



TRADING PLACES: Lord Frost delivering proposals to change the protocol in the House of Lords on Wednesday

Protocol fallout shows sham fights not just for Scarva

THE government has published proposals to change the Brexit protocol, provoking a balanced crop of political over-reactions. As a rough summary, unionists are delighted the protocol is being abolished and nationalists are angry it is not being fully implemented. Few seem willing to consider the proposals are about implementing as much as possible to make the protocol a permanent arrangement. Unionists should consider how much diplomatic capital London is burning through to make technical tweaks to the sea border, with no sign of planning a land border. The EU says it will not "renegotiate" the protocol, a term the UK has conspicuously avoided. Sham fights are not just for Scarva.

Nationalists should admit some aspects of the protocol are hopelessly impractical, the sea border was meant to be implemented on at 'at risk' basis and Northern Ireland's threat to the EU single market is negligible. Six supermarket chains told London and Brussels this week fewer checks are essential. Why man the barricades to demand more?

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ONE of the features of pre-Brexit Britain was ministers and mandarins blaming Brussels for red tape that was entirely Whitehall's fault. The extent to which this caused Brexit and bent the banana of history is sobering to contemplate. Northern Ireland was hardly immune: attempts to impose water charging during the last period of direct rule were accompanied by endless, erroneous claims it was 'a European requirement'.

The Republic is not immune either. Failure to extend its digital vaccine certificate to Irish passport holders in Northern Ireland has been blamed on EU rules, which sounds plausible, given the certificate is an EU-wide scheme. However, those rules need not have prevented Dublin ensuring eligibility here from the outset.

This is going to become an extraordinarily difficult issue to keep track of in the protocol era.

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SECRETARY of state Brandon Lewis has directed the commissioning of abortion

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services by March next year. The direction has been issued via regulations Westminster passed this March that create a unique form of special-purpose direct rule: everything and everyone at Stormont stays in place but Lewis can order any minister, senior health official or "relevant person" in any department to implement the UK's treaty obligations on abortion. Orders have now been given to UUP health minister Robin Swann and his officials as well as to the first and deputy first ministers, who have been told to put abortion on the executive agenda.

It would be courageous to assume this untested mechanism will operate smoothly. What if Swann defers to the executive and the DUP vetoes abortion, again? The regulations contain no penalties and no reference to what happens if a 'relevant person' ignores an order or fails to deliver it.

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THE Northern Ireland Office has firmly denied a report in Private Eye that it is working on a "code of ethics" for the media as part of its amnesty plans, under which journalists would be curtailed from investigating the Troubles "in the interests of the peace process."

Denial notwithstanding, this extraordinary concept is not a new idea. SDLP MP Claire

Hanna says a similar notion was proposed for the 2005 amnesty bill agreed between the government and Sinn Féin.

It is also similar to some definitions of the 'peace journalism' advocated by parts of academia and campaign groups here for over two decades, despite its blatant agenda-pushing and obvious absurdity.

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LET us not pretend journalism never stirs the pot. President Joe Biden has become "a divisive figure in Northern Ireland as Brexit tensions simmer", according to a lengthy television report aired this week on MSNBC's 'Morning Joe', a widely-watched US news programme. Reporter Matt Bradley did the full Kevin and Sadie tour: peace walls, bonfires and parades; plus lots of footage of trucks coming off the boat at Larne. Every interviewee was subtitled, making them look like minor characters in an Austin Powers movie. The headline claim about Biden came primarily from an interview with Orange Order Grand Secretary Mervyn Gibson, yet Gibson was complimentary about Biden and appeared to be fending off a leading question. It would be far more correct to say the president has not proved divisive here, contrary to initial speculation. But where is the fun in that?

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DURING the last heatwave in June and July 2018, NI Water issued a hosepipe ban that included paddling pools – a surprisingly vast usage of water, with each refill requiring as much as 16 households normally use in a day. It then emerged this was outside the Stormont-owned company's powers, as the relevant 2006 legislation only permits hosepipe bans for watering gardens and washing cars. There was quite a kerfuffle about it, the attorney general got involved and NI Water initially dug its heels in, before issuing an apology three months later. Although Stormont was suspended at the time, politicians also had their say. So has anything been done to update the law? Of course not. Now NI Water is left begging people not to fill paddling pools as a hosepipe ban is needed again.

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ON THIS DAY

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Ex-Servicemen Burn Medals

ABOUT 200 Derry ex-servicemen burned their discharge papers and war medals last night.

They heaped them on a fire outside an Army post in the Diamond. The men were protesting against the killing of two young Derry men shot by troops in the Bogside two weeks ago, and calling for an impartial inquiry into the deaths. Meanwhile, members of the Gifford Tribunal arrived in Derry last night – Lord Gifford, British Labour peer; Mr Paul O'Dwyer, Irish-born New York lawyer and Mr Albie Sachs, a South African lawyer. They will open investigations tomorrow into the deaths of the two young Derry men shot by troops during disturbances.

Belfast Science Fiction Author

ONE of a few Irish authors are known throughout the world but in the world of science fiction a Belfast man, James White of Andersonstown is better known in such countries as Japan, Portugal, the US and Italy than he is in his hometown. This week he has had his seventh novel published since he began writing twenty years ago. It is called 'Tomorrow is Too Far' and is a science fiction tale about espionage in an aircraft factory, an appropriate setting as the author is employed at Short Brothers and Harland in Belfast. James White is married and lives with his wife Peggy and their three children. Each novel sells about 50,000 copies but his American editions sell more than 100,000.

Derry as a Free Port

THE idea of a free port at Derry, which has been put forward from time to time during the last fifty years, has received new impetus recently with the possibility of Great Britain joining the Common Market and a new relationship being established between Derry and other ports of Europe. Mr David Corkey, Community Development Officer in Derry, said yesterday that the city could become a distribution centre for the Common Market as it was the most westerly port on the Atlantic Seaboard. The idea has never been considered at Government level but it has the backing of Mr John Hume, MP.

(The Gifford Inquiry was the first of a series of independent investigations into disputed events during the Troubles. The action of Catholic ex-servicemen is a reminder of the searing impact of the shooting of Cusack and Beattie on Derry's nationalist majority. From the early 1960s a young John Hume and his teaching colleague, Terence McDonald at St Columb's College had used a series of TV documentaries to highlight Derry's potential as the economic capital of NW Ireland, even featuring Brian Faulkner as Commerce Minister in one of them.)

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