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Covid-19 pandemic in North of Ireland

Unionism's silent shift on the pandemic: Not consensus - simple survival!

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After months of obsequious kow-towing by the British media, the British government's rerun of the Second World War with Johnson and his team playing the role of Dad's Army has run its course and Johnson and his cronies are now seen as buffoons who have horribly mismanaged the crisis. One of the outcomes of this failure has been a distancing of component elements of the British State with the meaningless Stay Alert being unanimously rejected as a slogan and more coherent plans being advanced by administrations outside England.

In the general fog a significant but silent shift has taken place in Ulster Unionism. Arlene Foster, the Democratic Unionist Party's leader, alongside Sinn Fein's Michelle O'Neill, announced a five-point plan for a gradual emergence from the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Like many other plans it is very light on detail on the steps that will be taken to protect workers who return to work and uniquely it has no time scale at all.

The reason for the lack of time scale is pretty evident. It is quite clear that the Northern plan, while not identical, runs parallel to the time frame produced by the Irish government. This convergence was made clear when the Northern Executive took its first steps on the plan on the same day that the Dublin initiative was enforced.

For some time leading scientific figures have been calling for an All-Ireland response to the viral threat. The charge has been led by Professor Gabriel Scally, who constantly denounces the idea that there can be two Covid 19 strategies on one island and who has become so repelled by British government complacency that he has set up an independent body to challenge the official, misnamed, SAGE committee. The Unionist response has been one of saluting the flag and following the British lead. They argue that they are 'following the science' but never explain why British science is different from WHO science. On its part Sinn Fein has concentrated on avoiding blame. Many people were left scratching their heads when Michelle O'Neill called for more testing in care homes, unable to understand why a member of the Stormont administration did not simply enforce the tests.

The new plan is a more rational approach in line with Dublin proposals. The DUP have accepted this as long as Sinn Fein agree never to notice the correlation between the two plans and to endorse the local plan, firmly labelled as Northern Irish.

Some commentators have seen this as evidence of the gradual evolution of the Good Friday institutions towards stability and cooperation, an argument given the semblance of credibility by complaints from DUP far right politician Sammy Wilson. In reality the Stormont Parties are struggling for survival. They all have histories of running down the Health Service and of cutting health workers pay. They have fiddled the figures to conceal the true level of infection and to cover up the decimation of the elderly population in private care homes. Recent press reports showing that 50% of all deaths have occurred in these homes has led to a muffled apology from the health minister and a promise to do better in the future, a promise readily accepted by the leadership of the local health unions. The hypocrisy of the apology can be seen by the failure to respond to Professor Scally and by the fact that legal action is now being taken by relatives of victims.

While the Stormont decision is a welcome move towards rationality, that doesn't mean it's good news for workers. The ambiguity and vagueness is there to protect the political Parties rather than to advance the interests of the workers. The plan is not time based, but neither is it criteria based, so when workers are pushed back to work it depends on the whim of the government rather than concrete steps to protect them, something that is also a feature of the Dublin plan.

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Dublin and Belfast, with the aid of the trade union leadership and the general anxiety produced by the pandemic, have managed to run with the old lie: We are all In this together. That myth will not survive attempts to return to the status quo, given the risks to the workforce and that demands that billions in debt repayment must come from the workers.

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Source [Socialist Democracy](#).

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