



**FROZEN:** Economy Minister Diane Dodds seemed frozen in the headlights when the 'Swiss model' was raised by the SDLP and Alliance in the assembly but both she and Arlene Foster have since said they are not averse to idea

# Swiss model offers food for thought

**T**HE 'Swiss model' is entering Northern Ireland's Brexit lexicon. Switzerland avoids border checks by aligning its plant and animal regulations with the EU.

DUP economy minister Diane Dodds seemed frozen in the headlights when this was raised by the SDLP and Alliance in the assembly but both she and Arlene Foster have since said they are not averse to the idea.

Beyond the details of this example the overall Swiss model involves endlessly negotiating your relationship with the EU, issue by issue. Swiss politics become dominated by these protracted technical debates, in which alignment is the only realistic choice. Northern Ireland lacks even that hypothetical autonomy, as the UK must shadow the EU to mitigate the sea border for us. This is the rough outline of our Brexit future: not so much a Swiss model as begging London for a Swiss roll.

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A REPORT from Ulster University has found Northern Ireland's entire education system to be a divisive mess that needs rebuilt from top to bottom. Covid is putting further radical ideas on the agenda, including scrapping GCSEs.

The hopelessness of expecting Stormont to deliver change on such a scale is highlighted by Peter Weir's pledge to let children start school one year later if they were born prematurely in the months before June.

The DUP education minister says this simple tweak of admissions rules will be a "major priority within the current mandate".

That is no guarantee of delivery, so obsessed is the education bureaucracy with managing everything by pupil age.

Weir's Sinn Féin predecessor, John O'Dowd, had to abandon an identical pledge in 2015 because he ran out of legislative time before the following year's assembly election. It is now the same length of time to the next election.

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IN A move straight from the Donald Trump play-book, Sinn Féin has complained about this year's canvasses of the electoral register – a legally required update, last performed in 2013.

Of course, the party also complained in 2013, when it claimed

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voters were being disenfranchised by form-filling. This year it adds the government is "planning" to "suppress the democratic rights of citizens" ahead of "next year's historic assembly election".

Canvasses are not performed by the government but by the independent Electoral Office. Frequency is set in legislation at once every ten years. A canvass was planned last year until Covid intervened. Next year clashes with the election and the following year misses the deadline, so that leaves this year. No grievance-peddling conspiracy theory is required to explain it.

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COUNCILS will be able to set different levels of business and domestic rates under legislation to be introduced by Sinn Féin finance minister Conor Murphy. With the decline of the high street, logic points to households picking up more of the bill. It will be interesting to see how councillors handle this unpopular responsibility. One improvement not announced is letting councils vary business rates within their areas, to shift the burden from less prosperous town centres. The creation of the super-councils six years ago made this reform more urgent, yet there is still no sign of it.

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IMAGINE a new greenway route was identified through unused land in west Belfast, requiring only minor access work for most of its

length and winning support from residents, community groups and the council. Then imagine the Department for Infrastructure said it had to run along the hard shoulder of the M1, while still offering no credible budget or timeline to build it.

This is what has happened to the proposed Holywood greenway, which the department has absurdly re-routed onto the Sydenham bypass, ridiculing policy direction from SDLP minister Nichola Mallon. Days later, Mallon penned a *Belfast Telegraph* column that concluded: "Change is coming. So let's get on with it."

It looked more like a message to her officials than to the public.

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A FIXED link to Scotland has made the news again, although this time Boris Johnson cannot be accused of staging a distraction. Despite headlines such as the *Guardian's* "Rail bosses plan to build Northern Ireland to Scotland tunnel", the 'plan' is merely an engineering industry submission to an independent review.

Conservative MP Simon Hoare, chair of Westminster's Northern Ireland affairs committee, made further headlines by saying "the trains could be pulled by an inexhaustible herd of unicorns". He may have been joking. Then again, he told an event in London on Tuesday that Northern Ireland's access to the EU and the UK means it is entering "an absolute golden age".

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AN ONLINE petition to have Stephen Nolan taken off air has been strongly condemned by the National Union of Journalists, whose Belfast branch called it "yet another toxic campaign against working journalists in Northern Ireland."

The petition seems largely provoked by Nolan using loyalist blogger Jamie Bryson as a guest, which makes the NUJ's statement doubly pointed: its Belfast branch has been excoriating about Bryson in the past and tried to block him joining the union, as bloggers are entitled to do.

There is further irony in how many republicans have been calling for Bryson to be silenced. Would they prefer him to be voiced by an actor?

*In a move straight from the Donald Trump play-book, Sinn Féin has complained about this year's canvasses of the electoral register – a legally required update*

## ON THIS DAY

FERMANAGH 20 1921

### Fears for Missing Postmaster

MR THOMAS Hodgett, postmaster at Navan [County Meath] who was taken from his house on Friday, is believed to have been the victim of foul play. Shots were heard both before and after his removal and bloodstains and signs of a struggle were discovered.

It is stated that Mr Hodgett, on hearing a shot outside his house about one o'clock, went downstairs to investigate, clad only in his night attire. He opened the door and two men entered. They wore dark overcoats and declared that they wanted to show him what power Sinn Féin had. Mr Hodgett was then directed to come along with them and, before they left, the two strangers made some remark about the Irish Republic.

There is no trace of Mr Hodgett and no explanation is yet forthcoming of the affair. He is a native of Dungannon. He had been four years in Navan and was very popular. The Rev R Hodgett, Minister of Tennent Street Baptist Church, Belfast, is a nephew of the kidnapped man.

### 'Shadowed from Ireland' – Shot Dead

A TRAGEDY of a mysterious nature was discovered near London on Saturday and is engaging the attention of the police. A man, whose occupation is not at present definitely established, was found at Acton in the lavatory of a Great Western Railway Fishguard express coach with his throat cut. In the breast pocket of his coat, however, was discovered a piece of paper on which was written the words: 'Shadowed from Ireland'.

Our Cork correspondent says deceased was George Tilson (36) who lived in Cork. He was a younger brother of Mr R H Tilson, ex-High Sheriff of Cork. He received a letter some days ago threatening his life. At first he took no notice of it but then decided to leave for England. The wound from which he died is such as could scarcely be self-inflicted.

### Peacemaker on 'Machinations'

DR CLUNE, the Catholic Archbishop of Perth, was welcomed there last night. He said he always thought the British soldiers fought honourably and cleanly but was sorry to have to say that the sample of the armed forces he saw operating in Ireland had not fought honourably.

He, as an Archbishop coming from Ireland, subscribed to every word and every charge de Valera cabled to Australia against the English forces. Old age pensioners, girls, women and the child in arms were shot down by the Black and Tans. Many upholders of British Government policy felt, with the PM, anxious for a peaceful solution but interested persons found a way to frustrate this. (Archbishop Clune had come close to arranging a truce between Lloyd George and de Valera in December 1919.)

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