



GOOD TO TALK: Former senior aide to David Trimble, David Campbell, Tony Blair's former chief of staff Jonathan Powell and Richard Monteith at the launch of the Loyalist Communities Council in 2015
PICTURE: Mal McCann

Peace process built on talking to paramilitaries

THE peace process is built around the dilemma of official engagement with proscribed organisations. This continues to the present day; the executive's strategy on paramilitarism, reaffirmed by all parties and both governments last year, is divided into the carrot of "promoting lawfulness" and the stick of "tackling criminality".

So there was a bit too much preciousness after the Northern Ireland Office met the Loyalist Communities Council to address "anger" over the Brexit sea border.

The NIO clearly saw this as an urgent matter of promoting lawfulness. When the SDLP and Alliance asked why loyalists are still being indulged instead of arrested, both parties were shaking a stick at their own policy.

Unionists preferred to compare the meeting to having to deal with Sinn Féin and its "shadow forces". Republicans said the correct analogy would be the NIO meeting dissidents to discuss a hard border, which is not known to have occurred.

However, if dissidents sought such a meeting, would it be denied – and how could anyone else involved in our politics object to it?

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One claim stirring up loyalist anger is that the government amended the Northern Ireland Act – the Good Friday Agreement's enabling legislation – last month to stop its consent provisions applying to sea border votes, as agreed in the Brexit withdrawal deal. Hence, say some loyalists, the supposedly unbreakable Good Friday Agreement has been broken. It is lamentable that anyone could take this seriously. The act has been amended scores of times over the years to keep it updated and confined to its own terms. This should be particularly obvious to all those loyalists who have noted, correctly, that Brexit has nothing to do with the Good Friday Agreement – as the latest amendment affirms.

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Health care staff in line for a £500 cheque from Stormont can thank an inflexible Treasury rule. The executive is only allowed to carry 0.75 per cent of its day to day budget over if it has not spent it all by the end of its financial

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year in March – a mechanism known as "budget exchange".

This year's budget was £12 billion, with another £3 billion added throughout the year for Covid support. The epidemic has also greatly complicated spending. So Stormont has reached the end of January with £400 million going spare, only a quarter of which it can keep. The rest has to be given away pronto, which is harder than it sounds. A quarter of the underspend is because DUP economy minister Diane Dodds could not give away £93 million in high street vouchers.

Parties at Stormont and Westminster saw this coming months ago and pressed the Treasury to raise the budget exchange threshold. With an accountant's logic, it replied this would be unnecessary as the 0.75 per cent allowance applied to the extra £3 billion. Such innocence.

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BBC Northern Ireland is persisting with its attempt to concoct a vaccine queue jumping story. Last week, the target was back office health workers. This week, it was health workers' families. These groups have been offered jabs to avoid wasting unused capacity at the seven health trust mass vaccination centres. Most of the population is to be vaccinated through a parallel system at GPs but it is not straightforward to switch patients

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between the two.

Extra capacity and vaccine at the centres has now allowed the 65-69 group to be redirected to them, while over-70s and shielding groups remain with GPs, who are better equipped for their requirements.

In queueing terms, this is like a supermarket opening a second till. That will not stop further stories of queue jumping as some 65-69s are inevitably vaccinated ahead of older or more vulnerable people.

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There was some excitement over a LucidTalk poll, commissioned by the Sunday Times, showing 51 per cent support for a border poll within five years. As noted in the same paper this reflects unionists so confident of victory they think a poll would put the question to bed. There seems little chance of that. One question that could soon be resolved is why the only other regular polling exercise in Northern Ireland, the annual Life and Times Survey by Queen's and Ulster universities, tends to show lower support for a united Ireland. LucidTalk, which conducts its polls online, says Life and Times detests "shy nationalists" by interviewing people face to face.

However, Covid means this year's Life and Times survey is being conducted online, by phone or by video call, at the respondent's choice.

This should indicate if a significant shy nationalist effect exists.

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The executive has put a draft programme for government out to public consultation. Consultees may struggle to disagree with a document arranged around nine incontestable "outcomes", such as "people want to live, work and visit here".

The last programme for government in 2016, never properly adopted due to Stormont's collapse, introduced this "outcomes" model alongside an online dashboard of 49 indicators so the public could judge delivery. The concept was copied from Scotland, with indicators promoted as its key innovation.

The new draft is remarkably similar to 2016, except all mention of indicators has been dropped. What this indicates requires no consultation.

ON THIS DAY

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Violence 'A Catholic Problem'

THERE was no hint that the recent troubles in Belfast were a Protestant-Catholic confrontation; it was a conflict that was markedly political, said Mr Roy Bradford, Stormont Minister of Commerce last night. Mr Bradford, who was speaking in North Antrim, said the problem was that a substantial section of the community at best would only reluctantly acquiesce in its British citizenship as a second choice, and at the worst, hated it with a bitter hatred and would reject it by every possible means, including violence.

That was why the British Army was attacked in Ballymurphy and Ardoyne. And that was why this particular problem was a Catholic problem and why its solution lay largely in the hands of the Catholic community. The leaders of that community and all the decent men and women who form its large majority see all too clearly what was happening to their children and their Christian standard of life. They saw that the futility of violence. They saw that respect for law was inviolable and that once it was broken down, only criminal elements of every kind would profit. The Government had gone as far and as fast as it could in rectifying grievances.

Devlin Attacks 'Colossal Cheek'

HOWEVER, the Commerce Minister has been sharply rebuked by Falls MP Mr Paddy Devlin for displaying "a colossal cheek" in asserting that the problem of violence in the North is a Catholic one.

The "fundamental Ulster problem", as Mr Bradford saw it, was that there were many people in NI who accepted British citizenship with reluctance. It was worth making two points, Mr Devlin said. Firstly, many people here had been reluctant to accept the second-class citizenship imposed by Mr Bradford and his predecessors since this state was set up. Secondly, it is the democratic right of every individual to support Republican ideals if he so wishes. Mr Bradford's contention that the Government had gone as far and as fast as it could in rectifying grievances was "ridiculous nonsense" in view of a recent injunction imposed on Dungannon Rural Council on its [sectarian] housing policy.

Enniskillen Future 'Cockpit'

A PROTEST meeting in Enniskillen against the imprisonment of Mr Frank McManus, MP, was told that the town would become the 'cockpit' for future Civil Rights agitation and there would be no peace until the corrupt County Council was abolished and the powers and privileges of the Brookes and the Wests were replaced by fair play. (A *suave, modern Unionist with Monaghan roots*, Roy Bradford characterised the ongoing violence as a 'Catholic problem', ignoring the UVF bombing campaign and the mob attacks of August '69.)

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