



DAMP SQUIB: Jeffrey Donaldson's warnings of economic and political instability over the Northern Ireland Protocol failed to have the desired effect  
PICTURE: Hugh Russell

# Unionists may huff and puff but the protocol is here to stay

THE DUP's 'Trigger Article 16' parliamentary debate proved to be the dampest of squibs last week, overshadowed by Boris Johnson's announcements on the easing of lockdown restrictions in the weeks and months to come. It didn't help either that, outside of loyal Ulster, this was not an issue anyone credibly believed to be worthy of the DEFCON 1 status afforded it by unionist politicians and their sympathetic voices in the most parochial pastures of our local media.

It was Jeffrey Donaldson's turn to strike the ominous chords for an albeit distracted and disinterested audience, with the Lagan Valley MP sombrely speaking of the apparent economic instability that exists today and warning political instability lay just around the corner, which implied Jeffrey may have been Zooming in for the meeting from a location close to the entrance to Mid and East Antrim Council offices.

The unionist lexicon has always reserved a special place for dramatic terms, so it was no surprise to hear Sammy Wilson speak of how the protocol "annexes Northern Ireland" from the United Kingdom, starkly concluding that Ulster had "not so much been sold out, but sold on to the EU."

The archives of Brexit's Banter years will forever record Ian Paisley Junior's indignant cry that the protocol "betrayed us and made us feel like foreigners in our own country." This would be the same man who, two years previously, confidently stated he would be asking Theresa May for "milk and no sugar" after telling a television news reporter that his party had given "precise instructions" to the then prime minister about how to handle Brexit.

It was left to Tory MP and chair of the NI Affairs select committee, Simon Hoare, to point out during the Commons Zoom discussion how the protocol had the potential to deliver "a golden age for the Northern Ireland economy", perhaps teasing Arlene for her comments in early

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January about the "gateway of opportunity" presented by the Brexit deal, which of course included the protocol.

Never to be outdone, Jim Allister wrote last week of the "pernicious constitutional damage" being done to the Union by the "sovereignty-bursting protocol" (who even thinks in such terms?)

Alas, it will all come to naught. Jeffrey's lament will go unheeded. Sammy's ragings will have the effect of a poodle howling at the moon, and the ever-entitled Fortunate Son will grow accustomed to pounding Ballymena's streets feeling like an Ulsterman in Sri Lanka.

Collectively they may continue to huff and puff, but the protocol is here to stay.

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The DUP are a busted flush in London, and who can blame Tory MPs for quietly smirking to themselves with pleasure at the humbling of the boisterous backbenchers from the back of beyond who thought they could dictate Brexit terms to Mother England.

In the absence of responsible leadership, unionist politicians cede space on the airwaves and in local communities to fringe figures of fun who, in another society, would fall to secure Warhol's fifteen minutes never mind years of cringeworthy coverage.

Unionist leaders appear determined to never enjoy their time actually living within the United Kingdom, pining instead for a union that can never be.

Northern Ireland can be British but history, geography, culture and much more beside mean it most assuredly will also remain Irish. Denying that reality and seeking to ignore its logical implications will leave unionism perpetually wrong-footed. That should be the enduring lesson for the DUP after squandering its opportunity to work towards a soft Brexit providing the least worst option for this region during Theresa May's tenure as prime minister.

The sunny uplands of freedom were always a mirage. Ulster's unionists are discovering the eternal wisdom of Kris Kristofferson's observation that freedom is "just another word for nothing left to lose."

For unionism, this is as good as it gets, and the more far-sighted unionists know that arresting the unmistakable momentum for Irish unity will involve transforming the narrative and charting a course never before conceived of by unionists - never mind enthusiastically advocated and worked towards. Those tempted to tentatively walk this road are inevitably subjected to vicious Lundy lashings from the most loyal quarters, and the absence of political cover and stewardship from the top means this mistake is rarely made twice. It's all so very predictable.

## ON THIS DAY

MARCH 1 1921

### Six Youths Executed at Victoria Barracks

CONTRARY to expectations and hopes in which 89 per cent of all the Irish people share, the six youths who have been convicted of offences against the law by a Military Court under Martial Law, were executed yesterday at Victoria Barracks, Cork.

It was said at first that the six would be hanged but they were shot. It is evident that the letter from the Bishop of Cork to General Strickland [Military Supremo] and the telegram sent by Cardinal Logue to General Macready [GOC] induced the military authorities to abandon the idea of sending the doomed youths to the Judgement Seat of God without the presence of Catholic chaplains. The names of the six victims were: Thomas O'Brien; Daniel O'Callaghan; John Lyons; Timothy McCarthy; Patrick Mahony (all Co. Cork) and John Allen, Tipperary.

Our Cork correspondent writes: Before the executions, which took place in batches of two from 8am, two Masses were celebrated in the cell. When the relatives returned to the Military Barracks at ten o'clock to have the remains handed over to them, they were informed that the request could not be acceded to as the bodies had already been removed.

Shortly before 7.30 am, a number of ladies from Cumann na mBan assembled outside the gates. A whippet tank with guns menacing the crowd was drawn up. Mrs MacCurtain, widow of the late Lord Mayor of Cork [assassinated by RIC in 1920] joined the watchers carrying a statue of the Sacred Heart. The Rosary having concluded, on the stroke of eight a volley of rifle fire broke the stillness of the morning, followed by a second fusillade.

Canon O'Sullivan said the men had walked to their death 'like schoolboys on a holiday'. Mrs Mahony of Berrings, mother of Patrick Mahony, said: 'My boy Patrick was only 23. He was educated at the Presentation College and was a good boy. I am proud of him.'

His Lordship the Most Rev Dr Coholan, Bishop of Cork expressed the view that the executions were very regrettable from the point of view of a peaceful settlement and very stupid on the part of the Government. The Government think they will break the spirit of the young men of Ireland by these executions, he said; they will only succeed in driving everyone into the ranks of the IRA...

(These executions marked a further escalation of the conflict. In May 1921, seven members of the Belfast IRA, captured following an IRA ambush at Lappinuff, Co Cavan, were sentenced to death by courtmartial, only to have their lives saved in the nick of time by the Anglo-Irish Truce of July.)

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