



CAT AND DOG: There is no prospect of true cooperation between the parties of the executive

North's cycle of crisis and standoff will never be broken

THERE comes a point when you realise that nothing is going to change in Northern Ireland. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse could be sitting around the executive table, setting out the gory details of their strategy to destroy everyone and everything on earth, and the DUP and Sinn Féin would somehow manage to contrive to turn it into an Orange versus Green thing. Indeed, I'm pretty sure Michelle O'Neill would ask for utter destruction to be put on hold until a border poll had been conducted.

Almost 20 years ago – just before the assembly was placed in suspended animation for five years – Martin McGuinness announced his intention to end the 11-plus transfer system. There was no discussion with the other members of the executive, let alone other parties; he just made a unilateral decision. Yet during the negotiations at St Andrews in 2006 Sinn Féin left open a door – and McGuinness fully understood the consequence of leaving it open – which meant it would be possible for an unregulated transfer system to replace the 11-plus.

And within two years of the rebooted executive being formed in 2007 – with the DUP and SF at its centre – the new unregulated transfer system was rolled out. It was described by its opponents as 'temporary' and my eldest daughter, Megan, sat it. Eleven years on and it remains unregulated, 'temporary' and unreformed. No education minister since 2007 (Ruane, O'Dowd and Weir) has made a serious effort to change it: resulting in the absurd situation we have right now, where the AQE, a private company, can reach an agreement with its client grammar schools and Weir says he doesn't have the authority to intervene.

My middle child, Lillah-Liberty, was due to sit the transfer test in December, then in January and now in February. I wrote a piece in October suggesting the AQE and Department of Education war-game the contingency plans in

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action 20 years contributed to the present mess) are trying to use the present health crisis to kill off academic selection. The logic of their position seems to be that if you get it stopped for one year – and maybe put on ice again in November, depending on potential ongoing threats from the virus – then it makes it easier to get it stopped altogether. That way lies another huge crisis for the executive: which is maybe what some want.

At moments like this I'm accused of lazy journalism or 'false equivalence' (which is SF's catch-all phrase for anyone, in any context, who seems to be criticising the party) by including the entire executive in my criticism, rather than singling out particular parties. But the fact of the matter is that the entire executive is to blame. In the most recent manifestation – January 2020 – five parties practically fell over each other to get their place around the table: yet every single party knew that nothing had been done to reform vetoes, blocking mechanisms and the Petition of Concern.

So they all knew that crisis would follow crisis, standoff would follow standoff and absurdity would follow absurdity.

The three smaller parties knew full well that the DUP and SF would deliberately rub each other up the wrong way: and knew, too, that both would play exclusively to their own gallery. The DUP and SF planned to do it all along, anyway, reckoning it pleases their voter base.

These realities are never going to change. How we do political business in Northern Ireland is never going to change.

Direct rule or Irish unity wouldn't make a button of difference, either, because the vast majority of unionist and republican voters would continue to despise each other. The Four Horsemen would just shrug their shoulders, holster their weapons and conclude there's nothing left to destroy here. Armageddon might look like a more attractive option than what we endure now.

What is clear is that elements within the executive (including Sinn Féin, which is still unwilling to acknowledge that McGuinness's unilateral action 20 years contributed to the present mess) are trying to use the present health crisis to kill off academic selection

ON THIS DAY

JANUARY 8 1921

South Armagh Ambush

LAST afternoon, shortly after three, a patrol from the Camlough RIC barracks (South Armagh) was ambushed on the main road to Newry in the vicinity of the burned-out residence of Mr Frank Aiken [senior IRA commander] in the townland of Carrickbracken.

The patrol consisted of Constables Cawley and Durkin and Special Constable Spring, all of whom were wounded. On approaching the spot in question, the patrol observed a couple of horsemen, evidently scouting. The patrol was immediately fired at by individuals who had been hiding behind a wall and it is stated that the attackers numbered about forty. Constables Cawley and Spring were seriously wounded while Constable Durkin was only slightly injured.

Auxiliary 'Guilty but Insane'

IN THE case of Temporary Cadet Sergeant Harte, RIC, charged before a general Courtmartial at Cork with murdering the Very Rev Canon Magner, PP, Dunmanway and Tadhg Crowley on December 15th, the court found that the accused was guilty of both offences but was insane at the time of their commission. It is believed that Hart will be detained in a criminal lunatic asylum.

Specials Charged with Riot

AT THE Ulster Winter Assizes yesterday, three members of the Special Constabulary who were enrolled for duty in Ballymacarrett were charged with riot at Mount Street on 28th August.

Mr J McGonigal, KC, prosecuting, stated that this was of a more serious class of riot than those with which juries had been engaged. The reason was that the three accused men were members of the Special Constabulary which had been enrolled to protect the property of citizens and to preserve the peace of the city during the riots. If the jury believed the evidence for the Crown, these men, instead of doing their duty, engaged in looting the premises of a man named Maguire at 112 Mount Street.

They were guilty of behaving in a disgraceful manner. At hearing.

Raids by Tyrone Specials

EXTENSIVE raids by RIC and Special Constables took place throughout the Edendork and Newmills districts, near Dungannon. The raids were on a scale never previously attempted in that district and many farmhouses were thoroughly ransacked. They first visited the dwelling of a man named Cavanagh of Old Engine, arresting his two sons. (The verdict in the case of the Auxiliary who murdered the parish priest recalled the case of Captain JC Bowen-Colthurst, charged with the murders of the pacifist, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington during the 1916 Rising. He was found guilty of murder but insane. Meanwhile the Specials were making their presence felt in rural arms searches while members were charged with looting a Catholic-owned pub in Belfast.)

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