



What exactly is Stormont's Covid-19 exit policy?

STORMONT will not be following Boris Johnson in exiting lockdown but exactly what exit policy is it following?

The main purpose of Covid restrictions is to prevent hospitals being overwhelmed. The seemingly hopeless constraint in Northern Ireland is that there are only around 100 intensive care beds under normal circumstances (all normally occupied by non-Covid patients.)

Hospitalisation rates for the vaccinated are so low it could be practical to provide enough extra beds to cope with an effectively fully-vaccinated adult population. However, it would still be a major commitment and require vaccines to keep ahead of variants. This is the only permanent path out of lockdown: vaccinating almost everyone, figuring out how much extra hospital capacity is still required, then paying for it.

So what is the executive's judgment on this? Anything else is just talking around in circles.

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THE problem with considering extra hospital capacity is that parts of the NHS here have collapsed, causing an ever-worsening domino effect. Belfast has had no out-of-hours GP cover for several weekends, with apparently little hope of it returning soon in the north and west of the city. Patients are being forced to attend A&E departments that were already swamped, where they have to go through a hospital triage process, meaning each consultation ties up several nurses and doctors.

Many of these consultations could be dealt with by pharmacists under the NHS minor ailments scheme. In February, Westminster passed a law giving Stormont's Department of Health huge new leeway to make all medication more easily available. That needs to be explored, if only as an emergency measure. It is absurd to have hospitals besieged by people who could simply go to Boots on a Saturday afternoon.

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JEFFREY Donaldson has conceded "there isn't a path" for him to move from Westminster to Stormont, where he would like to be first minister by the end of the year. There certainly isn't a path in his Lagan Valley constituency, where

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co-option into the assembly would require Edwin Poots or current first minister Paul Givan to give up their seats for an uncertain shot at Donaldson's Westminster seat.

Arlene Foster is giving up her assembly seat but that is in Fermanagh so it can only be filled by someone local. South Down would be the obvious fit for Donaldson: he was raised in Killeel and first won office there in a 1985 Stormont by-election. Alas the DUP's only assembly seat in the constituency was won by Jim Wells, who will never surrender it. Worse still, Wells is classed as an independent since losing the party whip three years ago, meaning he 'owns' the seat for co-option purposes.

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JUST how angry are unionists about the Northern Ireland Protocol? The question arises after Shankill Women's Centre coordinator Eileen Weir testified to MPs that what she hears on the ground is not so much opposition as confusion and ambivalence. This earned a rebuke from loyalist blogger Jamie Bryson and others but the evidence is on Weir's side. In the latest Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, conducted at the height of Brexit brinkmanship late last year, just 7 per cent of respondents said they knew a lot about the protocol. Forty per cent knew a little, 27 per cent had heard of the protocol

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but knew nothing about it, 22 per cent had never heard of it and 3 per cent were so oblivious they just answered "don't know". In a separate question, 16 per cent agreed the protocol was "on balance, a good thing", 18 per cent "on balance, a bad thing" and 46 per cent agreed it was "a mixed bag". The remaining 20 per cent had no opinion. It takes very few people to make trouble, of course, but this is hardly a popular uprising.

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SINN Féin's John O'Dowd has been condemned by Alliance for telling an assembly debate on promoting integrated education: "the identity in integrated schools is not neutral: in many of them, it is British. You can pay homage to the Crown but to no one else".

This demonstrable nonsense hopefully had no impact on O'Dowd's decisions while education minister from 2011 to 2016.

In 2015, a judge ruled O'Dowd was doing "the opposite" of his statutory duty under the Good Friday Agreement to "facilitate and encourage" integrated education.

Hours before O'Dowd's latest comments on the issue, he asked DUP education minister Michelle McIlveen to lobby the Irish government for "shared education along the border".

Demanding to integrate Ireland but not Northern Ireland feels emblematic of Sinn Féin's confusion between principled republicanism and blood and soil nationalism.

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CONSERVATIVE MP Simon Hoare, chair of Westminster's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, has apologised after mocking July 11 bonfires as "the traditional pallet burning fiesta".

Some loyalists responded to his original tweet by noting bonfires are customary around the world but these tend to be religious festivities. The closest example anywhere to Northern Ireland's edgier tradition is in Sussex, where annual bonfires have been a focus for protest, disorder and provocation since the middle ages.

Hoare ought to be aware of this, as it all happens just up the coast from his Dorset constituency.

ON THIS DAY

JULY 10 1971

Two Shot in Derry

WITH barricades last night almost cutting off the Bogside in a series of violent reactions to the fatal shooting of two young Derry men, it was claimed that neither victim was armed when fired on by troops.

Killed were 19-year-old George Desmond Beattie of Rosemount and Seamus Cusack (28) from Creggan. Beattie died almost immediately when struck by a bullet near Free Derry Corner during a protest demonstration which followed Cusack's death fifteen hours earlier in hospital in Letterkenny.

Mr John Hume, MP is demanding a full-scale inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the men's deaths. 'Eyewitness reports make it clear that, in spite of Army allegations, neither man was armed. The Army action has caused widespread resentment in the community.' The IRA Northern Command last night said Mr Cusack's death was a brutal murder and a clear statement of the British Army's role in the Six Counties: 'The meaning of the Army's shoot for effect is now horribly clear. It is simply a licence to murder Irish civilians'. The British Army stated: 'During the past few days small groups of terrorists and hooligans have been attempting to draw security forces into operations in the Bogside. Hence it has been necessary to return fire.'

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Faulkner Pleads for Peace

THE Prime Minister, Mr Brian Faulkner, pleaded for peace in NI as the Stormont session ended for the summer recess yesterday. But at the same time, he warned: 'The security forces are not prepared to dally with a situation in which their lives and the lives of civilians are being put at risk'. Mr Faulkner was replying to an adjournment debate opened by Falls MP, Mr Paddy Devlin (SDLP) on recent shooting incidents. Mr Devlin said he was concerned that instructions being given to troops on the ground on when they might open fire were either being misunderstood or abused and he complained about a shot having been fired into a Ballymurphy family's home.

AS THE last Unionist government celebrated the 50th anniversary of the state, the security situation was rapidly deteriorating. The killing of two civilians by the British army in Derry would have far-reaching consequences, triggering the withdrawal of the entire nationalist opposition from Stormont. The parallels with the birth of the state in 1921 – serious violence, polarisation and nationalist alienation – could not have been clearer. The coming months would seal the fate of the old Stormont regime.

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