

Poots opts for distraction over Irish language act

Newton
EMERSON



EDWIN Poots has ruled out any DUP moves to collapse Stormont, as hinted at by his defeated leadership rival Jeffrey Donaldson. Asked about the Irish language legislation promised in New Decade, New Approach, Poots expressed his full support for the deal.

This is doubly revealing because everyone at Stormont knows Covid has scuppered the timetable to pass the legislation before next year's scheduled election. Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill acknowledged as much at an assembly committee last month.

Poots could have used the inevitable delay to grandstand against the legislation, pick a sham fight with Sinn Féin or risk a real fight, as the DUP cannot nominate a new first minister without republican cooperation.

Instead, Poots focused on the New Decade, New Approach pledge to introduce the military covenant. Expect to hear more of this, despite it being meaningless in Northern Ireland, as it involves preferential access to housing and healthcare that cannot be provided under our equality laws. It is a great distraction though, especially when the new leader of the UUP has a Military Cross.



VIOLENCE is "an absolute last resort" in opposing the Brexit sea border but "I am not sure if and when violence will be the answer" and "I would not rule it off the table."

So said 19-year-old Joel Keys, a member of the Loyalist Communities Council, speaking by video link to Westminster's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

MPs were aghast and UK newspapers reported a serious loyalist warning to restart the Troubles.

Ironically, the LCC had put Keys forward because it felt older members with paramilitary pasts would be unable to speak about the protocol without sounding threatening. Under a cross-party grilling, the youngster then fluffed his lines. Still, he can take heart that raising Brexit-related violence has not harmed his political prospects. One day, he could be taoiseach.



HER Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS), an oversight body for England and Wales, was played by both sides in Northern Ireland in 2013 when it produced a confused report into the Historical Enquiries Team that allowed the Troubles legacy body to be shut down, as desired by both republican activists and PSNI management.

It is hard to avoid the sense of history repeated itself with HMICFRS's report into the Bobby Storey funeral. The PSNI is cleared of "any bias towards one community" on the grounds it would have taken the same approach to the funeral of "a leading figure in the loyalist community".

This is a finding of bias against the law-abiding community, which neither the police nor a policing oversight body should be presenting as vindication.



WHEN Michelle O'Neill declined to meet Prince Charles on his centenary



BACKING: DUP newly elected leader Edwin Poots has expressed full support for the New Decade, New Approach deal that restored Stormont last year

commemoration visit to Northern Ireland this week, it was widely reported to be because of his role as colonel in chief of the parachute regiment.

DUP MP Gregory Campbell denounced this as "a step backwards" and "an act of disrespect".

Yet all O'Neill said was "on this occasion a meeting was not possible". Her statement added: "The British royals have made a very positive contribution to the development of peace and reconciliation."

The plain fact is a meeting was not politically possible one week after the Ballymurphy inquest verdict and Sinn Féin was as respectful about it as anyone could have asked.



NORTHERN Ireland has lost control of its hospital waiting lists, Prof Deirdre Heenan of health think-tank the Nuffield Trust has told Radio Ulster. With parties clearly in pre-election mode, this is a timely reminder that devolution was only restored because of the waiting list crisis. Voters exhausted by constitutional and culture war arguments turned to Alliance to signal a demand that

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Stormont return and refocus on the NHS. Although that message was received, it appears it needs to be sent again.



SINN Féin's pre-election purge has moved from Derry to South Down, where assembly member Emma Rogan has been deselected for failing to sufficiently build her public profile. Chris Hazzard, the constituency's MP, must also be under the party microscope. He lost 7.5 percentage points in the last Westminster election and came within three points of handing the seat back to the SDLP.

A former Stormont minister, Hazzard now spends an undue amount of time tweeting solidarity with Venezuela. In his defence, an abstentionist MP has little else to do.



THE DUP and Sinn Féin joined forces at Belfast City Council to sink a Green Party motion against letting private taxis into bus lanes.

Sinn Féin councillor Ronan McLaughlin restated his party's bizarre claim that "this comes down to a class issue" as "the vast majority of taxi drivers come from working class areas".

Where does he think bus drivers and passengers come from? Monaco?

The taxi industry began lobbying for access to Belfast's bus lanes in 2018, weeks before the launch of the Glider system. Drivers' union Unite says this is really about "influential private taxi owners" trying to "undermine" a \$110 million taxpayer investment in public transport.

A party with headquarters named after James Connolly really ought to be on the side of the transport workers' union.

ON THIS DAY

MAY 22 1971

New Lodge Riots

LAST night, in the aftermath of the rioting in Belfast's New Lodge Road area, angry Opposition MPs expressed bitter criticism of the Army's role and claimed that sections of the Royal Highland Fusiliers ran amok through the civilian population. The leader of the SDLP, Mr Gerry Fitt who, with other Opposition MPs, rushed from a Stormont debate to the riot scene earlier in the day, said: "From reports we have had from hundreds of people in the New Lodge Road district, I am convinced that during the disturbances many soldiers from the regiment shouted to men, women and children: 'You have got three of ours. Now we're going to get you!'."

Mr Fitt said this was an obvious reference to the tragic death of three Scottish soldiers recently in Ligoniel. "This regiment now seems to believe that the people of the New Lodge Road were in some way connected. Sections of the regiment were out to take revenge on innocent people." The party called for the immediate withdrawal of the regiment from the Dock constituency and an inquiry into what had taken place.

Police said that fourteen adults arrested during the trouble would be appearing in court this morning on charges of disorderly behaviour, riotous behaviour and assault. One woman arrested was the mother of Mr William Reid, the 32-year-old IRA officer, shot dead in a gun battle with a Royal Highland Fusiliers patrol last weekend. Mr Reid was buried with IRA honours on Wednesday.

Yesterday's trouble was sparked off after several Catholic girl employees left the Gallaher tobacco works in York Street because they had been intimidated, assaulted and locked in a toilet around lunch hour. A crowd later gathered outside the works. There were scuffles and stone-throwing. The disturbances spread to the New Lodge Road. Here, stones and bottles were used and troops made baton charges. Snatch squads made eighteen arrests. Four soldiers were hurt.

Fermanagh MP Freed from Jail

THE 28-year-old MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone at Westminster, Mr Frank McManus, who has been serving a six months sentence in Armagh, has been released. He had been jailed for taking part in a banned civil rights march at Enniskillen in November last. Last night about 800 people packed the Town Hall in Enniskillen to greet Mr McManus on his arrival home.

THIS period saw recurring rioting in the New Lodge area between local people and Scottish troops. The first British soldier, Gunner Robert Curtis had been shot dead in the district in February while three Scots soldiers had been murdered by the Provisional IRA in March 1971.

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