

Unionists completely overreacted to Biden's even-handed remarks

Newton
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UNIONISTS have badly overreacted to Joe Biden's St Patrick's Day remarks in support of the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol.

The UUP has accused the US president in strident terms of taking sides on the protocol and thereby undermining the agreement. The DUP seems equally uncomfortable, although it has been circumspect in public – Arlene Foster shared a smiling first ministers' video call from Biden and vice-president Kamala Harris.

In reality, the White House has been remarkably diplomatic and even-handed, as has Congress on the same subject. Statements from senior Biden administration officials have stuck religiously to peace process platitudes on the agreement and explained carefully that they cannot be taking sides on the protocol because both sides, the EU and UK, have agreed it.

This is a far gentler outcome than unionists have any right to expect, on any day let alone St Patrick's Day, given recent lobbying in Washington by Dublin, Brussels and Sinn Féin, plus the dire trans-Atlantic messaging from London and unionism itself. Biden's record suggests it would not take much more provocation for him to say what he really thinks.

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THE A5 Aghnacloy to Derry dual carriageway may well have been sunk by an interim public inquiry report. SDLP transport minister Nicola Mallon is putting a brave face on the findings, saying she remains committed to the \$1.1 billion scheme. However, her department has accepted 27 of the report's 30 recommendations, many of which require major redesigns or damn the project's rationale altogether. In retrospect, the A5 was doomed when Dublin pulled its half of the funding a decade ago. The funding offer was restored last October but policies and priorities have moved on. Rather than improving infrastructure west of the Bann, the project has wasted time, money and effort that could have delivered more practical investment – including along the A5 corridor. Over \$80 million has already been spent without a sod being turned – enough to build the proposed Cookstown bypass twice over.

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SINN Féin has been ridiculed after abstaining in Stormont on a DUP motion on abortion, in order to pretend it had been both for and against as northern and southern audiences require. The DUP has fooled nobody by abstaining in Westminster on a law to restrict protests, then claiming to have opposed it, to try keeping outside with the government without upsetting loyalists who might want to wave placards in Larne.

The moral of the story is that these procedural manoeuvres might sound clever when plotted out in a committee but all they achieve is antagonising the handful of voters who care enough to follow them closely, while spreading a vague impression of double standards



PLATITUDES: President Joe Biden's administration has stuck to peace process platitudes on the Good Friday Agreement and explained it cannot take sides on the protocol because both sides, the EU and UK, have agreed it

across the public at large.

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GRAMMAR schools should not receive "preferential treatment" when extra places are decided for the next academic year. The call was made in the assembly by Green Party leader Clare Bailey, addressing DUP education minister Peter Weir.

Every year, funding for additional places is spread around oversubscribed secondary schools who request it. Grammars are certain to be particularly over-subscribed this year due to the suspension of selection tests. Yet for opponents of selection, there is a case to encourage grammar growth: it puts a long-term downward pressure on entrance requirements, broadening pupil intake.

Hopes have been voiced in the past that this could be an organic erosion of selection, creating de facto comprehensives with a 'grammar ethos' – the best of both worlds, in many eyes. Perhaps this year is a unique opportunity to give that process a nudge.

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THE Department of Justice is to set up more 'Nightingale Courts' to clear a backlog of 10,000 cases. The first and so far only such court opened in January and has helped get the backlog down from almost 13,000 – but as the pre-Covid figure was 8,000, the epidemic has only exacerbated chronic delay.

More drastic solutions could be considered. Over 40 per cent of cases in Northern Ireland's magistrates courts' are motoring offences, with almost all ending in a conviction and nine in ten resolved through a fine. Offering everyone waiting a trial a recorded fine, possibly reduced, could wipe out most of the magistrates' backlog overnight. This would not mean leniency for serious motoring offences, which go to the Crown Court.

Another 12 per cent of cases in magistrates' courts are for television license evasion, again almost all ending in a fine. It would be cheaper for Stormont to give the BBC its money than pursue these cases.

Alas, any of this would require legislation at Stormont or Westminster, making it the slowest option of all.

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SURPRISE has been expressed at the renewal of *Bloodlands*, the BBC drama set in Strangford. Despite huge audience figures across the UK, critics here have complained of a daft plot full of holes. Local familiarity must have bred contempt – *Bloodlands* is a conscious attempt at 'Nordic noir', a genre that expects viewers to ignore a preposterous plot and just wallow in the dark mood and scenery. Obviously, it helps if the setting is Scandinavian, which Strangford has not been for some time.

ON THIS DAY

MARCH 20 1971

Hardliners to Topple Clark

THE further measures to deal with the NI Troubles, announced by the Prime Minister at Stormont yesterday following his hush-hush visit to London, were clearly unacceptable to the right wing MPs who are now confident that they have the necessary support in the country to bring down the Government on the 'law and order' issue.

The only concession Mr Chichester-Clark could make to their demands was that the Army strength in the North will be increased by about 1,400 extra troops. His opponents had been pressing for tougher action, including internment and the establishment of a local militia under Stormont control. It is certain that the campaign to force the PM to resign will be continued with increased intensity and it is expected that the final showdown will take place at the Unionist Council meeting on March 29. Mr Chichester-Clark is not expected to survive as Premier after that – and, in fact, some observers feel that he may throw in the towel.

Support for Lynch's

'Border Industries' Idea

SIR Frederick Catherwood, Director General of the National Economic Development Office, last night backed suggestions by the Taoiseach, Mr Lynch that the Irish and Stormont Governments engage in economic cooperation to attract industry to border areas of high unemployment. Sir Fred added: "This is an ingenious idea, worth considering."

Death of Piper Severs

1916 Link

THE late Mr Francis Joseph McPeake, one of Ireland's best-known folk musicians and story-tellers, has died. Mr McPeake, renowned for his Uilleann pipes playing, died in Belfast on St Patrick's Day aged 86. As a young man he learned to play the Uilleann pipes in his determination to see that Irish traditional music in Belfast should not die. His enthusiasm led him through the Gaelic League to a man who was to be his benefactor, Francis Joseph Bigger. With his aid, the late Mr McPeake took up tuition from the then Uilleann pipes maestro, John O'Reilly of Galway who was totally blind.

When, sixty years ago, Francis won his first major award at the Oireachtas in Dublin, Eamonn Ceannt, [the executed 1916 leader] adjudicated. In his association with Bigger and his house, Ard Righ he met Roger Casement, Alice Stopford Green [the historian] and Lord Ashbourne [a leading aristocratic Gaelic League]. His international tours included Russia, America and France. (Jack Lynch's novel idea to attract industry to border areas was never taken up and, within a week, Chichester-Clark had been replaced as Premier by the ambitious Brian Faulkner. Meanwhile the passing of Francis McPeake, senior, severed a link with the Gaelic Revival, pioneered in Belfast by the Protestant Nationalist lawyer, FJ Bigger.)

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