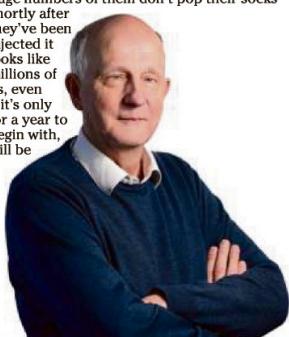


Vaccine just the shot in the arm needed for Johnson's wellbeing

THE vaccine couldn't have come at a better time for Boris Johnson. The Conservative Party is behind in the polls (and, despite what the sceptics say, most polls are still fairly close to the mark). His personal stock has plummeted inside the parliamentary party and wider membership. He has until November 19 to reach a deal with the EU; and, at this point, there's no guarantee it will be done. His chum, Donald Trump – in danger of becoming the political equivalent of Lady Havisham – is on the way out and Joe Biden won't be giving him any leeway on a trade deal. And on Wednesday a new backbench rebellion emerged in the form of the Covid Recovery Group (CRG), threatening to make it difficult for him to impose new restrictions or lockdowns.

He needed something – anything – which could be presented as good news and a ready-to-roll-out vaccine is manna from heaven. It will require emergency approval and it looks like the 85+ demographic will, although nobody will say it, serve as guinea pigs for the first round of shots. But so long as huge numbers of them don't pop their socks shortly after they've been injected it looks like millions of us, even if it's only for a year to begin with, will be



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given immunity and the chance to return to what passes for 'normal' again. And 'normal' again is what Boris Johnson needs right now.

He has another potential problem: Nigel Farage, who announced last week that his Brexit Party will be re-launched as Reform UK and contest local government elections next spring. Among other things the new party favours allowing Covid-19 to circulate freely among the young and healthy, while the old and vulnerable will be encouraged to shield themselves. But a successful vaccine renders that policy redundant. Johnson recovering his popularity with Conservatives will also dampen support for Reform UK. And Farage's cachet as a 'mate' of President Trump won't mean anything now that Trump has been shown the door (albeit one he'll have to be kicked through).

He may still hope that the Brexit issue won't go away any time soon, allowing him to continue to put pressure on the Conservatives and force Johnson further and yet further to the populist alt-right. But I'm not convinced that there's a huge appetite to continue with the argument

which has dominated and divided UK politics since David Cameron conceded an in/out referendum in the 2015 Conservative manifesto.

I think most people just want certainties on the economy and how the UK trades and prospers after January 2021. I don't detect any great desire for a re-run of old battles; particularly against a background of the UK recovering from the economic damage done by Covid, while also adjusting to post-EU realities, including dropping out without a formal deal and with no guarantee of a new trade agreement with the US. I don't see how another huge political/constitutional battle with the Conservatives at the centre of it is in anyone's interests.

That said, Farage loves a spat, especially one fought in the full glare of the cameras and with no need for him to actually deliver the goods at any point. A fuming point and a foaming pint may be his stock in trade, yet somehow he always remains on the electoral margins.

Meanwhile, the Northern Ireland Executive continues its transformation from government to game show, by way of every single one of Dante's circles of hell. It's a very simple game actually: take any issue you can think of and then place bets on how long it will take the various players to reduce it to full-blown farce. Round two consists of a second series of bets on how many compromises will then be required to reach the deal we all knew they'd probably reach in the first case.

A new round will be added in the next few weeks when the executive will be asked to agree a distribution plan for who gets the new vaccine first. But I kid you not, if it is left to them to agree an order of priority we'll probably only see it rolled out in time for Covid-27.

Anyway, I'm planning to trademark the format and take it on the road when life does return to 'normal' again. My working title: You Bet! It's Bloody Pointless. It sums up perfectly what passes for 'normal' here.

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ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 13 1970

'Ulster '71 Row'

THE STORMONT Government was accused in the House of Commons yesterday of earmarking £800,000 of public money for a Unionist Party celebration next week.

Mr Herbert Kirk, Minister of Finance, moved a supplementary estimate of £109,000 for advance expenditure on the 'Ulster '71' project and Mr Gerry Fitt, leader of the SDLP Opposition, said the total involved was £800,000 – 'the £109,000 will do for a weekend' – and the money was used to celebrate fifty years of Unionist government.

The Unionist Party, Mr Fitt said, was entitled to celebrate in its own right because it had dominated the political scene for so long, but many people bitterly opposed to the party were being asked to approve the expenditure of public money on a Unionist celebration. Mr Ivan Cooper (SDLP) said if the Government wanted to present a better image of NI they should get on with giving equal rights and opportunities to all the people.

Mr James O'Reilly (Nat.) said the money should be spent on the creation of new industries in depressed areas and Mr Austin Currie (SDLP) said his reservations about the Ulster '71 project were increased when he saw that Mr John Brooke [a leading Unionist right-winger] would be in charge.

Meanwhile, Rev Ian Paisley (Protestant Unionist), who abstained, said that he would not give a blank cheque to the Government if they were not prepared to state clearly the origin and the birthright of NI – 'warts and all' – during Ulster '71'.

The estimate was approved by 22 votes to 6 with Mr Vivian Simpson (NI Labour Party) voting with the Government.

Mr Kirk said the proposed expenditure for 'Ulster '71' was 'a massive investment in the future and a great act of faith by the Government'.

Street Violence 'Symptom of Failure'

'IN SO far as violence has erupted in the streets of Northern Ireland, it is a symptom of failure and a monument to our inadequacies as a community'. So declared Dr Norman Gibson, Professor of Economics at the New University, Coleraine.

At the heart of the Northern problem, there was a political conflict, he went on: 'There is fundamental disagreement over policy and even more basic, over the very existence of Northern Ireland. Political conflict could scarcely be more divisive than this. This political conflict has been so destructive that it has infected, distorted and corrupted economic, social, cultural, religious and personal life.'

The launch of 'Ulster '71' with its jarring jingle, 'Come and join in the fun' coincided with the introduction of internment by Brian Faulkner's Unionist government and major violence on the streets. Predictably, the event was boycotted by nationalists.

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