



PROTOCOL: Graffiti in Bangor, Co Down, reflecting loyalists' withdrawal of support for the Good Friday Agreement and anger at the sea border

Are we really risking our peace over inspecting packets of ham at Larne?

LIKE it or not, one response to loyalist violence that must be seriously considered is making concessions towards it.

After decades of yielding to violence from all quarters, involving horrendous compromises for an imperfect peace, it should be inconceivable to risk restarting the Troubles over inspecting packets of ham at Larne.

We are not even inspecting ham for ourselves but for the EU, which claims without reason or evidence that its single market would otherwise be swamped via circuitous smuggling of food through Britain and Northern Ireland.

Could Jonathan Swift have dreamed up a more absurd reason for conflict? Inspecting the big or little end of eggs, perhaps?

At some point we will have to confront the moral squalor of giving in to violence but that moment is hardly now, when so little might be required to prevent violence. Rather, it would be immoral to prioritise hypothetical ham over life and property.

This does not mean scrapping or renegotiating the protocol, let alone installing a hard border. It does mean maximum mitigation of the sea border, as its own terms allow.

Many republicans say Brexit technicalities have little to do with loyalist violence. What is there to lose by finding out?

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ORGANISING a 'protest' at an interface guarantees trouble.

However, loyalism's official protest plans for the coming months are centred on unnotified parades in unionist-majority areas.

If police move in to prevent these unlawful demonstrations that will also ensure trouble, as has already happened in Ballymena.

Standing back to take evidence for later arrests still makes officers a target and helps manufacture grievances about two-tier policing.

In fact, any police presence plays into the hands of those who want to engineer a confrontation.

So this is another loyalist threat where the authorities must consider a tactical retreat. If an unnotified parade takes place in a unionist area, what is at stake apart from avoiding a confrontation?

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MUCH commentary on the rioting has focused on long-standing social

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and economic factors, such as persistent deprivation and educational under-achievement.

Any analysis extending beyond personal responsibility also needs to consider the epidemic. Nobody looking at Northern Ireland from any objective distance could fail to wonder at the effect of locking a divided society down for a year amid other political pressures. It cannot be a coincidence that everything has blown up just as restrictions are about to lift. There is a dangerous feedback loop in this mechanism, as loyalists increasingly suspect they are being locked down just to keep them off the streets. The executive has not helped by being so opaque about its criteria for relaxing restrictions.

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ARLENE Foster has reversed her refusal to meet the chief constable, a position that was always going to put her at odds with most of the unionist electorate during a well-foreseen upsurge in violence.

UUP leader Steve Aiken has retracted his claim the PSNI was "marking its own homework" by having its handling of the Bobby Storey funeral investigated by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC).

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"We fully support the HMIC in its work," he told the assembly. "Its professionalism and ability to investigate impartially is without any doubt."

HMIC is best known in Northern Ireland for its 2013 report into the Historical Enquiries Team (HET), which damned the Troubles legacy body for not performing full investigations, although HET's whole rationale was that it would not perform such investigations pending a legacy agreement. The PSNI accepted HMIC's debatable criticism and shut HET down, as it wanted to do anyway to save money. So while the inspectorate is independent, it has shown itself to be easily used.

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LET us take good news where we find it. Marks & Spencer has announced it is opening a new food store in Coleraine, investing \$2.5 million and creating 70 jobs.

This is a timely sign that business expects protocol problems to be solved. No food retailer is considered more vulnerable to the sea border than Marks & Spencer, as such a high proportion of its product lines are pre-packaged own-brand meat and dairy, all arriving on a relatively small number of mixed containers from distribution centres in Britain.

It is tempting to quip that rioting will now be less likely in middle-class areas, although Marks & Spencer has also recently invested in food halls in Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey.

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SDLP infrastructure minister Nichola Mallon and Irish transport minister Eamon Ryan have launched an all-Ireland strategic rail review, as pledged in New Decade, New Approach.

A tiny change of wording is significant. New Decade, New Approach referred to "high speed rail" from Derry to Cork – a Boris bridge fantasy. The review refers to "high/higher speed rail", which is entirely realistic. Higher speed rail is a specific term in transport policy meaning incremental improvements in existing tracks to deliver speeds up to 125 mph, rather than building TGV-type lines from scratch.

There is never going to be a TGV from Derry to Belfast but there can be a fast, frequent conventional service. There might one day be a TGV from Belfast to Dublin – where it can join the tunnel to Wales.

ON THIS DAY

APRIL 10 1921

Lisburn Pogrom Recalled

THE recent report of the American Delegation of the Committee for Relief in Ireland (AMCOMRI) draws attention to the pitiable state of the Catholic population of Lisburn: Lisburn we found in greater comparative distress than possibly any other Irish city excepting Cork. In August as many as 232 families were compelled to leave their homes owing to the burnings, wreckings or intimidations and 130 families have not yet dared to return.

Several hundred women and children scantily-clothed fled from their homes on the night of the general burnings and made their way to Belfast over twelve miles of hillside roads.

Three American citizens were burnt out of their homes and deprived of their means of earning a livelihood.

One of these, Mr Peter McKeever, who had recently returned from the States and bought a business with his hard-earned savings, was shot in his own shop by the mob. He is still suffering from the effects of his injury.

Mr S Toman, another elderly returned American who purchased a beautiful residence, was burnt out and escaped with difficulty.

Both lost by looting and burnings their homes, their stock and personal belongings, as well as their means of living.

It is now almost eight months since the burnings and as yet not a single building has been re-erected in the town and most of the Catholic traders have been unable to resume business.

This fact, added to a general boycott of Catholic working people, has made the lot of a great part of the population truly deplorable.

That a general boycott of the people is in force is fully borne out by one significant fact: that not a single Catholic has since the burnings been employed under the Urban Council though Catholics still pay no insignificant share of the town rates.

The howling mob of intoxicated hooligans and their bigoted leaders, not content with the havoc they had worked on the innocent Catholic inhabitants, did not spare in their frenzy the priests of the parish. They too were compelled from their burning home in the dead of night.

It is only the urgency of their case that compels them to the appeal to the generosity of the Catholic public.

Bishop MacRory has set a princely example by presenting a motorcar – or its value, £500 – for a grand draw.

(Peter McKeever, a Catholic merchant, was to die a year later from the gunshot wounds he sustained during the loyalist mob attack of August 1920 following the IRA assassination of District Inspector Swanzy. A virtual exhibition on these tragic events can be viewed now on the Lisburn Museum website.)

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