier's announcements were enthusiastically received by members of the Opposition but Unionist back-benchers remained silent and looked disappointed. There were strong indications that Unionist right-wingers resented the proposals. Mr Harry West MP said he was alarmed at the Premier's statement, adding: 'I know there will be a day of reckoning for all this.'

### Currie Raises Oath

MR AUSTIN Currie (SDLP) asked the Minister of Finance at Stormont yesterday to list the positions in the public service where an Oath of Allegiance or other tests of loyalty are compulsory in order to obtain employment. The Minister, Mr Herbert Kirk, said that by the Promissory Oaths Act (1923) every person serving in an established capacity in the NI Civil Service or otherwise employed full-time by any Department of the Government was required to take an oath in the form prescribed. The legislation applied not only to civil servants but to the employees of public bodies, such as Hospital Authority and teachers. Mr Currie said he would raise the matter again. (Imposed by the Craig government in the first years of the new state, the Oath of Allegiance had always been resented by Nationalists. It was eventually abolished under Direct Rule in 1973.)

### Machine-gun Fire in Ardoyne

THREE British soldiers were injured - one seriously - when several explosions rocked the riot-torn Ardoyne area of Belfast. Heavy machine-gun firing was also reported at Flax Street, off Crumlin Road and at North Queen Street where three bullets hit an Army patrol vehicle.

### Paisley in Derry - 10 Arrests

A LARGE-SCALE military and police security operation was mounted in Derry last night when the Rev Ian Paisley, MP visited the city to address an Ulster Protestant Volunteer rally in the Guildhall. The rally was attended by about 800. Later stones were thrown at an Army post in Waterloo Place.

### Promotion for Westminster Unionist

PROMOTION for Westminster Unionist Sir John Eden, Minister of Industry in the Conservative government of Edward Heath has appointed Mr Rafton Pounder, MP for Belfast South, as his Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Until 1973 when the Heath government signed the Sunningdale Agreement, the Ulster Unionists were part of the Tory party.

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