



WHERE TO GO?: As it reaches its 50th anniversary, the DUP, led by First Minister Paul Givan and party leader Jeffrey Donaldson, seems to be having a mid-life crisis

Unionism's last dance to the status quo

THE DUP is 50 today and looks like it's going through a mid-life crisis. This week it caught up with the old gang for Ulster Day – the political equivalent of dad-dancing at a wedding.

Sucking in their bellies for one last dance to the status quo, Jeffrey joined Jim, Doug and Billy on the floor, head-banging in defiance against the protocol.

The other Jim, (what is it about unionism and Jim?) Wells, could only look on with tears of joy and told the *Nolan Show* of his desire to see unionists coming together like the old days of the Ulster Workers' Council strike. For those too young to remember, that was the period when once again politicians and paramilitaries were united in ensuring we had no petrol, no electricity, food went to waste and milk was poured down the drain. Meanwhile, families like ours with old fashioned gas cylinder cookers, turf sheds and a rake of blessed candles about the house managed alright.

Ironically, on the very day unionists were misty-eyed about past glories, Britain seems to have gone back to the dark days of the 70s.

Right now in all nine counties of Ulster, thanks to the protocol, petrol stations are open and there aren't miles-long queues of motorists waiting to fill up their fuel tanks. People may have noticed a few missing product lines in the British-owned supermarkets but not the aisles of empty shelves seen in England. Most people have found that if you really need something and you can't get it in Tesco or Asda, the chances are Dunnes or SuperValu have it anyway.

The ability of unionism to read the room must surely be called into question. If the consequences of being treated just the same as England are fuel panic buying and grocery shortages, is their electorate really willing to make that sacrifice?

The signatories of the Ulster Covenant in 1912, or Declaration if you happened to be a woman, stated that they "hereby pledge ourselves in solemn covenant,

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throughout this our time of threatened calamity, to stand by one another in defending, for ourselves and our children, our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom".

One hundred and nine years on, the British of Ulster are still fighting their own government for not treating them as a constituent and integral part of the UK. You'd nearly be weary for them.

This joint declaration is an attempt to peddle a unionist unity that simply does not exist. Electoral pacts didn't work in North Belfast or Fermanagh and South Tyrone, nor do we have an electorate willing to hold its nose and vote in order of preference down a PR list for people they'd never in a million years give a first preference to.

"What created problems in Ireland is Brexit, nothing else," said Michel Barnier this week, reiterating that every word and every sentence of the protocol was negotiated with Boris Johnson's government. Johnson was given a mandate to negotiate the protocol

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via the UK-wide general election vote of December 2019 which ended the DUP's confidence and supply agreement with the Conservative Party. The Withdrawal Agreement, including the protocol, was passed into law in January 2020 following the UK-wide vote of both Houses of Parliament.

It's funny how Jim Allister only wants to implement UK-wide votes that suit him.

A few weeks ago, the Ulster Unionist Party went on a publicity offensive, saying it was seeking workable solutions to challenges it believes the protocol presented, albeit that they were still opposed to the protocol. Signing a joint declaration of opposition whilst failing to fulfil its stated aim of mitigating negative impacts of Brexit really is a retrograde step for the party.

It's a second retrograde step in less than a week. It has recruited a number of high-profile new members recently and set out its stall as the progressive and sensible branch of unionism. And then a tweeted photograph of a social gathering of female elected representatives and activists was given the jaw-dropping hashtag #beattiesbabes. This was retweeted by the party leader.

As one friend commented to me: "Did they get into a De Lorean and step out in 1997?" It's *Daily Mail* terminology that denies women agency, belittles their contribution and reinforces misogyny. So much for progressive politics.

As for the baul' Billy Hutchinson, I did actually snort out my coffee when I heard the BBC refer to him as the leader of one of the "four main unionist parties." That wouldn't be the first definition to come into most people's heads.

Unionism has an image problem. The shirts are unbuttoned way too far and the ties tied around the forehead as they strut their stuff in the sure and certain belief that they've still got it.

The rest of us can only shake our heads, like bewildered wedding guests, and hope that they sit down before they do any serious damage.

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 30 1971

Two Die in Shankill Bomb

TWO men died and 25 other customers were injured – some seriously – when a gigantic 50 pound to 100 pound gellignite bomb exploded in the hallway of a Shankill Road public house late last night, collapsing walls and blowing off part of the roof. The explosion at the Four Step Inn came at 10.20 p.m. when the bar was crowded with Linfield supporters who had been at the match with Standard Liege at Windsor Park earlier in the evening.

Pandemonium followed the massive blast. Firemen, the security forces and civilian volunteers tore at the tons of debris to free trapped customers. As tension mounted in the area, the Rev Ian Paisley arrived and spoke to the crowd who later dispersed.

Dublin Summit Follows Talks

THE tripartite talks at Chequers, just ended, are to be followed by discussions between Mr Jack Lynch, the Taoiseach, and SDLP leaders from the North. Mr Lynch warned, on his return from London, that unless the SDLP MPs were brought into talks on the NI crisis, 'people would look to the IRA'.

On the talks, Mr Lynch said he regarded their discussions as 'quite satisfactory'. He said it was an important breakthrough in Anglo-Irish relations. He, as Taoiseach, was now involved in the political evolution of the North.

Bishops Blame Injustice

THE Bishops of Ireland said yesterday they could not accept the view that the sole cause of the present NI upheaval lay in the activities of those who were promoting violence. Meeting at Maynooth, the Hierarchy blamed several factors. However, they were convinced that force was not the answer.

The Bishops said: 'The end of injustice and the distrust which has built up over the past fifty years and which had been reinforced by recent trends within the ruling political party in NI, deeply felt anxiety at certain aspects of the administration of justice there, the memory of the terrible events of August 1969, the reaction to internment and to the one-sided and inhuman way in which it has been exercised...'

Leaders at Maynooth Mass

PRESIDENT de Valera, the Fine Gael leader Mr Liam Cosgrave and a representative of the Labour Party were among 400 people attending Mass celebrated by more than ten bishops at the Royal College of St Patrick, Maynooth last night.

(The IRA's no-warning bombing of the Four Steps Inn was widely condemned as a deeply provocative and sectarian act. Meanwhile, following a conference with Heath and Faulkner – the first since 1925 – Lynch had established the principle that the Irish government had a right to be consulted about the situation in the north.)

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