

**VERDICT:** The timing of the Ballymurphy inquests forced the British government to push back its Troubles amnesty plans

**PICTURE:** Hugh Russell



# Stormont sustainability needs strengthened

**T**HE government has pushed back its plans for a de facto Troubles amnesty, partly due to the negative reaction when it leaked the plan last week and partly due to the grotesque coincidence of the Queen's Speech coinciding with the Ballymurphy inquest verdict.

Expected legislation was dropped from the speech and replaced with an open-ended pledge to a better "legacy package", to be discussed with "all relevant stakeholders", including the Irish government.

This earned the government the worst of both worlds, with victims across the spectrum in Northern Ireland accusing it of still planning an amnesty, while headlines in London accused it of breaking its promise to protect former soldiers.

Other UK press reports indicate the government told journalists it had been in talks with Dublin about its amnesty plan, until last week's leak forced the Irish side to back out and deny everything.

True or not, this cannot help the talks with Dublin the government is now openly seeking.

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ONE firm commitment to Northern Ireland announced in the Queen's Speech is enacting the measures agreed in New Decade, New Approach for "sustainability of the institutions".

Of most urgency is extending the period between a Sinn Féin or DUP walk-out and an executive collapse from one week to six months, to give everyone time to resolve their differences.

With Westminster about to take the summer off and rumours of a Stormont collapse in the autumn, time to legislate is short.

Those rumours have been spurred by grandstanding DUP threats to boycott the North-South Ministerial Council, an institution of equal standing to Stormont under the Good Friday Agreement.

A measure to prevent DUP walk-outs collapsing council meetings would be equally urgent and appropriate – and hard for the DUP to refuse, as 'sustainability' was its demand in New Decade, New Approach.

But alas, nobody else thought to ask.

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IN DECEMBER, London and Brussels agreed criteria to establish what goods crossing the sea border are 'at risk' of being smuggled into the EU.

This appeared to mark a pragmatic approach to the protocol, with most goods no longer needing to be checked.

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Now the European Commission has clarified a complication: December's deal only applied to the customs sea border.

The agrifood sea border is different. Food safety regulations already permit the maximum risk to the single market, Brussels claims, so everything entering Northern Ireland must still be fully certified, supermarket shipments included.

This may well be a hardball negotiating tactic to bounce the UK into food regulation alignment but if the tactic fails Brussels is still going to insist on checking everything, which is unworkable, as London is pointing out.

Another protocol stand-off is inevitable.

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LORD Frost, the UK's Brexit negotiator, met the Loyalist Communities Council during his first official visit to Northern Ireland this week.

Complaints about such meetings miss that the LCC has a less absolutist line against the protocol than both main unionist parties.

Meanwhile, UUP leadership candidate Doug Beattie has taken a firm line against the LCC, calling for it to disband and "get off the necks of our people".

LCC chair David Campbell accused Beattie of "alienating at least a third" of the unionist electorate.

The difference between a unionist and a

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loyalist is famously ill-defined but a one-third overlap looks like quite an exaggeration. Loyalist parties peaked in 1997 at 7 per cent of the unionist vote.

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SINN Féin ordered its party in Derry to stand down after investigating a poor electoral performance.

This is turning into a bit of a circus over the dismissal of elected representatives, which is distracting from the central allegation.

As a Sinn Féin source informed the Irish Times: "I am aware of the sense that people were getting jobs in the community sector... people were boxing-off jobs in peace funding and community development funding."

Did party investigators substantiate these concerns? If so, should funding not be returned and jobs reopened for fair employment?

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AS STORMONT gives final approval to a \$30 million Enniskillen bypass, a planning application has been submitted for a Lisburn bypass funded entirely by private developers.

The attraction for the developers, who also proposed and designed the scheme, will be better access to land they have acquired along the route for housing.

It might seem to defeat the point of a bypass to turn it into an urban corridor but that always happens anyway, so at least the taxpayer is getting this one for free.

The attraction to Stormont of such an approach can only increase.

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THE possible closure of Barry's Amusements in Portrush has provoked widespread dismay and a petition supported by Arlene Foster.

However, if the owners fail in their efforts to sell the business as a going concern, its \$2.75 million seafront site will inevitably be developed into a hotel or holiday apartments and there is not much the public sector can or should do about it.

Stormont might have been able to justify some sort of intervention before it spent \$5.6 million on a new train station in Portrush for the 2019 golf Open.

Prior to that, there were only grotty open air platforms. Moving them just 170 metres down the line would have cleared an identically-shaped space to Barry's directly behind it.

## ON THIS DAY

MAY 15 1971

### 'Weapons Sold to Specials'

REPLYING to Mr John Hume (SDLP) at Stormont yesterday, the Minister of State at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Mr John Taylor said that over the years weapons had been sold to members of the Ulster Special Constabulary, but these were usually unserviceable .303 rifles which, as required by conditions of sale, were converted to .22 calibre for use in connection with Ulster Special Constabulary rifle clubs. No sales have been made to the general public and all sales were discontinued in 1969.

Mr Hume said the fact that guns were sold in this way – some at one pound each – was scandalous. He asked what confidence could people have in the security arrangements in NI while legal arms are being sold wholesale to the USC.

Rev Ian Paisley (Protestant Unionist) said it was quite responsible to sell to these people who had been at the time engaged in the defence of the country. Mr Robert Mitchell (Unionist) said the public had every confidence in the responsibility of former members of the USC. Rev William Beattie (PU) said it would have been very foolish to put these weapons out to tender. The only regret Opposition members had was that the IRA did not get the opportunity to purchase them.

### Student Protest at 'Ulster '71'

SIR Francis Evans, president of the Ulster '71 Central Council, said yesterday one of the aims of the £800,000 exhibition was to banish uncertainty. He was speaking at lunch in the Queen's University Whittla Hall after the official opening ceremony by the Lord Mayor of London. "With the help of our friends with us today we seek to inject a dose of self-confidence into our province and to banish some of the uncertainties about the future." The exhibition was visited by the Prime Minister, Mr Brian Faulkner.

Six hundred students from QUB demonstrated at the opening of Ulster '71 yesterday. The students, carrying a forest of placards, marched to the main gates of the exhibition. Three Army Landrovers accompanied the demonstrators but there were no incidents. Inside the exhibition the president of the Students' Union, Mr Kevin Finnegan spoke to the crowd and said that there was no doubt that Ulster '71 was a political event, celebrating fifty years of Unionism. As such, it was biased, wasteful and non-productive. (Launched by the last Unionist Government in May 1971 to mark Northern Ireland's golden jubilee, 'Ulster '71' was boycotted by nationalists as a piece of Unionist triumphalism. Its catchy signature tune, 'Ulster '71: Come and join in the fun', seemed a mockery after internment and blood on the streets that violent summer.)

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