



PROTOCOL PROTEST: A handful of 'Members of Unionists against NI Protocol' during a white-line protest outside Belfast City Hall at the start of the month
PICTURE: Arthur Allison/Pacemaker

Unionists have failed miserably to whip up a frenzy over the protocol

FROM the perpetually lost and leaderless land of loyalism emerged a new figure last week. A fresh faced teen was thrust into the public's glare, volunteered by veteran hands to speak before a Westminster audience, delivering a threat about a possible return to violence if unionism doesn't get its wish over the protocol.

Much warranted criticism and ridicule followed, but it was left to Professor Michael Dougan, a pre-eminent authority on all things Brexit, to highlight that the invitation offered to this assorted gathering of unelectables by a Westminster committee was timed to boost the Tory government's leverage in its efforts to shirk its legal obligations under the very deal it agreed with the EU. Nobody does shameless perfidy better than the British establishment.

What has been most noteworthy about the post-Brexit fallout has been how, in spite of transparent and unrelenting attempts, political unionism has failed miserably to whip ordinary unionists into a frenzy over the protocol. The 'border down the Irish Sea' remains invisible and inconsequential to most of us, albeit an inconvenience (to varying degrees) for business people already steeled for a more challenging environment post-Brexit as a direct consequence of political unionism's foolhardy endorsement of that reckless constitutional joyride.

Without any other strategy to call upon, unionist leaders continue to speak of communal anger and rage - now apparently worse than any time since the Anglo-Irish Agreement - in spite of scant evidence being presented to back up these assertions.

Orchestrated attempts by loyalists last month to instigate street level violence and disorder fell flat and soon petered out, the calculated shifting of protests to peace line interfaces an admission of failure but also an ominous warning as to what can be expected when marching feet hit the ground this summer.

The Loyalist Communities Council was created in an attempt to use the continued existence of loyalist

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paramilitaries to maximize political pressure to achieve political unionism's objectives. This is a tried and tested tactic, from Carson's UVF and the more modern Troubles variant to the present day.

Their foremost figure, David Campbell, used a BBC interview a week ago to allege that no "self-respecting unionist" would vote for the "deeply anti-British" Alliance Party. Such child-like utterances do nothing to discourage ordinary people in 2021 from perceiving unionist parties and their fellow travellers as an anachronism, firmly of an age best left behind.

And whilst on matters antediluvian, the Poots era has had a distinctly underwhelming beginning. Having declined media interviews in the immediate aftermath of his victory, nominating Arlene's frenemy Christopher Stallford in his place, the new leader's first public utterances in that capacity conspicuously avoided reference to either the nationalist community or the vast swathes

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of others who share this land, confirming a trademark inability to see and think beyond the Elect. His graceless omission of a nod to even Jeffrey Donaldson provoked the ire of Peter Robinson.

In subsequent public pronouncements, Poots has solemnly claimed that relationships between north and south "have never been worse," a clear indication that he will endeavour to continue frustrating the operation of the North-South Ministerial Council if so permitted by nationalist parties who, as of yet, have remained admirably restrained in response to these provocative antics.

Last week, Dublin's Central Statistics Office released figures showing a dramatic increase in export figures from north to south for the first quarter of 2021, providing some insight into the huge potential offered by the protocol for the north's business community, an inconvenient truth for those currently beating the drums.

At the same time, the taoiseach's Shared Island unit was announcing details of the extensive research being commissioned in conjunction with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) exploring opportunities for collaboration and co-operation across north and south in major policy areas.

Meanwhile, the latest opinion polls from Dublin have confirmed Sinn Féin's status as the most popular party in the state. The day is soon approaching when government ministers from the same party are in power in Dublin and Belfast simultaneously, free to discuss, plan and co-operate on the delivery of policies for the betterment of all people on the island.

These realities illustrate how relations between north and south are growing stronger than at any time in the history of the existence of the partitioned states. All of the noise and fury political unionism can muster will not alter that fact. They have no veto to prevent others from thinking and acting 32, inside or outside of Stormont's walls.

ON THIS DAY

MAY 24 1921

Tyrone RIC Attack

OUR Omagh correspondent wires: A police patrol consisting of a sergeant and three constables, while cycling from Greencastle to Mountfield police barracks (County Tyrone), were fired on at Cashel by a party of men who were concealed behind a hedge. Sergeant Peter MacDonagh, a native of Brookeborough, County Fermanagh, was hit by the first volley of shots. The three constables sought refuge in a house.

Row at Cookstown Murder Inquest

A MILITARY Court of Inquiry in lieu of an inquest was held on Saturday regarding the death of Joseph Hayden of Gortfad Glebe, Rock, County Tyrone who was murdered in his bed on Thursday.

Mr J Hoy, solicitor who with Mr T J S Harbison, MP appeared for the next of kin, vigorously protested against the continuation of the inquiry as the funeral had been arranged for that day. It was inhuman to ask the members of the family to give evidence at the present moment and James Hayden was still in a very weak condition.

The President said that he would take evidence of identification but could not allow the solicitors to be present. Mr Harbison protested against the ruling and said there was no use in trying to cloak the matter.

Sinn Féin Meeting in Belfast

'IRELAND is winning' declared Rev Michael O'Flanagan, Vice-President of Sinn Féin, at a meeting in support of the Belfast Sinn Féin candidates in Smithfield Square yesterday.

Mr [Archie] Savage formally introduced Mr Sean MacEntee, TD, Monaghan. Mr MacEntee said he was pleased to take part in the last round of the struggle for the unity of their country. They were determined to defeat the last attempt of the invader to divide Ireland.

Bishop's Warning to Catholic Voters

IN A letter, read at all Masses in the city yesterday, Bishop Joseph MacRory stated: 'It is necessary that every available vote be polled ... for all the candidates opposed to Partition. ... The character of your children's education, and with it perhaps their eternal welfare, may depend on the result of this election. Hence all differences between Sinn Féiners and Parliamentarians ought to be flung aside ...' (De Valera was angry when he learned that Sean MacEntee, Sinn Féin's most high-profile Northern figure, had risked arrest by appearing on a platform in Belfast. The son of a local publican and a member of Dail Eireann, MacEntee (1889-1984) was the only Belfast man sentenced to death for his part in '1916'. He was a Sinn Féin candidate in West Belfast. Bishop MacRory was voicing the Church's concern about its educational interests under partition.)

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