



CHANGE: We are still battling a virus that has made our lives, communities, country and the world a very different place PICTURE: Mal McCann

Moving on after a year like no other

WE ARE now a year on from the first positive case of Covid-19 detected in the north.

I have lived through and reported on some seismic events in our recent history, some tragic, some joyous, some life changing, some life affirming. But none of us have ever experienced anything like the last 12 months and I hope that we never will again.

In the week when all of Europe went into lockdown I was due to go on holiday to visit a friend who lives in Spain, bags packed and planning a week of no emails or work commitments. My packed case remains in the spare room. I've no idea when it'll ever get used again.

Within the space of days I went from looking forward to a sunshine break to talking to my mother about her final wishes if she were to succumb to the virus. Emotional conversations with loved ones and constant worry about what was ahead, as we watched horrific images from Milan and Madrid.

Life came at us all fast that week in March. People hoped this would be a short, sharp shock but the experts were telling us differently. This was going to take months, not weeks, to suppress.

In mid-March 2020 I interviewed a senior police officer who said the PSNI had a Covid policing plan in place until September. September? It was completely incomprehensible that we would still be living under restrictions six months on. And yet here we are looking back at a full year of Covid, lockdown and release. Still battling with a virus that has made our lives, communities, country and the world a very different place.

It soon became clear that the years of austerity and constant cutting of health service budgets had left us with an NHS unable to cope with such pressures. Clapping

Allison MORRIS



for nurses, who just months before had been standing on freezing cold picket lines, striking for pay parity with their counterparts in England, seemed well-meaning but misplaced. This year also highlighted the injustices of our society. The unfair distribution of the world's wealth and resources was amplified when placed in the context of a global disaster. Those of us lucky enough to be able to work from home have had a much easier lockdown financially than the tens of thousands who were furloughed or lost their jobs.

The definition of 'front-line' worker has also changed for ever, beyond the emergency services to the cleaners, supermarket workers, bus drivers, utility workers, teachers, social workers and food bank volunteers, among others.

It showed the best of us and the worst of us. The toilet roll hoarding, curtain twitching busybodies, the people in parks complaining

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about people in parks, those for whom home was a comfortable safe haven judging those for whom lockdown was more like a prison sentence.

We talk of underlying medical conditions that put people at greater risk from Covid but what this last year has shown is that poverty is also an underlying condition. It was no coincidence that a postcode breakdown showed that where the highest rates of Covid deaths occurred were also areas of high economic and social deprivation. Then at the other extreme from those now relying on food banks for survival, the pandemic helped many of the super rich get even wealthier. According to an Oxfam report, the world's 10 richest billionaires have collectively seen their wealth grow by \$540 billion – more than £378 billion – since last March.

The vaccine has finally brought hope where there was previously despair but it is when we do come out of lockdown permanently that the real work of rebuilding begins.

Dealing with the aftermath of Covid, the damage to mental health, to the education of children and young people, hospital waiting lists and untreated non-Covid related conditions, the loneliness and isolation of many people during this time, will take years.

But we can do better. We can use this time to make sure those gaps in opportunity are addressed and that there is a fairer society, so should we face such challenges in the future people are not left struggling in the way they have been.

And so, this is my last Irish News column as I prepare to move on. Having this weekly platform has been one of the greatest privileges of my career. I have loved the feedback – good and bad – from you, the readers of this fine newspaper.

Thank you for your time and I hope you and yours stay safe as we look forward to better times ahead.

ON THIS DAY

MARCH 4 1921

Devlin Challenges Despotism

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, Mr Joseph Devlin (Nat.) asked the Prime Minister whether, in view of the large number of death sentences inflicted by Military Courts, he would make immediate provision for appeals from such courts to civil courts.

Sir H Greenwood said the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act, passed last August, contained no provision for an appeal to any civil court from the Courtmartial.

Mr Devlin – May I ask the Prime Minister whether, in view of the fact that there is a universal feeling that many innocent men are being executed, he will reconsider the desirability of setting up some civil tribunal for the purpose of having the evidence investigated before the sentence is carried out.

Mr Lloyd George – To do so at the present time would, I think, interfere with the course of justice. Everybody is very shocked at the necessity of inflicting the death penalty but, after all, if you look at the figures there have been far more murders than there have been punishments.

Mr Devlin – May I ask whether the PM is aware that the major portion of all these evils which sprung up in Ireland are due to the executions of 1916 and whether in view of the great feeling of horror which is being created in the country, he will... not continue a policy which is bound to poison the future relationships between this country and Ireland.

Mr Lloyd George – We cannot possibly allow murders to be unpunished.

Haircutting Outrage

ANOTHER haircutting outrage took place in Belfast yesterday, a young woman named Lily Stitt of Parker Street, Newtownards Road, being the victim. It appears that about 11 o'clock in the morning she returned home from shopping to find two strange men wearing trench coats. They asked her where 'Jimmy' was, meaning her brother who is a Special Constable.

The men produced revolvers and proceeded to cut off the woman's hair with a pair of scissors as a result of which she fainted. They took four pounds out of a drawer and also a number of Orange sashes, regalia and a Union Jack. These they cut up and placed in the fire. Before departing they said they would 'get Jimmy yet'. The police are investigating.

LEADING a tiny band of six Nationalist MPs in a hostile Commons, Devlin, along with Asquith and Labour, sought to hold the Coalition government to account for its policy of military oppression and partition in Ireland. Extraordinarily, while the Ulster Unionists and even the Southern Unionists were consulted about the partition scheme, the Northern Nationalists were completely ignored by the government.

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