

ACCORD: The idea of an official history of the Troubles is a central part of the 2014 Stormont House agreement on dealing with the past. Pictured are Northern Ireland parties at talks hosted by then secretary of state Theresa Villiers at Stormont House in 2014

It's a bit late to complain about official history idea

Newton EMERSON



THE Daily Telegraph has claimed the Northern Ireland Office intends to commission historians to write an 'official history' of the Troubles, with access to intelligence records on 'privy council terms' (that is, confidential briefings).

The criticism this has provoked has extended beyond accusations of government bias to ridiculing the very concept of an official history, yet that is a central part of the 2014 Stormont House agreement on dealing the past. It involves commissioning academics "to produce a factual historical timeline and statistical analysis of the Troubles". A separate "report on themes" would later be commissioned from "independent academic experts", drawing on all the other legacy mechanisms and forming the conclusion of the entire process. This is all to be overseen by an 11-strong body nominated by both governments and the executive parties according to their electoral strengths. Stormont House was reaffirmed in 2015's Fresh Start and last year's New Decade, New Approach, with only the UUP dissenting. If the idea of an official history is absurd, it is a bit late for anyone else to say so.

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WHEN the DUP used its executive veto last November to block a 14-day lockdown extension, one consequence was that everyone became aware of the veto mechanism.

Introduced by the St Andrews agreement, it is similar to the assembly's petition of concern but had remained obscure.

So everyone is now aware the DUP could have blocked vaccine passports. Although all four of the party's ministers voted against the measure and made their objections public, the public knows it was a token protest.

Leader Jeffrey Donaldson said he had "an open mind" on the issue, which kept him above the fray, although this ruthlessly underlined the weakness of first minister Paul Givan, who only last month said vaccine passports would "infringe on rights".

The DUP's odd mix of libertarianism and religious conservatism frequently leads it into culture war trenches, deadlocking Stormont and alienating itself from the electorate. In September, Donaldson indicated he would address this by allowing his MLAs more conscience votes in the assembly. That duly occurred with a private member's bill on organ donation. However, letting his entire ministerial team have what amounts to a conscience vote against him in the executive takes Donaldson's party management to another level – a higher plane of conscienceness.

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LIDL grew its sales by a whopping 9 per cent in Northern Ireland over the past 12 months while all the other major supermarket chains saw a slight fall. This is part of a long-term trend here and in Britain so it would be excitable to say it is because Lidl was by far the best prepared for the protocol, spending two years switching to suppliers in the Republic to get itself fully 'sea border ready' in time for January 1 this year.

However, it clearly has not done Lidl any harm.

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SINN Féin finance minister Conor Murphy has made it a condition that any business winning a new government contract must pay the national living wage, effective from June next year.

Confusingly, the minimum wage and the living wage are the same for workers aged over 22 but for anyone younger this means a significant raise. Murphy's decision, which as finance minister he can implement on his own, does highlight the issue of devolving the minimum wage, enabling Stormont to adjust its levels. Alliance had that promise inserted into New Decade, New Approach but nothing has been heard of it since - including from Alliance, which has moved on to indulging fantasies of a universal basic income.

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THE assembly standards commissioner, Dr Melissa McCullough, is conducting a "preliminary investigation" into the admissibility of a conflict of interest complaint against SDLP infrastructure minister Nichola Mallon.

A member of the public has alleged that because Mallon's husband works for a PR firm that has represented a petroleum exploration company, she could assist the company in obtaining an exploration licence.

Mallon has nothing to do with such licences – that falls to DUP economy minister Gordon Lyons. Mallon has declared her husband's job and his firm stopped representing the exploration company before she became a minister.

It is hard to know what is the more extraordinary proposition here: that the DUP would obey Mallon, that Mallon would obey her husband, that her husband could time-travel to arrange it, or that McCullough has to entertain any of this with a straight face.

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OFFICIALS at Belfast City Council have proposed an admirably sensible approach to buskers, street preachers and protesters: a bye-law requiring a license for the use of an amplifier.

This would obviate all questions of what is being sung, preached or hollered, sparing police and council officers from having to wade into debates about hate speech and free speech, as is increasingly happening with street preachers in particular.

However, when the proposal was put before councillors it was rejected by the DUP, which described it as "censorship", and People Before Profit, which called it "extremely elitist, exclusionary, and potentially discriminatory".

So the issue must now go to the full council, although at least this time the Christians and the Trotskyites will be hollering on the same side.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 20 1971

'White-wash' Rejected

THERE was ill-treatment of detainees during the internment operation here – but no physical brutality or cruelty, Sir Edmund Compton's Committee of Inquiry reported yesterday.

The three-man team considered that techniques used in 'questioning in depth' constituted physical ill-treatment. These were:

Hooding: 'a black pillow-slip' which can increase a detainee's sense of isolation...

Noise: a continuous and monotonous electronic 'hissing' or 'mush' noise... It may enhance the detainee's sense of isolation.

Wall-standing: 'Requiring detainees to stand with their arms against the wall for between four and six hours ...'

Bread and water diet: 'We found physical ill-treatment in the diet of one round of bread and one pint of water every six hours...'

Deprivation of sleep: 'It was confirmed that it was the general policy to deprive the men of opportunity of sleep..'

However, in an introduction to the eighty-page document, the British Home Secretary, Mr Reginald Maudling, said the Government rejected any 'suggestion that the methods currently authorised for interrogation contained any element of cruelty or brutality'.

But the Government had decided 'it would be right to make arrangements for examining and providing authoritative advice for the interrogation of persons suspected of involvement in a terrorist campaign ...'

Calls for International Inquiry into Techniques

THE Compton Report, with its admission of ill-treatment of detainees during interrogation, obviously gives little comfort to the British Government which is to review these procedures.

However, its inadequacies and word-spinning has drawn upon it from Opposition and outside spokesmen the general comment of being an exercise in white-washing the security forces.

Bishop William Philbin of Down and Connor said last night: 'The facts revealed in the Compton Report are a serious indictment of the forces concerned ...I ask the responsible authorities to recognise that the indignation which such outrages provoke must be seen in conjunction with the increasingly common allegations of ill-treatment of civilians in the streets of Belfast'.

THE Compton Report followed an investigation by a three-man commission into allegation of the brutal treatment of internees. Dismissing allegations of brutality and torture, Compton found that there had been physical abuse and in-depth interrogation. The cases of the 'hooded men' later went to the European Court of Human Rights which found Britain guilty of 'inhuman and degrading treatment'.

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