



MUTT AND JEFF?: Are Boris Johnson and David Frost, his Brexit minister, the Dumb and Dumber of British politics?

Dumb and Dumber putting north's economy at risk

A COUPLE of weeks back I took the ferry from Cairnryan to Belfast. It was my first trip across the United Kingdom's latest border.

On the way over I looked out for the line marking the DUP's gift to Irish unity, but I must have missed it. Funny things borders, you sort of know they're there, but there's often a bit of ambiguity about where the line actually lies.

Since partition (and what a great century we're having) generations have exploited that ambiguity.

While some rogues made a mint, many of us benefited on a more domestic scale – the odd packet of tea here, a pound of butter there. The Troubles made smuggling a little more difficult, but I remember as a child shopping trips to Dundalk to stock up on stuff.

The arrival of the single European market put an end to all that: no more the risk of butter melting with your body heat, the thrill of dodging the customs officer, the adrenalin rush of getting away with a packet of Barry's and a box of Jacob's Mikado.

Smugglers need tariffs in the same way that Conservative politicians need Russian oligarchs. Without them, they wither and die.

As I packed for the crossing, I wondered whether I'd be better jettisoning my suitcases, and stocking up instead with boxes of English sausages to sell out of the back of my Hyundai in Sandy Row.

I'd be certain to make more than enough to pay for the ferry crossing, with cash left over for a slap-up meal at Deane's, Guinness and oysters in The Crown, and a few Ulster Frys that did justice to the Fermanagh-raised pigs who died to make them happen.

I thought I might be able to make a decent living pushing English sausages to loyalists willing to sacrifice their health for God and Ulster.

All a fantasy of course. The smells from my boot did not trouble the

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sausage-seeking sniffer dogs at Cairnryan, and there was no need to tip off Sammy Wilson that if he was waiting at the docks there'd be a bag of British bangers and a bottle of HP Sauce for him.

Rather than salivating over inferior English produce, unionists need to pay a bit of attention to the bad news coming out now about the malign impact of Brexit on the British economy.

Not only is British trade with Europe on a downward spiral, the costs of managing that trade are up – more than 200 million additional documents a year now have to be processed, says Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

With free movement at an end, there are hundreds of thousands of vacancies in the NHS, the social care system, haulage and

logistics, and in hospitality. Food is rotting in fields because there is no-one to harvest it, and somewhere in the region of 100,000 pigs are to be culled because there is no capacity to process them.

Yet unionists tell us the protocol – which protects Northern Ireland from Brexit – needs to be set aside.

Boris Johnson and David Frost, his Brexit minister, are the Mutt and Jeff of British politics – perhaps more accurately they could be described as Dumb and Dumber.

By wedding themselves to the most extreme form of Brexit, they have single-handedly undermined the foundation of Britain's position as a leading economic power.

And as the British ship of state sinks, there is a risk they will bring Northern Ireland down with them.

This week, the UK unilaterally extended the grace period for checks on goods moving across the Irish Sea. It is a clear breach of both the letter and the spirit of the protocol.

Playing for time is, of course, the last resort of the desperate man. And Frost – an apparatchik who has risen without trace – is the very definition of the word desperate. He completely messed up the Brexit negotiations

– egged on by a prime minister who put his own interests ahead of his country's.

The simple truth is that Frost's decision this week on the protocol is a tacit admission that the junking the single market was wrong.

All the available evidence points to that simple fact.

Rather than complain about the protocol, unionism needs to persuade Johnson that remaining within the single market (alongside other non-EU nations like Norway), while staying outside the European Union is the best way of neutralising the so-called Irish question, while allowing him to say he got Brexit done.

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ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 9 1921

Northerners Meet Dev

A DEPUTATION, representing the majority of the electorate and comprising chairmen and other members of the public bodies of South and East Down, waited upon President de Valera and the Dail Cabinet today and laid before them a memorial protesting against any attempt to exclude these areas from the jurisdiction of a government for all Ireland.

Mr Patrick O'Neill, elected [Nationalist] representative for the county, read the following memorial: 'A meeting of elected representatives in County Down was held at Castlewellan on Sunday last when it was unanimously decided that steps be taken to voice on behalf of the electorate their unalterable opposition to the partitioning of Ireland. Speaking on behalf of the electorate of the area referred to, the representatives pledged themselves to use all means to effectively resist the attempt of the British Government to coerce them into a separate administration from the rest of Ireland. The meeting decided to wait upon you, sir, and your Cabinet for the purpose of bringing to your knowledge the resolve of our people.'

Mr O'Neill told President de Valera: 'As far as reason can be attributed to the framers of this monstrosity [the 1920 Act], it would seem that they claim to carve out a territory, the inhabitants of which were homogeneous in race, religion and political thought. [However] they have perpetrated an injustice against the people of the area we represent which we trust neither you nor the people of Ireland will consent to. We draw your attention to the map of our country and to the two constituencies of East and South Down. These form a tract of territory extending from Strangford Lough to Carlingford Lough and adjoin the Counties of Armagh and Louth. With one inconsiderable exception [Newcastle urban district] every local governing body in the area has a majority opposed to the partitioning of our country.'

The remonstrance is signed by Henry McGrath, chairman, Downpatrick Rural District Council; Thomas McAleenan, chairman, Kilkeel RDC; Patrick Bradley, chairman, Newry Number One RDC; Patrick Murney, chairman, Kilkeel Board of Guardians; John McMahon, chairman, Downpatrick Board of Guardians; Newry Board of Guardians; Warrenpoint UDC; Patrick O'Neill, MP; Joseph Connellan, Newry Urban Council.

(The prospect of negotiations raised nationalist hopes and unionist fears in the north. The late summer of 1921 witnessed a stream of northern anti-partitionist deputations to President de Valera and his Cabinet colleagues in Dublin, stressing the determination of the nationalist majority areas to be placed under the jurisdiction of the Dail. De Valera was cautious in his replies, merely assuring them that their concerns would be 'kept in mind' by Sinn Féin.)

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