

PROTOCOL PROBLEMS: British prime minister Boris Johnson

Boris's teasing over protocol a problem for DUP



Alex KANE

BORIS Johnson is such a tease. For weeks now he's been telling unionists the conditions required for triggering Article 16 have already been met and that he's minded to pull the trigger.

He was at it again on Monday evening: "But if we do invoke Article 16 – which by the way is a perfectly legitimate part of that protocol – we will do so reasonably and appropriately, because we believe it is the only way left to protect the territorial integrity of our country and meet our obligations to the people of Northern Ireland under the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. (But) let me say – given all the speculation – that we would rather find a negotiated solution to the problems created by the NI Protocol – and that still seems possible."

There you go, a perfect example of the tease he does so well. It could be done. It might be done. He doesn't want to do it. It's the only way to protect the territorial integrity of the UK. But it's still possible a solution exists which doesn't require triggering the article. It's gold standard gobbledegook, of course; and well he knows it. Or maybe he doesn't. He is so proficient in fork-tongued gibberish he may no longer be capable of distinguishing a fact from a fart: because to him they are both just variations of wind.

Even more ludicrous than the tease is his clumsy, clownish, lumbering attempt to take a political/moral high ground on the protocol. According to Dominic Cummings and Ian Paisley he always intended to shred it anyway, since its only purpose was to allow him to 'get Brexit done'.

Were either of his grandmothers still alive he would probably have sold them had the occasion required it. Even Lord Frost, his chief negotiator, has admitted that the protocol was only agreed to because there was pressure from the EU for Johnson to seal the deal. Or, putting that less diplomatically, Johnson just flapdoodled his way to an election victory.

I wonder what Jeffrey Donaldson makes of it all. The reopening of negotiations with the UK and the EU bought him some time at the end of October, meaning that he didn't have to carry through with a perceived threat to crash the assembly and trigger an early election. But he doesn't want the negotiations to run and run, just to conclude with Johnson nodding through something which is the existing protocol in all but name and with Northern Ireland still occupying the constitutional granny flat located between GB and the EU.

And I'm pretty sure he doesn't want a triggering of Article 16 leading to a collapse of the entire Withdrawal Agreement and endless months of uncertainty for businesses in NI (the majority of whom seem reasonably content to live with the protocol: because, if nothing else, it does provide them with something resembling clarity and certainty). He's also wise enough to know that an unravelling of the Withdrawal Agreement and the reopening of the entire Brexit debate could fuel the view across English nationalism and Conservative grassroots that 'safeguarding' unionist interests wasn't, in fact, worth the effort.

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His other problem is that he doesn't know who would win if Johnson had to choose between prioritising unionist/loyalist interests and 'meeting our obligations to the people of Northern Ireland under the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement'. Johnson has enough other problems on his plate (including slipping poll ratings and a rise in Covid figures) without adding the crashing of the Good Friday Agreement to the mix.

His advisers (assuming he listens to them) will be aware of the latest polling figures from LucidTalk and the University of Liverpool, which suggest considerable numbers of those from the pro-union community are much more flexible on the protocol than the unionist parties, loyalism and the Orange Order may be. In other words, Johnson might conclude the 'people of Northern Ireland' is a much bigger and less protocol-hostile base than party political unionism (which is already a minority in the assembly).

But Donaldson's biggest problem of all is an election—less than six months away—the outcome of which depends on what Johnson decides to do with the protocol. At this point no-one has any idea what he'll do. And I really do mean no-one. Not even Johnson himself: who, like the Queen of Hearts, sometimes believes as many as six impossible things before breakfast.

Which one he'll choose and where it lands is impossible to guess, because his entire shtick is now built around a hugely embarrassing impression of an over-the-hill burlesque artiste played by Charles Laughton.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 19 1921

Banging the Drum

THE much-advertised meetings called by the Ulster Unionist Council to protest against the British Government peace proposals were held in the Assembly and YMCA Halls, Belfast last night while a third meeting was held in the Grosvenor Hall which was taken possession of by a mob. The new force known as the 'Ulster Imperial Guards' were mustered for the occasion and marched to the meeting places from various points. They presented a somewhat sorry spectacle as they passed through the streets, only a few hundred of them putting in an appearance though one of the speakers boasted that they had a force of 21,000.

Fermanagh Republicans Meet

AN Aeridheacht in aid of the Prisoners' Dependants' Fund was held in the County Hall, Enniskillen on Sunday evening. The hall was crowded. Archdeacon Tierney, PP, VG, Enniskillen, who presided, said the presence of so many determined-looking young people showed that the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone were not going to be wrested from Ireland without a struggle. (Applause.) Mr Darrell Figgis [Sinn Fein TD], in the course of an address, dealt with the conditions underlying future peace in Ireland. He stated that if and when an honourable peace were got, their problems in Ireland would only begin. Another problem was that of the so-called Six Counties. He was proud to be speaking in the capital of West Ulster in a part of Ireland over which a Secessionist Parliament claimed an authority not based on the consent of the governed, but in defiance of their declared wish. No body of Irishmen could be permitted to tear the common country asunder. (Applause.)

More Trouble in East Belfast

THE Ballymacarrett district of Belfast was the scene of another outbreak of firing last night when an attack was made upon Catholics returning from a boxing tournament in St Matthew's Hall, Seaforde Street. Later a bomb was thrown into a Catholic street but no-one was injured. The attack was apparently pre-arranged and was directed upon the pedestrians simultaneously from several points at Newtownards Road. A section of the audience had left the hall shortly before ten o'clock and were proceeding towards Chemical Street when several men stationed at the corner of Wolf Street opened fire. Fortunately, no-one was injured. Additional police forces later arrived but the gunmen had disappeared.

As militant loyalists demonstrated their strength in Belfast, republicans asserted their demand for a united republic at a meeting in Enniskillen. They were addressed by Darrell Figgis (1882-1925), a Protestant Sinn Féin TD and propagandist. A later supporter of the Treaty, Figgis died tragically by his own hand.

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