Lobbying scandal points to Ulsterisation of Britain

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RESIGNATION: Former secretary of state Owen Paterson resigned as an MP after he was found to have broken lobbying rules

NORTHERN Ireland is everywhere in the Owen Paterson lobbying scandal and not just because he is a former secretary of state.

The firms he lobbied for, Randox Laboratories and Lynn's Country Foods, are based in Crumlin and Downpatrick. Kathryn Stone, the Westminster standards commissioner who found Paterson breached the MPs' code of conduct, was formerly Northern Ireland's commissioner for victims and survivors. Paterson's recommended 30-day suspension was matched only in modern history by the punishment handed down to Ian Paisley over his foreign trips and lobbying. Sammy Wilson was the only non-Tory to vote for quashing Paterson's punishment and 'reviewing' the standards body, with all seven other DUP MPs abstaining.

Much of this is being noted in the UK media, which is now familiar with the DUP due to the confidence-and-supply deal and Brexit. Randox is familiar due to Covid testing contracts. You can almost sense journalists and their audience resisting the unthinkable conclusion. They are witnessing the Ulsterisation of Britain.

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THERE was dark humour, presumably unintentional, in loyalists objecting to the protocol by setting fire to a bus. Perhaps they should have created their own version of the Brexit bus, using the DUP's claim on the cost of the sea border: "We're losing £850 million a year. Let's fund our NHS instead."

Although the victim of the attack was the vehicle's driver, who mercifully escaped unharmed, the target was Jeffrey Donaldson. Burning a bus at dawn in Newtownards on the first day of this month was meant to embarrass the DUP leader over his promise to collapse Stormont by November if the protocol was not abolished.

The DUP was also the target of a tiny protest at the Lanark Way interface in Belfast, which inevitably attracted young rioters. The fringe loyalists involved carried placards condemning Donaldson's party.

The DUP can be accused of raising loyalist tensions, or exploiting them, or at least giving into them, but it cannot have wanted this at any level.

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AHEAD of travelling to the COP26 climate change conference, SDLP minister Nichola Mallon said it was "frankly embarrassing" Stormont is bringing forward two competing bills on the issue.

The embarrassment is that many in Glasgow will assume the bills are unionist and nationalist. In reality there is a Green Party bill backed by everyone except the DUP and a DUP bill backed by everyone including the Greens. The main difference between them, which both parties are working to bridge, is the Greens want a 100 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2045 while the DUP wants 82 per cent by 2050. The main reason for this difference is lobbying by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), although farmers receive 90 per cent of their income in grants and will be paid to reduce emissions. Perhaps the UFU is beyond embarrassment.

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THE SDLP and Sinn Féin have fallen out badly over the £20 weekly universal credit uplift. Sinn Féin finance minister Conor Murphy rejected a bid by his party colleague Deirdre Hargey to extend it for six months, saying there was not enough money in the current monitoring round – the executive's thrice-yearly reallocation of unspent funds. The SDLP says he could have counted on more funds becoming available, which looks plausible until well into next year. However, Murphy is correct that costs would soon have exceeded the scope of shuffling unspent cash around.

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NEW Decade, New Approach (NDNA) created an assembly committee to have another go at devising a bill of rights. Mystery has surrounded its failure to appoint an advisory panel of five experts, with Sinn Féin and the DUP blaming each other. There are now claims the blockage is over appointing Queen's University law professor Colin Harvey, who is eminently qualified.

The suspicion must be the DUP objects to him as a prominent advocate of a border poll. If so, his exclusion is unacceptable.

As Prof Harvey was involved in the failed 2008 attempt at a bill it would be legitimate to ask what he would do differently this time. He has co-authored papers arguing the 2008 'maximalist' approach was correct and should be tried again. However, there is no need for the rest of the panel to agree, or for the committee to agree with the panel, or even for the panel to have been created – NDNA said nothing about expert advice. It looks like another unforced error by the DUP.

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STEPHEN Farry, Alliance's only MP, has signed a Commons motion opposing nuclear power as a solution to climate change.

Surprisingly, Sinn Féin may have to head in the opposite direction.

An opinion poll in the Republic has found an even split over building a nuclear power station, with 43 per cent of the public for and 43 per cent against. Sinn Féin supporters were 47 per cent for, well above Fine Gael supporters at 39 per cent and the highest of any large party except Fianna Fáil, at 51 per cent.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 6 1971

Heath May Take Over

AN IMPORTANT announcement on the NI situation is expected at Westminster next week following the publication of the Compton Report [into the alleged mistreatment of internees]. Political observers were last night speculating on its possible content in the light of a statement at Stormont yesterday by Mr Brian Faulkner, the Prime Minister, who rejected the idea of control of law and order being transferred to Westminster and added: 'We will be better by far to have direct rule openly and honestly rather than some sort of face-saving sham'.

In the House of Lords, Lord Carrington [Defence Secretary] said military measures could do no more than contribute towards establishing the necessary conditions for peace and a peaceful solution to the problems of NI.: 'I do not know how long it will take finally to finish the emergency. In the process it will almost certainly be that we shall see much more bloodshed and even an extension of it to [GB].'

Reports that the British Government is thinking of appointing a Secretary of State to take over political and military operations in the North were unconfirmed in Whitehall last night. Many leading figures in the Tory Party are now disillusioned about the prospect of getting anywhere in NI with the present policies and agree that radical changes are needed immediately.

Two Die in Ormeau Pub Blast

AN ELDERLY man and a middle-aged woman were killed in a fifty-pound gelignite explosion at a Belfast public house. Thirty-six others, including customers in the bar and passengers on a passing bus, were injured by the blast. Bombs were planted in the bar and in a drapery shop between which Ballynafeigh Police Station is sandwiched. Customers in the Red Lion pub were given ten minutes to get out after gunmen held up the bar and one of them planted the bomb. The device exploded before they could get clear.

Meanwhile a border hotel in Belleek, County Fermanagh and the Black Mountain Bar at Hannahstown on the outskirts of Belfast were badly damaged by explosions late last night as the bombing campaign continued.

It was claimed at Stormont yesterday that an attempt had been made to kidnap the Speaker of Stormont, Mr Ivan Neill at his Rostrevor home.

THIS report carried the strongest hint yet that major constitutional change in the north was imminent. From this moment Downing Street sources were briefing about the likely abolition of the old unionist-dominated Stormont parliament and the introduction of direct rule from London. For nationalists and the IRA this would be seen as a victory but for unionism, its impact would be traumatic.

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