

HISTORY REPEATING:
Flag protesters block
off Boucher Road and
Tate's Avenue Belfast
in December 2012



Loyalists should heed lessons of flag protests

LOYALISTS intend to resume disruption next week after the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh, by holding unnotified band parades and 'pop-up protest' road blocks.

Almost a decade after the flag protests, loyalists have once again forgotten that blocking the road is intensely aggravating to the general population and serves only to unite the public against those responsible.

The flag protests also turned the public against the police, as officers facilitated road blocks by stopping traffic for safety reasons. This enabled a handful of protesters to close down main routes for hours. Outcry at this eventually forced the PSNI to forcibly clear the roads – just the sort of confrontation loyalists want to engineer. It is a no-win situation for the police and there can be little confidence the PSNI's current management has figured out a cunning way to avoid it.

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REPORTS last weekend revealed Stormont had signed off \$10 million for paramilitary 'transition' at the end of a week of loyalist rioting. Front pages implied a direct connection but in reality the money had been on its way for months, as the second three-year instalment of the executive's Communities in Transition programme.

Anyone who wanted to speculate on a coincidence might have recalled reports last November that loyalists were offering to go straight for \$5 million. That would have required a matching bung to republicans, making a nice round total of \$10 million.

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ARLENE Foster has told an assembly committee she is fully committed to Irish language legislation as promised in New Decade, New Approach but there has to be a "realistic conversation" about whether this is deliverable before the next election, as also pledged.

This has not immediately rung alarm bells for a crisis because Michelle O'Neill, appearing at the same committee, conceded the executive can only be "as speedy as we can". Legislation rarely takes less than two years to pass, there is only one year left to the election and Covid is still consuming most government attention. Perhaps the best reason to realise



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the DUP is not deliberately dragging its feet is that it is no better for Foster to fight an election with an Irish language act ahead of her than behind. It may even be worse.

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AN APPEAL court has forced the executive to admit it will fund the Troubles pension, ending the deadlock with Westminster over who will cover the estimated \$1.2 billion cost over the next 20 years. However, the debate will remain a frozen conflict as the Sinn Féin, DUP and Alliance ministers administering the scheme say they will continue to press London to contribute towards it.

This position could have been taken over a year ago, allowing payments to be issued that much sooner. Making victims wait as a negotiating tactic did not bounce the Treasury into offering one extra penny, so the cruel delay was pointless. It was also petty, as more money was always going to arrive from London over the course of 20 years.

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IT IS extraordinary enough that the Nama witness coaching scandal has led to a criminal trial. Two former Sinn Féin members and loyalist blogger Jamie Bryson stand accused of conspiracy to commit misconduct in public

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office, for allegedly colluding on testimony at a 2015 assembly committee hearing. This is a stretch of a catch-all law reserved for activities that would not otherwise be an offence.

It is even more extraordinary that the Public Prosecution Service has decided the trial must be jury-free – unprecedented for a non-terrorism case in the crown court. The defendants have secured an adjournment while they challenge this decision. If their challenge fails, press and public will be largely free to comment during proceedings as there will be no jurors to prejudice. With such a high-profile case, this seems certain to invoke the law of unintended consequences.

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SINN Féin is being investigated by the Republic's Data Protection Commission over a voter database it has built from the electoral register and personal details gleaned from Facebook.

The commission is likely to find the party must tell anyone who asks what information it holds on them. Everyone on the database may also need to be asked for consent to keep their records. Sinn Féin must be tempted to quote former PSNI chief constable Sir Hugh Orde, whose response to a 2005 information leak was: "Everyone knows where everyone lives, frankly."

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THERE is more joy in heaven at one sinner that repents than at 99 righteous persons, which brings us to Sinn Féin MLA Pat Sheehan, deputy chair of Stormont's education committee. In 2014 he told the assembly that integrated education was "a Trojan horse aimed at eroding anything associated with Irishness" and wrongly claimed integrated schools banned GAA.

This week, Sheehan said he was "bitterly disappointed" that a Catholic primary in Fermanagh has been judged too small to change to integrated status. He appealed to DUP education minister Peter Weir to review the decision.

Sheehan would be as keen on a state school changing status – he is a genuine convert to the integrated cause, telling the committee last month: "it's long past the time when people are being educated on a segregated basis." Amen.

ON THIS DAY

APRIL 17 1921

'Jewels' Theft Recalled

THE fate of Sir Arthur Vicars recalls the theft of the 'Crown Jewels' from Dublin Castle on July 6, 1907. This ranks as one of the most amazing robberies in history. The jewels and regalia were unique in character and, of course, no thief could dispose of them in the form in which they were at that time. The jewels included: The Diamond Star of the Grand Master of the Order of St Patrick, valued at £30,000; the Diamond Badge of the Order, valued at £16,000 and Five Collars of Knight Companions of the Order, valued at £1,000.

The jewels were kept in a safe in the library of the Office at Arms. The building was also a strong-room. After the officials had left, a detective made a round of the rooms each night and there were also guards in the Courtyard outside. On July 6 1907, a charwoman found the strong-room door open. This was reported to Sir Arthur Vicars but no action was taken. Three days later the strong-room door was found open. It was then found that the contents had been removed. The general conclusion was that the robbery took place on the night of July 5, 1907.

When he was deprived of his office, Sir Arthur Vicars issued a strong protest against the treatment meted out to him and declared that no charges had been formulated against him.

The remains of Sir Arthur Vicars were removed from Kilmorna yesterday and deposited in Listowel Protestant Church from where they will be conveyed to Cheltenham for burial.

Specials Capture Armed Men

SPECIAL Constables at Dunmurry arrested eight armed men last night between 9.30 and ten o'clock. It appears that a couple of scouts attached to the Special Constabulary observed two parties, consisting of four men each, acting in a suspicious manner. One party went towards the Lisburn Road and the other towards Blacks Road.

Information was conveyed to the police barracks at Dunmurry and two parties of Special Constabulary turned out. Coming up behind one party on the Lisburn Road, the Specials called upon them to halt. The men did so and were arrested and taken to the barracks. In the meantime the other party was captured on Black's Road. When searched eight revolvers and a wire-cutter were found in their possession. The captives include John O'Leary, Hamilton Street; Thomas Reid, Grace Street and Michael Leonard, Little May Street.

The theft of the Irish Crown Jewels in 1907 remains an unsolved crime. The inquiry was reportedly hampered by links between Vicars' staff and the royal court of Edward VII. The jewels were never recovered.

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