

NOT FOR TURNING:
Agriculture Minister
Edwin Poots

DUP like a container ship stuck in the Suez Canal over Protocol

PITY those who applied to work as government port inspectors, only to be told several days later that the job advertisements had been published by mistake.

"Not authorised", is the phrase Agriculture Minister Edwin Poots used, by which he meant not authorised by him.

Ministers don't usually get involved in hiring of staff. They are supposed to show leadership and drive the direction of a department. Unfortunately with Mr Poots at the helm, the Department of Agriculture has as much direction as a container ship wedged in the Suez Canal. There's no point in sending in sand dredgers or a flotilla of tugboats, the DUP minister isn't for turning.

Last month, interim agriculture minister Gordon Lyons, who took on the role while Mr Poots was having cancer surgery, ordered that work on permanent inspection posts for post-Brexit port checks should be halted.

We were told that Stormont, or rather the DUP, would await "further clarity" from the British government before going ahead with any customs posts.

Given that it was Boris Johnson's government which negotiated and supported the protocol, I'm not sure how much more clarity it can give.

Had the DUP not supported a hard Brexit in the first place then we wouldn't be in the situation we are now.

Not knowing when to stop digging, Mr Poots decided to blame his own staff for the job adverts – nothing to do with him.

His statement seemed a little at odds with that of his own department. A departmental spokeswoman said the adverts were meant to recruit general agricultural inspectors, including those who would investigate animal welfare, and had "incorrectly specified that new staff would be solely located to the

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points of entry".

However, Mr Poots said the recruitment "will not continue as no authorisation was given for it", suggesting that there is a freeze on the hiring of all agricultural inspectors.

He blustered that he will be seeking a "full explanation". Surely we all would? Either the north needs extra agricultural inspectors or it doesn't.

The department's reluctance to release documents to *The Irish News* under freedom of information legislation suggests that the public won't get a full explanation about the wider issue – on what basis did Mr Lyons decide to halt work on inspection posts?

Of course the most immediate casualties of this mess are staff themselves.

In the three months since Brexit kicked in, port staff have been withdrawn and then reinstated amid claims and counter-claims

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about their safety. Initial concern that staff had been threatened turned into a political row about how credible the threats were, with the PSNI blaming individuals or small groups, rather than loyalist paramilitaries.

Arlene Foster's claims of "dangerous" loyalist alienation over the protocol have the feel of the bad old days of dog-whistle politics when the DUP whipped up tensions, then stood back and denied all responsibility.

She may claim that loyalists and unionists feel sidelined over the deal but wasn't it ever thus? As founding DUP member Wallace Thompson told the *News Letter* last week, unionists feel they have been "betrayed over and over again and we're always on the back foot".

The reality is Mrs Foster's dysfunctional party opposes the protocol yet remains in charge of the department whose job it is to implement checks.

The DUP has been the main player in an online petition against the protocol and, more recently, a wider unionist-backed crowdfunding appeal for a legal challenge against border checks.

The UK cannot keep extending grace periods on Irish Sea border checks indefinitely, particularly since the EU has declared an extension until October 1 illegal.

So what happens in the meantime? Will there be no movement on border checks until opposition to the protocol is defeated, or more likely given that Boris is in charge, continuously ignored?

Maybe the bigger question is whether the DUP is capable of managing the Department of Agriculture at all.

Some staff might be wishing for a return to the three years when Stormont was on hiatus. At least then any lack of leadership could be blamed on not having a minister. Now the department has one who refuses to lead.

ON THIS DAY

MARCH 31 1921

Protestant Murdered

EARLY yesterday morning forty armed civilians visited the home of William Fleming, a Protestant farmer at Drumgarra, County Monaghan, and called on Fleming and his son, Robert to come out and hand over a gun. The men refused and the house was set on fire.

The Flemings were taken to the main road and shot. Robert (25) was killed instantly and his father badly wounded in the stomach and back. The Fleming house was set on fire. When this occurred there were present, in addition to the father and son, William Fleming's mother, a woman of over eighty years of age and two grandchildren aged nine and eleven. They remained in an outhouse with the wounded man until the police arrived. Robert Fleming was a quiet man and popular with his neighbours. He spent some years in America, returning home to manage the farm. Extensive raids for arms were made in the district last September and Fleming's house was visited and the gun demanded. The Flemings refused to surrender the weapon and firing took place between the raiders and the occupants. It is believed that in that fight a young civilian from Castleblayney was shot dead. Fleming Senior was wounded on that occasion.

Specials Raids

A NEWBLISS [County Monaghan] report states that serious complaints were made regarding the conduct of armed men who are alleged to have searched houses and threatened people in the neighbourhood of Clones. The raiders were attired partly in multi, some wearing RIC caps and portion of military uniforms. They are believed to have been Specials from the Newtownbutler district who had crossed the boundary into County Monaghan where they had no right to go on duty.

Down AOH Hall

UNDER the auspices of Division 861, AOH, a high-class concert and dance was held on Easter Monday in the new AOH Hall, Ballycran, Kircubbin, County Down. The concert opened with a selection of Irish airs by the Portaferry Pipers (AOH) while Mr P McLaughlin, comedian, kept the company in roars of laughter with his sketch, 'The Dentist's Room' evoking much applause. Miss Maggie Curley, Belfast's leading soprano, sang 'Ireland, I Love Thee'. The social programme concluded with the singing of 'God Save Ireland'.

UNDER their terms of reference the Ulster Special Constabulary were confined to the six counties though they made regular forays into neighbouring areas. Sectarian attacks continued along the Fermanagh-Monaghan border involving the IRA and B Specials. While a majority of northern nationalists supported Sinn Féin after 1916, Devlin's Ancient Order of Hibernians remained a significant force in Belfast and east Ulster until the 1950s.

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