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Amnesty cynicism has delivered the worst of both worlds

WE HAVE been heading towards a Troubles amnesty for 20 years, although perhaps not in as sweeping a form as just proposed by Brandon Lewis, the secretary of state. Negotiations began at the 2001 Weston Park talks, hosted by the British and Irish governments, where a general amnesty was supported or at least accepted by every main party except the SDLP.

This was finalised at the 2003 Hillsborough Castle talks, hosted by Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, then put into a Westminster bill in 2005, which almost made it into law before the SDLP exposed and scuppered it. Since then, Sinn Féin and successive governments have been trying to return to that point while pretending otherwise. All the while, prospects of justice have been eroded by the de facto amnesties of the peace process: the early release scheme, on-the-run letters and royal pardons, immunity for testimony, or simply the passage of time.

It is grotesque this has come to a head with a government blatantly pulling the plug to protect soldiers for narrow electoral reasons. It is barely less grotesque for many parties and other groups here, including the Irish government, to feign outrage. Their cynicism has brought us the worst of both worlds: private agreement to 'draw a line in the sand', while still fighting over it in public.

FOR some months, unionists opposed to the Northern Ireland protocol have been excited by a clause in its infamous Article 16 allowing suspension for "diversion of trade".

Any example of businesses switching suppliers to the Republic has been cited as such a diversion. Although the protocol does not define what 'diversion of trade' means, it is usually a technical term in economics referring to tariffs or other barriers forcing importers to pay more or use a less efficient supplier - so spotting a tricolour on cheese in Lidl is not proof it has occurred.

However, that may be about to change. Lord Frost, the UK's Brexit negotiator, has told a House of Lords committee that booming cross-border trade is "in many ways a problem" as it reflects Northern Ireland businesses having difficulties sourcing from preferred suppliers in Britain. By

Newton
EMERSON



contrast, the EU says switching to southern suppliers is how much of the protocol should

A diversion over diversion is clearly on the cards.

THE TUV will run candidates in all 18 constituencies at the next assembly election, leader Jim Allister has announced. DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson replied this will cause a "divided and splintered" unionism and "Sinn Féin will gain at unionism's expense."

In reality, unionism should benefit from more competitive parties in a PR-STV election, as it will bring out more voters who transfer down the ballot. The TUV is so hapless at electioneering it could as easily save DUP seats as take them. Of course, neither Allister nor Donaldson can say so.

ONE reason Jeffrey Donaldson is regarded as a reformed character after his anti-agreement days in the UUP is that he has since toured the world promoting the peace process.

Companies House records Donaldson setting up three companies over the past decade to sell peace process expertise abroad. One company, since dissolved, was formed with Ian Paisley jnr. Other co-directors have included figures from Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance.

In 2018, questions were raised about the appropriateness of one of these firms

training police officers in Bahrain, due to that country's human rights record.

Such questions can only increase if Donaldson becomes first minister. For one thing, his ventures compete directly with Northern Ireland CoOperation Overseas, a non-profit company owned by Invest NI and hence accountable to DUP economy minister Gordon Lyons.

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THE law fixing Northern Ireland's school starting age is inflexible and unjustified, the High Court has ruled, in a case involving a child born prematurely on the enrolment cut-off date of July 1. There is political support for introducing some kind of deferred mechanism but the bureaucratic resistance is extraordinary. Because all education system metrics are based on pupil age, any blurring of cohorts is viewed as anarchy. Officials would want an exact amount of flexibility to show, so they see it as just creating another cut-off date. Above all, officials fear that if some children can defer then every parent will want it. Heaven forbid that everyone might get what they want.

MICHELLE O'Neill has called for a "rethink" of "our segregated education system", in what looks like an apology for last week's attack on integrated schools by Sinn Féin former education minister John O'Dowd.

Writing in *The Irish Netos*, the deputy first minister affirmed her support for the New Decade, New Approach review into a single education system, with "children and young people of different backgrounds educated together in the classroom."

However, O'Neill's suggestion for advancing this goal is "creating real freedom to choose" by giving equal priority, promotion and investment to all four current sectors: maintained, controlled, integrated and Irish-medium.

This would be a step backwards from the Good Friday Agreement, which creates a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate integrated and Irish-medium education. It also makes no sense: how does investing in multiple sectors move towards a system with all children taught together?

ON THIS DAY

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IRA 'Rescues' Member

IRA sources reported last night that the young wounded Belfast man carried out of the Royal Victoria Hospital in a dramatic swoop by members of the Provisional wing was progressing satisfactorily. He was receiving medical attention at an undisclosed location.

Taken from the hospital in a sleekly-planned IRA operation was nineteen year old whom police had been guarding during his recovery from leg wounds. His thigh was shattered after he was shot by troops four days ago on the Whitecross Road. A mine had exploded near an Army vehicle at the time.

Early yesterday morning a group of armed IRA men entered the hospital despite the presence of armed policemen and Army patrols. Four of them were dressed as doctors. They gagged the night porter and held up the two police guards outside

Fitt on SDLP Withdrawal

SDLP leader Mr Gerry Fitt said yesterday that the SDLP decision to withdraw from Stormont could change the whole future of NI. He was speaking at a press conference in Belfast after announcing the party's decision and said that he and the other SDLP MPs, Mr Austin Currie, Mr John Hume, Mr Ivan Cooper, Mr Paddy O'Hanlon and Mr Paddy Devlin will not resign their

The SDLP move followed the British government's refusal to hold an impartial inquiry into the deaths of two young Derry men shot by soldiers. The party now plans to establish an 'alternative assembly'. Mr Currie said he and the other MPs had often been told to get out of Stormont. 'But we have been prepared to do our utmost to see if the system could be changed sufficiently in the interests of all the people of NI. Now it has become absolutely clear that nothing can be done while that system of government exists. There is no future for Stormont in its present form as far as we are concerned.'

Mr Fitt said the alternative assembly proposed would certainly have no sectarian tint about it. 'We will continue as we have done to act in the interests of the working-class people whether they are our political supporters or not.'

GIVEN Gerry Fitt's later assertion that he left the SDLP because the party had decided to pursue a 'green agenda', his explicit support for the policy of withdrawal from Stormont in 1971 is striking. He was certainly correct in his assessment that the abandonment of the Northern Ireland Parliament by nationalism generally would create an entirely new situation. Meanwhile, the rapidly escalating IRA campaign was preoccupying Faulkner and the Joint Security Committee at Stormont Castle.

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