

Executive could unravel by accident

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COULD Stormont collapse over the Bobby Storey funeral? That is the last thing the DUP wants but it feels under intense pressure to be seen to do something. Calling for the chief constable to resign and threatening to walk off the Policing Board are distractions that could backfire when the chief constable does not resign and the board continues as normal, with or without its DUP members.

Even then it is difficult to imagine Arlene Foster quitting the executive, triggering an election in which her party would be crucified.

Perhaps a better question is whether Sinn Féin would have stomped off had some of its representatives faced an appearance before a magistrate and a small fine, which is all any prosecutions would have entailed. That also seems vanishingly unlikely, as walking out would play badly north and south.

So there was never any need for the kid glove treatment that has proved so politically toxic. Instead, it has raised tensions to the point where the executive could unravel by accident.



A DUP demand for Michelle O'Neill to resign appears to be the same demand made after the funeral last June, judging by careful phrasing from DUP junior minister Gordon Lyons. It was just never formally rescinded. The same applies to Sinn Féin's demand for Arlene Foster to resign after RHI. Both calls remain extant but have faded to a historical curiosity, like the apocryphal state of war between Russia and Berwick-upon-Tweed. The real battle line over the funeral is between Sinn Féin and every other party, from the Greens to the TUV, with the DUP least inclined to go on the offensive as it has most to lose if power-sharing fails.



ONE sign that the call for the chief constable to resign is not serious is that the DUP has not addressed the means to achieve it. Only the justice minister, Alliance leader Naomi Long, can require a chief constable's resignation. The Policing Board must rubber stamp her decision and cannot call for resignation on its own.

If a chief constable does not agree to step down, the minister must commission an inquiry and "consider" its report but she is under no requirement to change her mind.

Long has made numerous comments this week on the funeral and the relationship of her office to police and prosecutors. Tellingly, the DUP has still not pressed her to move against the chief constable – or even mentioned her untrammelled power to do so.



IT IS routine for police to engage with organisers before and during events, including where legality is in question and violence may be a risk. So the PSNI can feel aggrieved that its engagement with the Storey funeral has been the focus of complaints, with

CONTROVERSY: The furore over the funeral of Bobby Storey has heightened tensions at Stormont



the Public Prosecution Service claiming this has made charges unviable. Upholding the law must kick in at some point, so where is the line drawn?

In 2017 the PSNI lost a Supreme Court case over facilitating unnotified flag protests. Officers had believed their highest duty was protecting the right to life, which meant not provoking violence. Judges reminded them their first duty is "to prevent the commission of offences".

This ruling suggests the line is tightly drawn. Even if officers feared violence at the funeral, as reported, they should have tried to enforce the Covid regulations. The PSNI might feel this suggests that whether dealing with loyalists or republicans, gently or firmly, the police will always be wrong.



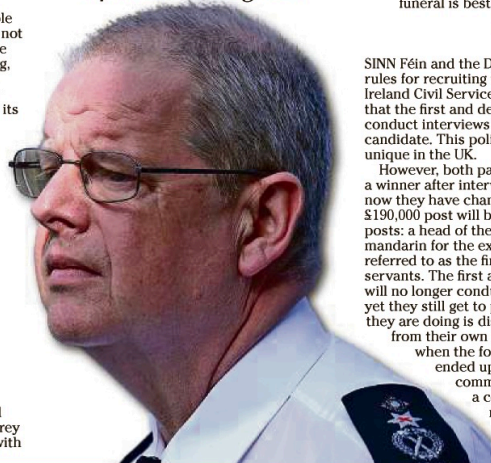
A LAST-MINUTE threat by Sinn Féin to withhold Stormont's budget was due to the row over funding the Troubles pensions. Officially, this is an argument between the DUP and Sinn Féin on one side and the government on the other. However, for Sinn Féin, it is a more fundamental issue of having no distinction made between the IRA's victims and IRA members injured by their own actions, so that republicans can maintain we are all innocent victims of Britain. If upholding the pride and ideology of the IRA means denying every victim a pension, or every public service a budget, then so be it. This is the context in which the Bobby Storey funeral is best understood.



SINN Féin and the DUP quietly changed the rules for recruiting the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service half a decade ago, so that the first and deputy first ministers conduct interviews and select the successful candidate. This politicised arrangement is unique in the UK.

However, both parties were unable to agree a winner after interviews last September, so now they have changed the rules again. The £190,000 post will become two £190,000-plus posts: a head of the civil service and a top mandarin for the executive office, sadly not referred to as the first and deputy first civil servants. The first and deputy first ministers will no longer conduct the final interview, yet they still get to pick the winners, so all they are doing is distancing themselves from their own fudge. This recalls 2008, when the four executive parties ended up appointing four victims commissioners. It also recalls a certain first minister's reference to being "accountable but not responsible".

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ON THIS DAY

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Faulkner Under Fire

THERE were angry scenes at Stormont early this morning as the two-day debate on a motion of confidence in the new Government dragged to an end. A scathing attack by Mr Austin Currie (SDLP) on the Prime Minister provoked a series of heated interruptions from Government supporters. The motion was finally passed by 27 votes to 8 but Mr Faulkner had to endure bitter criticism from all sides of the House.

Mr Desmond Boal (Protestant Unionist) told the Premier he had only got the job because there was no-one else to do it and he reminded the House that only two years ago Mr Faulkner was a right winger. Dr Robert Simpson (Unionist) criticised the promotion of Mr Harry West.

And the Nationalist and SDLP members condemned the Government's lack of integrity or credibility and demanded firm guarantees on the Reform programme. Mr Currie said the reason Mr Faulkner held his new position was because of the speeches and attitude he had adopted in the past. The PM had shown in the past, particularly to the Orange Order, that he held sentiments of naked sectarianism.

Mr Faulkner said his was going to be an open government. His door was open to the Opposition, like everyone else, if they cared to walk through it in a constructive spirit.

North-South Commerce Talks

WITH news yesterday that prospects for economic and social development in NI are to be investigated by the Westminster and Stormont governments came the announcement that cross-border talks between the two Departments of Commerce are soon to get underway. Last night Mr Faulkner emphasised that he was "very anxious indeed to see economic cooperation between the two parts of the country. This followed the Stormont disclosure earlier by the new Minister of Commerce, Robin Bailie that he had asked his Department to make contact with Dublin 'to see if a meaningful dialogue can be started on all matters within the range of my functions where cooperation might be considered.'

For the Opposition, Mr John Hume (SDLP) welcomed Mr Bailie's assurances and suggested that it would be a good gesture on the part of the Republic if they removed the remaining tariffs that existed on imports from the North.

The SDLP's distrust of Brian Faulkner was tempered by support for his government's announcement that it was considering Jack Lynch's offer of talks on cross-border economic development. Educated at St Columba's College, Rathfriland, Faulkner had clearly no difficulty in viewing Ireland as one country. He was also considering giving the opposition a meaningful role in parliamentary decision-making through a new committee system.

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