**News Letter**

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Dear Editor,

Alex Kane makes his regular plea for Unionism to start strategising, as he says we are now in "endgame territory". (NL 13 July 2020)

He asks, "What does Unionism do? More important when does it start doing it?" which is rather the wrong way round given you don't commence an operation before you know what it is about.

I concur with much of his historical analysis about London except that the "benign neutrality" he complains of has happened since 1921 and partition, not more recently. That earlier period was something of a high point for unionism when the Conservatives showed massive support for Ulster, only to put it to one side in government, when faced with militarised Irish separatism.

Of course, London has to balance a host of competing demands on its time and resources but the union remains a paramount policy consideration despite the colossal amount of blood and treasure expended since direct rule.

For the half century of England getting Ireland out of its hair, until 1972, the money saved has been multiplied a hundred fold in costs over the last 50 years not to mention army deaths. And devolution remains the God, even if it is wearing thin in Wales and Scotland!

Alex makes much of Boris's change of tactics on Brexit but you only have to recall the film 'Elizabeth and Essex' where Bette Davis rails against the money wasted in Ireland, the military casualties and the hopelessness of Errol Flynn’s operation. And that was nearly 500 years ago. England just can’t escape what happens next door.

Unionism has never stopped having to strategise although it may get its tactics wrong, being always stuck with having to defend the status quo thus finding adopting the latest liberal development difficult. But we do, without ever getting credit. The unionist strategy can only be one of hanging on in. For some it can be done by intransigence with a smile which is where the DUP gets it so wrong. Dealing with Dublin is fine so long as one realises that Unionism dies with Irish unity while devolution within a 'new Ireland' is as bad an option today as it was in 1921.

On Belfast City Council, in my recent experience, and now with minimal UUP representation, unionists fight for territory, as they are forced to - on each issue and every pound allocated. There is and can be no other way, even if officials try to dampen the worst of the new majority's demands for the sake of community relations and financial stability. I do wish Alex would take a day or two out and attend some council or Stormont committees, which are rarely reported, to learn of that reality.

Belfast council's budgets are tiny compared to Stormont yet sadly huge retrenchment looms with Covid-19 further demolishing our rates base. That is not to say the spendthrift councillors have even contemplated this scenario. They still live in the cloud cuckoo land of limitless rate income.

I wonder, in passing, if the £500,000 bonfire diversionary money, now annualised, was still spent this year given no diversions were permitted. Presumably no one has dared ask. That budget was brought into existence following the last inquiry into council actions in 2017 in moving pallets around. Hopefully the new inquiry will not be used by Sinn Fein to demand more spending.

Either way the endgame has a long way to run even if it was under consideration in 1641.

Jeffrey Dudgeon (former Belfast Councillor)