



SPECULATION: Gavin Robinson's comments this week led to speculation of a possible challenge to Arlene Foster's leadership

DUP suffering from case of media over-analysis

THE DUP is experiencing a slight case of media over-analysis, after East Belfast MP Gavin Robinson agreed with comments three years ago from former DUP leader Peter Robinson (no relation) that unionists would be wise to prepare for a border poll.

DUP MPs Gregory Campbell and Carla Lockhart then agreed with Gavin Robinson, starting speculation of a leadership challenge and a radical rethink inside unionism's largest party. Such moves could be afoot. However, Gavin Robinson has made similar remarks previously. Rather than volunteering his views on Peter Robinson's comments, he was asked for them by the Irish News. Like any politician he would have realised agreeing or disagreeing could both make unwanted headlines, so he opted for waffly agreement about unionists needing to argue their case – he did not mention a border poll. Campbell and Lockhart then did much the same when put on the spot over Gavin Robinson's remarks.

Of course, this could all kick off a leadership challenge and a rethink in unionism. We might know in around ten years.

SECRETARY of state Brandon Lewis and DUP agriculture minister Edwin Poots have disputed the cause of empty supermarket shelves, with Lewis blaming Covid and Poots blaming the Brexit sea border.

Matters became somewhat unseemly when Poots called Lewis an "emperor with no clothes" and Lewis tweeted "not sure anyone needs that image in their head."

In reality, both men's arguments were bare. Retailers and hauliers have pointed to the other sea border, at Dover, as the principle problem with supplies across the UK. Northern Ireland is partially protected from this by its sea border, although it has issues of its own.

At least Lewis can acknowledge problems at Dover, even if he has to blame Covid. The DUP's position is that Brexit is good but Northern Ireland's sea border is bad. Disruption across the English Channel indicates the reverse.

WHEN UUP health minister Robin Swann called in military personnel with

**Newton
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medical training to help in hospitals, attention predictably turned to Sinn Féin's response, until Michelle O'Neill endorsed the move. Attention might then have turned to some intra-unionist awkwardness. Last week, UUP MLA Doug Beattie, a former captain, ridiculed DUP economy minister Diane Dodds when she called for the army to use its "skills and logistical expertise" in hospitals.

But in the end all attention went to trade union Unison, after its Northern Ireland branch issued a petulant demand for "clarity". Interpreting this through a republican or unionist lens would be simplistic. More exotic forms of left-wing politics will also have been involved – so exotic, in fact, that the comrades demanded to know if Swann had exhausted all his options with "private sector healthcare providers".

COVID really is turning the world upside down. While Sinn Féin clears the military to work in hospitals, BBC Northern Ireland has subjected health workers to populist bureaucrat-bashing. Radio Ulster tried to create a scandal over back office health staff, such as in IT and accounts, being added to the priority list for vaccines this week.

"Some listeners said they understood only 'front-line' medical staff were eligible for the

vaccine," sniffed the BBC website in a follow-up report.

There is not enough eye-rolling in the whole of ophthalmology to respond to this implication. Northern Ireland is running two parallel vaccination systems, via health trusts and GPs, to maximise distribution to different groups, using different vaccines and strategies. Healthcare staff are by far the easiest group for trusts to bring through their high-volume vaccination centres and any spare capacity in that system cannot be swapped to the GP side – it would just be wasted. So this week, after a month of prioritising medical staff and with capacity ramping up, non-medical colleagues were added. Nobody's doctor or granny has missed out as a result.

HAVE some GPs been missing out on vaccine deliveries? That was suggested by Sinn Féin MP Orfhlaith Begley, who said GPs in her West Tyrone constituency had complained of a "postcode lottery".

There has been a lottery aspect, although only briefly. GP are using the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, rolling it out to the general population by age. The first consignment that arrived at the start of this month was of 50,000 doses in indivisible packs of 100 – only enough for one pack each to Northern Ireland's 350 general practices.

As this was a bit 'lumpy' to distribute among the first group of patients aged 80 or over, those practices with closest to 100 suitable patients were prioritised. Within a week, enough further consignments had arrived to meet all GP demand. But that initial lumpiness is still working its way through the system.

RESPONDING to news that actor Laurence Fox has acquired a 'mask exempt' badge, Simon Hoare, the Conservative MP for North Dorset, tweeted: "I hadn't realised that being a first class, ocean going, chateau bottled, nuclear power p***k was an exemption from wearing a mask. What a selfish loathsome tool this man is."

Hoare is chair of Westminster's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, on which, perhaps fortunately, Sammy Wilson does not sit.

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ON THIS DAY

JANUARY 23 1971

Labour MP on Curfew

EVENTS in Belfast on July 3rd last year could take place anywhere in the UK, Mr Gerald Kaufman (Labour, Ardwick) said at Westminster yesterday.

Mr Kaufman said that General Freeland (the GOC) had issued a press release about a curfew in Belfast and a 'restrictive rule' took place from ten o'clock on the Friday night until the Sunday morning. 'Thousands were placed under what amounted to house arrest. 'If this was not a curfew, what was the legal authority for restriction of movements of thousands of people?'

Mr Rafton Pounder (Unionist) said he had no hesitation in commending General Freeland.

Mr Ian Gilmour (Defence Under-Secretary) said that on July 3 [1970] information was received of an arms cache in a specific house and the army and RUC carried out a successful search. As they withdrew, they came under fire from hostile crowds. Troops had to use firearms in their own defence.

Paisley in Chaplain Row

THE Speaker, Mr Ivan Neill, said at Stormont yesterday that he would give a ruling later on a question raised by Rev Ian Paisley (Protestant Unionist) in regard to the recent appointment of a Catholic priest as chaplain to the House. Mr Paisley said that the manner of the appointment brought the House into contempt.

He said that four years ago when the Nationalist Party accepted the role of Official Opposition, an invitation was sent to the Catholic Hierarchy to nominate a priest to act as chaplain. The letter was not acted on but in 1968 the Nationalist Party ceased to accept the role of official opposition.

'No Cancellation of 'Ulster 71'

THE PM, Mr James Chichester-Clark said yesterday that he could see no reason whatever to cancel 'Ulster 71' which was being staged to help the economic position of NI.

Mr Paddy Kennedy (Rep Lab) asked if the Dublin Government were co-operating in this project and what plans there were for the counties of Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan. He asked for an assurance that publicity would be given to unemployment in places like Derry and Ballymurphy. The setting up of the state 50 years ago was a mistake and the sooner steps were taken to rectify that, the better.

Rev Ian Paisley: No surrender!

The polarisation of opinion over the Unionist government's initiative to celebrate the first half-century of the Northern Ireland state is highlighted in these Stormont exchanges. Paisley never lost an opportunity to stir the pot, even challenging the historic appointment of Stormont's first Catholic chaplain. At Westminster, the SDLP leader, Gerry Fitt was able to rely on his Labour friends to embarrass the Tories over their NI policy.

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