



DIFFERENCES: The chasm between First Minister Arlene Foster and Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill is getting wider

DUP and Sinn Féin on shifting, unsafe ground

ON MONDAY we discovered Michelle O'Neill and Arlene Foster can't even agree on the appointment of a new head of the civil service and seem to be heading down the route of appointing a joint head: the sort of one-for-me-and-one-for-you solution beloved by two parties which – and let's avoid the usual nuanced pussyfooting – can't stand each other.

Really. They can't stand each other. They never will be able to stand each other. They sit at the heart of the executive with their own 'ourselves apart' arrangement waiting, as Arlene Foster noted yesterday, for something that will see their relationship damaged yet again.

They didn't have to wait long. When the Public Prosecution Service issued its report on Tuesday the DUP responded with a demand for the chief constable's resignation, a hint they might withdraw from the Policing Board, criticism of the Director of Public Prosecution and a call for Michelle O'Neill's resignation from former junior minister Gordon Lyons (who also said the DUP weren't planning to collapse the executive). The other three executive parties clambered on board in support of an SDLP motion of censure condemning 'the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister for their actions which have caused immense hurt and undermined the Executive's public health message.'

The motion was destined to go nowhere. How could it? The PPS report argues that prosecutions of anyone interviewed by the PSNI after the funeral were unlikely to succeed because: a) there was a 'lack of clarity and coherence' about regulations they might have breached; and b) there had been 'prior engagement with the organisers and policing approach on the day.'

So, the members of Sinn Féin interviewed by the PSNI can't be prosecuted because, apparently, there's no clarity or coherence on the regulations that Sinn Féin itself

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agreed to in the executive and then, through Michelle O'Neill at a press conference, urged the rest of us to follow. Meanwhile, the other four executive parties, who also agreed to the regulations, supported a motion which condemns Michelle O'Neill and Conor Murphy for breaching regulations described as unclear and incoherent! It's getting very close to something that could be described as Schrödinger's Covid Cat's Catch-22 territory. And no, I don't really understand it either.

Meanwhile, it strikes me as odd that in the engagement which took place between Sinn Féin and the PSNI neither side seemed to pay all that much attention to the precise interpretation of the regulations. The lack of clarity referred to by the PPS report obviously suited Sinn Féin, since most of the elected members who were questioned cited

'confusion' as their defence.

Were the stewards who marshalled events on the day confused? Was the leadership of Sinn Féin confused? Is it residual confusion which prevents Michelle O'Neill from acknowledging that a clear breach of the spirit and intent of the executive's public message on limiting the spread of Covid is, to all intents and purposes, just as bad as a specific breach of the law? When two executive ministers attend a funeral where alleged breaches of regulations can't be prosecuted because of the incoherence of the regulations (whilst the vast majority of other funerals did comply with a spirit of the law interpretation of the rules), am I being unreasonable to suggest the two ministers should even 'consider' their positions?

Anyway, back to my opening point: another day and another widening of the chasm between the DUP and Sinn Féin. It's not going to get better. Those who don't like the PPS report called for an independent review (which was announced on Wednesday); but even if a review reversed the PPS conclusions it would also reverse the DUP/SF positions of supporting or rejecting the findings.

I know most of you will be aware of my cynicism and pessimism when it comes to the possibility of genuine rapprochement between the DUP and Sinn Féin (and I've never bought into the belief that the Paisley/McGuinness, Robinson/McGuinness arrangements were really much better than the Foster/O'Neill relationship), but where we are now is entirely new ground, even for them. Shifting, unsafe, dangerously debilitating ground.

Can it get better? Will it get better? Only if there is a surge of middle ground willing-to-work-together parties in the election due in May 2022. My gut instinct is that the bitter, hard-blowing winds of polarisation sweeping through our politics now will favour the DUP and Sinn Féin. Which maybe explains why they keep on doing what they've always done.

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ON THIS DAY

APRIL 2 1921

Roslea Peace Talks

A PEACE conference of clergy and prominent laymen was held in the Town Hall, Clones yesterday evening [to discuss the Roslea troubles]. Rev Canon Ruddell, Rector, Clones occupied the chair. The meeting was called to consider the best means of bringing about a cessation of trouble prevailing chiefly in the Roslea district where shootings and burnings have been creating embittered feelings among the people of both sides of the community and which, if not checked by some effective means such as the intervention of the clergy and leading citizens, might lead to disastrous consequences.

The conference was summoned to bring together a meeting of the clergy and representative laity of all creeds and classes from the parishes of Clones, Roslea, Tydavnet, Kilmore and Drumsnatt, Killevin and Newbliss. Addresses were delivered by the Rector, Rev D Gormley, PP, Rev Samuel Currie, Clones and Mr Thomas Toal, chairman, Monaghan County Council. After a broad and amicable exchange of views between the delegates...adopted a resolution to do all that was possible to prevent any further trouble in their respective districts.

No Census of Ireland

DUBLIN Castle states: 'Owing to the existence of a state of rebellion in the south and west of Ireland and of the disturbed conditions in other parts of the country...the Government have therefore decided to postpone the holding of a census in Ireland on the present occasion.'

A Catholic Viceroy

THE Right Hon. Lord Edmond Talbot will succeed Fieldmarshal Viscount French as Viceroy of Ireland under The Better Government of Ireland Act 1920. His appointment is an historic event of the first importance, according to FA, as he is the leading lay Roman Catholic in the kingdom and the first Catholic to be Lord Lieutenant of Ireland [since the Union].

De Valera on Partition Polls

QUESTIONED yesterday regarding Dail Eireann's attitude towards the elections for the Northern and Southern Parliaments, Mr de Valera said: 'Dail Eireann is concerned with one question, whether it should give its sanction to the holding of these elections or whether it should refuse recognition and order the citizens to boycott them... I am confident that the people, who now realise what is at stake... will return none but Republican candidates outside the six county area...' (As leaders on both sides of the community divide sought to end the scourge of sectarian violence in Roslea, De Valera announced that Sinn Féin, while rejecting partition, would use elections, north and South, to elect a new republican Dáil. He agreed an electoral pact with Joe Devlin on a joint platform of abstinence and self-determination.)

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