



CLAIMS: Former adviser Dominic Cummings, inset, tweeted that Boris Johnson always intended to 'ditch' the Northern Ireland Protocol

Cummings's tweets suggest a prime minister capable of anything

IT WOULDN'T be the same in Northern Ireland if we didn't have some sort of talks process which trundles on towards a Christmas deadline.

The latest one (although we could actually have two if the assembly collapses at the end of the month and there's an early election) will be between the UK and EU as they try to agree a form of protocol (and there will be a protocol of some sort) which calms unionist nerves.

What are the chances of success? That probably depends on the answer to two questions: is it in the interests of unionism to have a functioning assembly; is it in the joint interests of the EU and British government to get the protocol problem out of their in-trays and off their desks?

The answer to both is, I think, yes. I know some people believe Boris Johnson plans to use the protocol as a stick to keep beating the EU with, but I'm not persuaded there is much benefit to him from that strategy. Getting 'Brexit done' got him into Downing Street and delivered a handsome majority in December 2019, but I don't see how leaving it undone, or picking it apart, helps him. The prospect of new negotiations may give Jeffrey Donaldson enough cover not to walk from the assembly in two weeks, although it doesn't mean Johnson will settle on a deal two months later that does the DUP, or unionism generally, any favours.

As Sammy Wilson noted on Wednesday morning, the deal breaker for the DUP is this: "Are we fully part of the United Kingdom or are we half in the union and half out of the United Kingdom when it comes to law-making and the adjudication on those laws."

The problem is the DUP don't make the call on that: it's up to Johnson. And if he doesn't deliver and the DUP has to walk from the executive (it would have no other option in those circumstances)

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then Donaldson finds himself in the worst of all worlds: betrayed (again) by Johnson; left without an assembly; and looking particularly weak in an election.

My gut instinct is Johnson doesn't want drawn-out political/societal instability in Northern Ireland: he may have no particular interest in the place, but he knows the history and understands the consequences of instability.

What he will prioritise, I suspect, is a deal which keeps business and trade as easy as possible, while promising unionism its future in the UK remains guaranteed unless it loses a border poll (which, he will insist, isn't going to be called anytime soon).

I suspect, too, that the EU will buy into the importance of restoring political stability/balance to Northern Ireland; if that means a few 'unique' arrangements further down the line, then so be it. All of which means the British government and EU have a joint interest (and the US will certainly agree to

underwrite it politically) in reaching a deal reasonably quickly.

Many readers of this column, maybe the majority, will be wondering if I've been sniffing something before writing it. Doesn't it sound far too optimistic for me? Maybe, but sometimes realism and optimism coincide.

It's also worth bearing in mind that deals can often be done under the most unlikely of circumstances. Indeed, the more difficult the circumstances the more likely it is a route to success can be found. As a former talks negotiator once told me: "Yes, the devil may be in the detail; yet there's often salvation in the small print."

So, if Johnson and the EU cut a new deal in the next few months what will the consequences be for unionism?

As I noted earlier I think unionists – particularly the UUP and DUP – will want to keep a functioning assembly (even if it means some difficult decisions if the election result places Sinn Féin in top dog role). Assuming those two parties account for the greater number of unionist MLAs (although the TUV has the potential to spring a major surprise) I'd be surprised if they didn't ensure the survival of the assembly.

That said, they will need something solid and positive to sell to their grassroots. If there isn't, then the assembly falls. Probably forever.

Back to the prime minister. If Dominic Cummings's tweets on Tuesday evening are correct – that Johnson always intended to 'ditch' the protocol – then it follows that he didn't ever give a damn about the damage it would do to Northern Ireland. Indeed it might have suited his interests to inflict that damage.

Worryingly, a prime minister who would do that to part of his own country is a prime minister capable of anything. I really do wish I had the confidence to doubt what Cummings is saying.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 15 1971

Faulkner on Northern UDI

THE Prime Minister, Mr Brian Faulkner told former Minister of Home Affairs, Mr William Craig at Stormont yesterday that the 'vision of an independent Ulster, self-supporting and self-sufficient, is a myth.' Mr Faulkner was rejecting a motion of censure by Mr Craig criticising the Government for its security failure.

Rev Ian Paisley condemned the Government for surrendering control of NI's security. There was a sharp clash between the Prime Minister and Mr Paisley over internment. Mr Paisley shouted at the PM: 'You are destroying this country!' Mr Faulkner refused to give way to Mr Paisley and dismissed him with a wave of his hand. Mr Craig's motion was defeated by 24 votes to 2.

The PM called for a realistic debate which takes account of the facts of life, rather than 'the imaginings of people who talk about NI being "master of its own house" as if we were a sovereign country and not part of the UK'. He said their aim was not just to defeat the IRA: beyond that, they must look to a Northern Ireland united on the basis of common purpose rather than existing in a state of armed truce. Mr Faulkner said there was already evidence that internment was beginning to bite.

Rev Ian Paisley said that their Parliament was now practically powerless. The PM could tender advice but it could be either accepted or rejected. He had been told that 58 people were killed since internment and yet it was suggested that things were better than before. The present measures would not defeat the IRA.

New 'Peace Wall'

STORMONT Minister, Mr Roy Bradford has turned down a plea for a public inquiry into the birth of the latest peace line. It divides the half-mile long Lenadoon Avenue.

After stone-throwing incidents Lenadoon Avenue came under the attention of the Suffolk Defence Committee. Their first move was the evacuation of Protestant families. Soon Catholic families, hearing of vacant houses in Lenadoon, began moving there from troubled areas. Now an Army post separates the two sections.

(Despite a resounding vote of confidence, Brian Faulkner's position had been seriously weakened by the failure of internment, the near total alienation of the minority, remorseless attacks by his internal enemies and 'the Demon Doctor', as the PM later described Dr Paisley. As the abstentionist Opposition regrouped in Dungiven in a rival 'Assembly of the Northern Irish People' – with the backing of Dublin – Faulkner came under increasing pressure from Ted Heath to 'broaden his cabinet'. Meanwhile, a new peace line was reported in Lenadoon as people continued to flee their homes in the city.)

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