

BRIDGING THE GAP: Infrastructure Minister Nichola Mallon has called for money set aside for the 'Boris Bridge' to be used to enhance public services in Northern Ireland

Mallon is trying to have her cake and eat it

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WITH the Boris Bridge officially cancelled, SDLP Infrastructure Minister Nichola Mallon has written to the prime minister "calling for this promised investment to be provided to the north so it can be used to enhance our public services".

Mallon is trying to have her cake and eat it, fittingly enough.

The bridge was one absurdly unrepresentative proposal under the Union Connectivity Review, which offers funding across the UK for national infrastructure projects, defined so widely they can include hospitals, housing and sewers. The review specifically invites proposals from Stormont for road and rail links across the border and between Belfast and Derry. Yet Mallon has refused to engage with the process because she believes it is "encroachment into the devolved space", as she told the assembly in March.

Although infrastructure is devolved, the UK is unusual in not also having a nationwide policy approach, as in the United States with its state and federal highways.

Everyone always knew the bridge would be cancelled and the review's full tranche of investment would be there for the asking. Do we really have to turn our noses up at it on a point of devolutionary principle?

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MALLON received some support for her encroachment concern from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, an independent body created by New Decade, New Approach to bring transparency to the executive's finances. Its first report has warned London is straying into the devolved space by keeping control of post-Brexit funding, such as farm subsidies, that used to flow via Brussels to Belfast. This risks duplication or conflicting priorities. The report also found Northern Ireland's subvention in the last year before Covid was £10.3 billion. As Sinn Féin Finance Minister Conor Murphy appointed the council, his party must now accept a figure it is has long tried to discredit in discussion on a united Ireland. There are perfectly realistic ways to manage the subvention but wishing it away is not one of them.

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STORMONT Speaker Alex Maskey said it was "unacceptable" that DUP, Sinn Féin and UUP ministers unveiled the executive's new Covid rules at a press conference. Maskey said he had obtained a pledge from the executive some time ago that "significant decisions" will be announced in the assembly first.

As the press conference mainly consisted of urging people to follow existing rules, it could be argued it involved no significant decisions. Ministers are unlikely to offer that defence themselves.

The DUP does want an assembly debate on vaccine passports – the party says it voted against them in the executive so MLAs can have a chance to discuss the measure. Three weeks ago, Sinn Féin was the only major party in the Republic to vote against renewing Covid powers, including vaccine passports, because it said the Dáil should discuss each measure.

What will be more awkward at the Stormont debate? That Sinn Féin disagrees with itself or that Sinn Féin and the DUP agree with each other?

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SOUTH Down assembly member Jim Wells, who lost the DUP whip in 2018, claims he has "unanimous support" from his constituency association to be the party's candidate in next year's election.

If so, there must have been quite an internal peace process. Wells caused a meltdown in the association in June by sending a 10-point email demanding members support Edwin Poots. Two councillors resigned, telling the press a purge was underway. They only rejoined in September after saying they had been persuaded back by Jeffrey Donaldson's leadership.

Running for South Down's one DUP seat would be an ideal way for Donaldson, a Kilkeel native, to return from Westminster to Stormont. In any case, candidate selection ultimately falls to DUP headquarters, where Wells most definitely does not have universal support.

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UNIONISTS complaining about Louise Haigh have short memories. The shadow secretary of state was criticised for saying a Labour government would not campaign for the union in a border poll. Her argument that the Good Friday Agreement requires such neutrality is disputed by legal experts and hinges on precise definitions of terms.

However, it has been Labour's position since 1994, when new leader Tony Blair changed it from advocating for a united Ireland by consent – a policy he had endorsed right up until becoming leader.

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ATTENTION has rightly been drawn to the small size of loyalist anti-protocol protests, so it seems only fair to note this was also true of pro-protocol protests last weekend by Border Communities Against Brexit.

Organisers beefed up the apparent attendance by placing a large picture of a crowd in front of cameras and beside the podium. Guest speakers were perhaps fortunate not to be asked to stand on a wheelie bin. The best perspective on protocol passions comes from this year's Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, conducted by Queen's and Ulster universities. In a random sampling of the population, 22 per cent said they had never heard of the protocol, 27 per cent said they had heard of it but knew nothing about it and another 3 per cent were so blissfully unaware they just answered "don't know".

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 27 1921

Craig Under Fire in Britain

MR [JL] Garvin writes in *The Observer*: The attitude of Ulster to the entirely new situation created by the King's speech in Belfast five months ago has been… a very deep disappointment to her friends. …The present British request to Ulster is not an invitation to her to commit suicide for our sakes. It is based on the belief that the peace and contentment of Ireland within the Empire are matters of at least as much interest to Ulster as to any part of Ireland...

But since the negotiations began Ulster has made no single concession to Southern opinion. Is this week also to pass with no advance whatever from her side towards the idea of Irish unity? The barbarous conditions of riot and oppression under which a great part of Belfast is living cannot be permanent. Neither can they be ended by the simple restoration of order by the Ascendancy forces. … A prosperous Ulster permanently founded upon Loyalist bayonets in the teeth of a numerous and hostile minority is an absurd proposition. The minority is large and in two counties a majority. Can the Ulster Unionists fly in the face of these facts?

Funeral of Gassing Victims

THE funerals of the late Mr Neil McConvey and his wife, two of the victims of the gas poisoning tragedy in Belfast's Thompson Street, took place yesterday from their late residence to Kilclief, County Down. The tragic nature of their deaths caused intense sorrow in the district and particularly amongst the staff of the County Down Railway where the late Mr McConvey worked for nearly fifty years. He was senior guard on the line. Every department of the line was fully represented in the funeral cortege.

The remains of the late Miss Minnie Kelly, the third victim of the tragedy, were laid to rest at Straw, Draperstown [Co Derry].

IRA Men Jailed in Belfast

DAVID McKinstry, Stratheden Street, Belfast has been sentenced to ten years; James Laverty, Lepper Street, five years and John Kearney, Lepper Street, five years, all with penal servitude.

They were tried by Courtmartial in Victoria Barracks and found guilty of having arms at Chichester Park on 11 October where they said they were engaged protecting Catholics employed on Tramway reconstruction work.

By November 1921, Lloyd George's attempt to get Craig to accept a 'federal Ireland' was backed up by pressure from the British Tory press. JL Garvin was a Liberal Unionist newspaper editor. At the same time three IRA men engaged in protecting Catholic tramway workers from sectarian attack were sentenced by Courtmartial.

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