

DUP north-south ploy is turning into a farce



Newton
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THE DUP boycott of the North-South Ministerial Council has ended, with the party denying it ever took place. After two meetings cancelled due to unionist no-shows, economy minister Diane Dodds attended a discussion on tourism.

The party explained this did not breach its 'five point plan' to end the Brexit protocol, one of whose points is stopping cross-border cooperation, because tourism is not a protocol issue. But neither are transport or language, the topics of the two cancelled meetings.

This ministerial boycott that is not a boycott is reminiscent of the 2015 'hokey cokey' ministerial resignations that were not resignations and which finally brought the curtain down on Peter Robinson's leadership.

Arlene Foster will not be as damaged by putting her leg in and out of the North-South Ministerial Council, a far less prominent body than Stormont. Still, the sense of a procedural ploy turning into farce is familiar, and should be especially familiar to Foster, as Robinson's protege and successor.



THE UUP has put some clear liberal water between itself and the DUP with a motion to outlaw gay conversion therapy, which the DUP predictably refused to support.

Tellingly, UUP leader Mike Nesbitt said this should help people understand why there "never can be unionist unity".

Although those proposing the motion were undoubtedly sincere, cynics might say this is an easier way for the UUP to distinguish itself than by having a different policy on Brexit.

The DUP's stated concerns were well-known issues of freedom of speech and religion. It is tricky to define 'therapy' for regulatory purposes, as Westminster has discovered while trying to legislate its own ban.

However, the DUP also tried to amend the motion to remove a reference to gay people not needing a "fix or cure" – a more headline stance than necessary merely to signal objection. It seems the DUP still needs to fish in deeply conservative waters.



CONSERVATIVE MP Johnny Mercer has been sacked as veterans minister after his bill to restrict prosecution of soldiers was watered down by the government.

This has caused a political sensation but it is hardly a legal surprise. Mercer's plan to exempt Iraq and Afghanistan veterans from all charges after a number of years, including for serious war crimes, could have caused soldiers to be tried at the Hague.

Currently, the International Criminal Court trusts the UK legal system to prosecute to its standards, a principle known as complementarity. Neither the government nor the military want to jeopardise that standing.

As for Mercer's plan to give Northern Ireland veterans protection, it is well understood across Westminster that a Troubles statute of limitations might be possible but only if it applies to all and follows political negotiations.



MARY Lou McDonald was widely reported as having apologised for the murder of Lord Louis Mountbatten,



U-TURN: Economy Minister Diane Dodds this week attended a north-south meeting

an 83-year-old woman and two boys. The Sinn Féin president had to clarify her party's position had not changed. No plausible reading of her comments could have suggested otherwise – far from apologising, she issued the usual meaningless regret for all deaths, then referenced "the armed forces associated with Prince Charles".

Despite Sinn Féin's rhetorical equivalence between the army and the IRA, the party remains unable to condemn specific atrocities, as David Cameron did for Bloody Sunday. Sinn Féin claims journalists only raise specific acts of violence to attack it. However, the willingness to see an apology where there was none suggests the media would be only too happy to celebrate the party coming to terms with its past. Imagine the positive coverage if it actually did so.



FINE Gael TD Neale Richmond is downplaying his proposal that a united Ireland should join the Commonwealth, following a mixed reaction in the southern press. This is a

debate nationalists are having amongst themselves, much like raising the threshold on a border poll, which may explain why it is so oddly uninformed. The reaction revealed a widespread belief, including amongst journalists, that a republic cannot join the Commonwealth (33 of 54 members are republics) or that Commonwealth membership is incompatible with the EU (two EU states, also both republics, are members). Nor must the UK sovereign be head of the Commonwealth – the next incumbent may not be Prince Charles. In short, membership has little value as a gesture to unionists, certainly compared to how much aggravation it seems to cause.



BILINGUAL Irish and English on board signs have been introduced on the west Belfast route of the Glider. They will switch to English only as the vehicles enter the city centre and progress onwards through east Belfast, then back again on the return journey.

West Belfast buses have had bilingual signs for a decade but they do not turn monoglot in transit as they only run in and out of town.

While this might seem like a unique Northern Ireland absurdity it is similar to requirements in Belgium, where by coincidence Glider vehicles are built.

Policy on Belgian public transport is to display the local language only – French, Flemish or German – or French and Flemish in Brussels. On board signs change en route, as must the language spoken by staff to passengers.

Flemish, of course, is the Ulster-Scots of Dutch.

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ON THIS DAY

APRIL 24 1921

South Armagh Raids

OUR Newry correspondent wires: From ten o'clock on Saturday night until late last night a wide converging movement of Crown forces was carried out in South Down, South Armagh and North Louth. Several arrests were made.

An exciting incident occurred at Mullaghbawn where John McCoy, auctioneer, reported to be a prominent Sinn Féiner, was shot. He now lies in a precarious condition in the Newry General Hospital. It is alleged that when Crown forces approached the house in which Mr McCoy was stopping he attempted to evade arrest and was shot through the right jaw.

Carmlough experienced another sensation on Saturday night. A number of shots were fired from a disused Protestant graveyard at the RIC barracks. The police returned the fire but no casualties are reported.

Police Wound Man in Raid

A MAN named Lagan, residing at Drumshambo, six miles from Cookstown, near to where a Protestant farmer was shot by raiders last week, was shot on Sunday morning and is not expected to live. His sister states that about 3 a.m. the dogs began to bark and she got up, thinking someone was after the fowl. She saw about twenty men with policemen's caps round the house and shouted to her brother to get up and escape. He ran out and the men fired. He fell at the corner of the house and she went out to see him and was slightly wounded also.

Belfast-Cavan Train Destroyed

A GOODS train, wagons and their contents was set on fire in a scene of destruction probably never before seen in the North. It happened at the little wayside district of Glaslough, outside Monaghan, on Saturday morning. The train crew were taken from the train at this point. The wagons were uncoupled to facilitate the burning and the countryside was lit up by the dramatic and terrible spectacle.

The 11.30 p.m. ordinary goods train from Belfast to Cavan left at the usual time on Friday night. It proceeded alright on its way until a couple of miles or so beyond Glaslough Station. The goods train consisted of 35 waggons with goods and merchandise of all kinds, consigned from Belfast houses to merchants in Cavan and Fermanagh.

These reports highlight raids by both the IRA and Specials across the North on the eve of the enactment of the partition arrangements, scheduled for May 3 1921. The destruction of the Belfast-Cavan goods train at the idyllic border village of Glaslough showed the intensification of the 'Belfast Boycott' by the local IRA. This was controversially imposed by the Dail in retaliation for anti-Catholic violence in Belfast.

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