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# **DAERA Daily Press Cuttings**

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Produced by  
[Media Monitoring Unit | Digital Shared Services](#)  
[Massey House | Stormont Estate | Belfast | BT4 3SX](#)  
[Email: EIS.MediaMonitoringUnit@finance-ni.gov.uk](mailto:EIS.MediaMonitoringUnit@finance-ni.gov.uk)  
[Media Monitoring Manager – 028 9016 3197](#)  
[Press Clips – 028 9016 3223](#)  
[Transcripts – 028 9016 3163](#)

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# *DUP treated me like Rafa Benitez, says ousted Wells*



Martin McGuinness

# The DUP sent me packing without any warning, says ousted Jim Wells

Politician feels he was treated like football's Rafa Benitez after 46-year career was abruptly ended

By Mark Bain

JIM Wells has said he feels like the Rafa Benitez of the DUP, after the party ended the political veteran's career.

The South Down MLA was denied the opportunity to fight for his seat in May's Assembly election, and has been unable to tell his wife, who suffered a stroke seven years ago, that his 46-year career in politics is effectively over.

Yesterday, he warned the DUP that should Northern Ireland get its first Sinn Fein First Minister in the election, that it must not nominate a Deputy First Minister and instead "find another means" of moving forward.

Former Westminster candidate Diane Forsythe, who rejoined the party in September after quitting following the election of Mr Poots as leader, will stand in South Down for the DUP.

After he was rejected, Mr Wells said he was "dumbfounded" by the DUP's decision not to select Mr Poots instead.

"The party will be making a big mistake if they leave a man with the experience of Edwin Poots out in the cold ahead of what is a critical election," said Mr Wells.

"Contrary to some reports, once it looked like I would not be returning. I contacted Mr Poots to suggest he seek nomination. He did so with my blessing and I can't fathom why the party would have dismissed him."

"We should never underestimate the value of his vast experience. It beggar's belief that the party would consider turning away from that."

The way the party ended his political career has left Mr Wells disappointed.

"Had they made it known to me earlier I would not be selected to return I would have retired. I would have appreciated that opportunity," he said. "Instead I heard through the media on Thursday night."

"It would have been nice to bow out gracefully, but I suppose not all of us can be like Sir Alex Ferguson and choose the timing of our departure. I feel more like Rafa Benitez today, sent packing and that was that."



Veteran DUP man Jim Wells

The former Everton manager was unceremoniously dumped this month after just over six months in charge of the club.

Mr Wells said the new DUP leadership faces a critical few weeks, with the electorate still unsure exactly what policies the party stands for.

"Time is tight, but come election day everyone going to vote has to be sure of what they are voting for. The only way for unionism to prevent a Sinn Fein First Minister is by voting for the DUP. That has to be made clear, and made clear very quickly."

One thing that does hurt Mr Wells though is that he is left to face his future alone. His wife Grace suffered a stroke seven years ago when he was serving as health minister.

"I can remember that day like yesterday," he said. "February 3, 2015. If it hadn't been for our three children and the five best grandchildren in the world I don't know what I would have done."

"I would like to tell Grace what has been happening, but she just isn't in a position to understand. I would love her to be by my side, but in some respects she has been spared all of this."

"I hope politics will miss me. It's sad to see the characters disappearing. Perhaps one of my faults through the years has been to speak my opinion too quickly, but politics needs personalities. Too many these days speak from a pre-written script. They're churned out like cannon fodder then disappear from the scene."

Ms Forsythe and Mr Poots declined to comment on the selection process, with the nomination of Mrs Forsythe still to be ratified by the party this week.



DUP's Edwin Poots has faced a lot of political ups and downs during his lengthy career in public service

BRIAN LAWLESS

# The tectonic plates have shifted and left Poots thinking he should have been careful about what he wished for



By Mark Bain

ON May 14, 2021, Edwin Poots was elected as the new leader of the Democratic Unionist Party.

It was quite the comeback from the Agriculture Minister and party veteran.

Just two months earlier Mr Poots had been speaking openly about his cancer diagnosis. On March 1, the Lagan Valley MLA was asked about the possibility of one day leading his party.

"I didn't have an interest before this, so nothing's changed," he said. "If you were doing Arlene's job, you'd never get peace... being the leader would be hugely stressful, hugely problematic and not particularly desirable."

Perhaps he should have listened to his own words. The problems started almost as soon as his leadership was confirmed.

Moves to remove Arlene Foster as leader had been building in the back corridors of DUP HQ but it was still brutal and swift when it came, perhaps too brutal and too swift for some.

While party veterans like Sammy Wilson quickly filed in to "unite behind" Mr Poots after his narrow victory over Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, most were unwilling to say who they had voted for in the 19-17 contest.

That many left the room while Mr Poots was giving his

victory speech was a sign of the problems to come. The ripples of unease within the party after the boulder landed in the lake, hit the banks and doubled back to sink him just 21 days later.

The year 2021 had all started so well, much better than 2020, which had ended after he contracted Covid-19.

He became a grandfather twice in the space of a few weeks, his family blessed with new life after the death of his father Charlie less than a year previously.

Missionary son Samuel's daughter Isabella was born on January 2 in Brazil, and on Valentine's Day, grandson Judah was born in South Africa to his daughter Anna.

A cancer diagnosis, revealed on January 19 as a growth on his kidney, saw him relinquish his office as Agriculture Minister. It was a temporary hiatus. After a quick and successful operation in early February, Mr Poots was back at his desk just three weeks later. But the drama of his political year was just about to ignite.

On April 27 the news broke that a letter of no confidence in DUP leader and First Minister Arlene Foster had been circulated around DUP members. The wheels were set in motion. Just a day later, Mrs Foster was on the way out of the leadership, and out of the DUP. Only 24 hours passed before Mr Poots announced his intention to stand for the leadership.

It was a swift coup that initially looked clean and clear-cut, but very quickly descended into bloody and brutal rivalry.



Edwin Poots celebrates after being voted in as the new DUP leader, but it turned out to be a rather short reign KELVIN BOYES

His rival, Sir Jeffrey, came to the party late and fell short at the leadership vote on May 14.

The culling of Arlene Foster did not sit well with some of the more moderate in the DUP. In south Down in particular several members walked away, including well known and respected local Councillor Glyn

Hanna and his daughter, former Westminster candidate Diane Forsythe. They left the party in June. They were back by September. Mr Poots led the party in June. He was long gone by September.

The tectonic plates of politics had shifted, then shifted again, with Mr Poots in danger

of being left behind as the party hastily made a decision to look in other directions.

That decision was made when it emerged Mr Poots had agreed a deal with Sinn Féin and the Westminster government to ensure Paul Givan became Northern Ireland's first minister. A majority of DUP members in the Assembly wanted to delay the process and he faced an internal revolt at a party meeting. As quickly as he'd arrived, Mr Poots was gone as leader.

Sir Jeffrey, spurned in the initial leadership vote, was the only remaining candidate. Once his position as leader was ratified on June 30, Mr Poots remained as Agriculture Minister.

Whether as an appeasement to those who had supported Mr Poots or a bidding of time to allow party healing, that role has proved a difficult job too. The fallout from Brexit and issues over Irish Sea border checks posts have dominated his ministry.

A party slowly easing away from an association with the Free Presbyterian Church, Mr Poots is one of the last men standing of that ilk and, like a game of musical chairs, the seats are disappearing.

Two's company, three's a crowd, particularly in Lagan Valley where the DUP has been coming under increasing electoral pressure.

With Sir Jeffrey earmarking the constituency which he currently serves as MP as his way into the Assembly come May, and First Minister Paul

Givan also contending, Mr Poots looked to be the odd man out. From sitting at the top of the tree, a year later he faces a heavy and undignified landing.

After a hasty climb to the top, it's a long way down and Mr Poots seems to be hitting every branch as he falls and there's still the prospect of landing outside politics altogether.

The attention moved to South Down. With one of Mr Poots' fellow veterans Jim Wells not under consideration to run, there was an opening. But Diane Forsythe was back on the scene and lying in wait.

And Mrs Forsythe was on home ground. She had polled well in the 2017 Westminster election. Those 9,000-plus voters backing her would translate to a comfortable Assembly seat.

All that came at the end of a week when he was embroiled in a Twitter storm. Defamation actions started against UUP leader Doug Beattie and NI Affairs Committee Chair Simon Hoare MP after a joke targeting Mr Poots' wife.

Straight-talking, delighting some and infuriating others, Mr Poots once said of himself: "I don't go out of my way to make myself popular with everybody. I much prefer people to have views — even those contrary to mine — and to stand up and fight for what they believe in. I'm very direct, and I find that a lot of my political adversaries appreciate that."

Political allies who appreciate that are beginning to look thin on the ground.

# 'DUP can't be allowed to paralyse Stormont'

By David Young

STORMONT must not become paralysed by repeated DUP threats to collapse the institutions, Conor Murphy has warned.

The Sinn Fein Finance Minister said DUP rhetoric about withdrawing from the Executive was less about its opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol and more about trying to shore up electoral support ahead of the election.

His comments come after DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson said last week he could not guarantee that First Minister Paul Givan would still be in post this week.

Sir Jeffrey has repeatedly threatened to take action if major changes to the Brexit protocol governing Irish Sea trade are not secured.

It is understood one option the party is considering is withdrawing Mr Givan from the post, but keeping its other ministers in position.

While this would enable ministers to continue running their own departments, significant decisions that require overall Executive approval could not be taken.

After talks with Foreign Secretary Liz Truss on Thursday, Mr Givan indicated the DUP deadline for taking action may be pushed back to February 21 pending the outcome of a key meeting between the UK and EU.



**Warning:**  
*Conor Murphy says DUP threats are not about tackling the protocol*

"We cannot allow ourselves to be paralysed with the chaos that's going on within the DUP," Mr Murphy told BBC NI's Sunday Politics.

"The Executive has a lot of work to conclude before the end of the mandate, the Assembly has a lot of work to conclude, there are very important bills that are going through in relation to organ donation, stalking, protection of women and the Executive.

"Clearly we're trying to get a budget through which would help transform health and tackle big issues like waiting lists and cancer services and mental health issues.

"So we can't, and the rest of the parties in the Executive cannot, and we haven't allowed ourselves to, be paralysed with the year-long now chaos and very public chaos going on within the DUP.

"Just to be clear, if they do pull out the First Minister or do take some pre-emptive action, it is about the election, it is about try-

ing to spook the unionist electorate in creating a crisis and spook them into voting and saving DUP seats come May 5 — that's what this is about, it's not about tackling the protocol."

Meanwhile, Ms Truss has said again that there is a "deal to be done" on the Northern Ireland Protocol.

She told Sky News's Trevor Phillips On Sunday programme: "I want to fix the protocol. I think there is a deal to be done.

"We've had positive discussions with the European Union. Everyone recognises there's a problem. My priority is protecting peace and stability in Northern Ireland, protecting the Belfast (Good Friday) agreement.

"We are in intensive talks, so I saw Maros Sefcovic on Monday in Brussels. He's coming over on Thursday for further talks."

At the weekend, DUP MLA Diane Dodds said the EU would trigger Article 16 "in a heartbeat if it suited their agenda".

She was speaking a year after the EU considered using the mechanism to block vaccines coming to Northern Ireland.

"They backed down but had no remorse and no hesitation in using Article 16 to protect their backyard. Yet our Government is dithering when the protocol is damaging the Union and costing our economy £2.5m every day," she said. "It's about time our Government took a leaf out of the EU book."

# Staffing crisis in agri-food industry is down to immigration rules, Poots told

Shortages are 'causing difficulties across the food processing sector'

**By Andrew Madden**

AGRI-FOOD representatives have told Agriculture Minister Edwin Poots that the UK's immigration system is the "main catalyst" for staff shortages facing the industry here.

One MLA described the situation as a "perfect storm" of failed regulations, economics and other forces that have severely impacted the sector.

Mr Poots said these shortages are causing difficulties across the food processing sector, and for abattoirs in particular, a situation he described as "worrying".

Despite offering competitive wages, the minister said, agri-food firms here have struggled to recruit a fully-staffed workforce from the pool of domestic

workers here, so have had to rely on migrant workers to fill the labour gap in the past. Changes to immigration rules made in Westminster, however, now mean migrant labour is limited to skilled jobs that meet certain salary levels and English language requirements.

Mr Poots added: "Industry representatives have indicated that the new UK Immigration System is the main catalyst for the current shortages."

"Engagement with industry indicates that there continues to be sizeable labour shortages, particular with respect to the number of slaughter plant operatives and butchers in our abattoirs and processing plants."

"These labour shortages are causing difficulties across the



**Worried:**  
Independent unionist MLA  
Claire Sugden

food processing sector, however, it is the pig sector that is reporting the most serious difficulties with processing capacity, resulting in a rollover of pigs on farms each week."

Other pressures facing the pig sector are an increase in supply alongside a global fall in pig prices. Late last year, the UK Government announced temporary visas for 800 butchers for the pig sector in order to ease staffing pressures. Applications for this scheme have now closed and the DUP minister warned short-term schemes will "do nothing to alleviate the agri-food staffing problem in the medium to longer-term".

"This is a worrying situation and I continue to take all steps within my power to help mitigate the problem. A significant aspect of this is my continued and extensive engagement with Whitehall given that Immigration Policy is a reserved matter," he said.

Independent unionist MLA Claire Sugden said: "Rules made in Westminster — not in Stormont — mean access to migrant labour is now limited to skilled jobs that meet set salary levels and English language requirements.

"As a result, we simply cannot find enough slaughter plant operatives and butchers in our abattoirs and processing plants."

"The knock-on effect of this is that animals cannot be slaughtered and processed quickly enough. Farmers and plants have these animals queuing up for longer, which means farmers are not just spending more on feed — the price of which has

also soared in recent months — but actually having to pay price penalties for overweight animals in the case of pigs."

"It truly is a perfect storm of failed regulations, economics and other forces that together are conspiring to make meat farming and processing across Northern Ireland increasingly unsustainable."

SDLP agriculture spokesperson Patsy McGlone said the main reason for the issues is Brexit.

Minister Poots also acknowledges that there is no obvious solution to these problems. Perhaps if his party stopped threatening to collapse our institutions and supported an agreement between the EU and British Government to resolve the small number of outstanding issues around the Protocol, we could then turn our attentions to coming up with a plan to support businesses like these and help them attract the staff they need," he said.

**LETTER OF THE DAY: CLIMATE TARGETS**

# Vegetable oil can make heating our homes cheaper and greener

ENVIRONMENT Minister Edwin Poots' Climate Bill reaches the consideration stage in the Assembly tomorrow. While subject to amendments, it sets a target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 82% by 2050.

With energy accounting for almost 60% of emissions here, how we heat our homes will have a major bearing on our ability to reach any target.

Economy Minister Gordon Lyons recently released the Executive's energy strategy, which sets out a plan that will mobilise the skills, technologies and behaviours needed to take us towards net-zero and affordable energy by 2050.

It came as no big surprise that electrification and heat pumps are at the core of plans for the decarbonisation of heat, but it was encouraging to see that the strategy notes the need for

low-carbon technologies and trials.

The Decarbonising Heat consultation will now take place later this year, and the not-for-profit trade organisation Oftec is ready to play its part in demonstrating how a move away from kerosene to biofuels can be easily achieved.

In particular, hydro-treated vegetable oil (HVO) can offer immediate and significant reductions in carbon emissions without the costly retrofit measures associated with heat pumps that customers can ill afford post-pandemic.

It is already available here and global supply is increasing fast. With the right policy support, UK industry could scale up domestic production to meet the heating requirements of rural homes well within the net-zero timeframes. This is the message we

have been taking to the department, and one we will be repeating in the Decarbonising Heat consultation.

Returning to minister Poots' Climate Bill, during its passage, if any amendment is passed to increase the 82% target to a 100% reduction in emissions by 2050 or earlier, then immediate consideration must be given to how we heat our homes in the future, especially in off-grid areas.

HVO offers a near drop-in replacement for heating oil at a fraction of the cost of an air source heat pump and delivers an approximate 88% reduction in carbon emissions.

With a simple modification to existing equipment that can be deployed today, why wait?

**DAVID BLEVINGS**  
OFTEC Ireland manager

# Wells may have to sell home to cover cost of wife's care

SUZANNE McGONAGLE

s.mcgonagle@irishnews.com

**J**IM Wells has told of how he may have to sell his home of 36 years to cover the cost of his wife's care after he was deselected as a DUP assembly member.

The former health minister (64) said he could face "difficult decisions" in a bid to be able to pay the £4,000 monthly bill for the care facility that Grace lives in.

It comes after the veteran politician was not selected by the DUP to run in south Down in the forthcoming assembly election.

On Friday, party officers chose Diane Forsythe ahead of Edwin Poots to run in the constituency.

Mr Wells spoke about the financial challenges he faces as he steps away from politics after almost 40 years.

He said while he could cover the monthly care bill for his wife for around a year after his salary stops, a decision about selling their home to help cover costs may have to be taken.

"I have savings. I have saved for a rainy day, but I didn't think this would be the rainy day," he said.

"The assembly does give you a small redundancy payment, so that can be used."

"The pension will help, but ultimately the house will



**'DIFFICULT DECISIONS':** Jim Wells and his wife Grace pictured in 2017. The former health minister said he could face "difficult decisions" regarding being able to pay the £4,000 monthly bill for his wife's care facility after he was deselected as a DUP assembly member

PICTURE: Pacemaker

have to be sold."

Mr Wells said while he will try to put the sale of their home "on the long finger for as long as we can" ... "eventually the chickens will come home to roost".

"The cost of the care is £43,000 per year, which is a considerable amount for one person to pay," he said.

"It has gone up way ahead of inflation because care homes are suffering greatly.

"They are having huge problems attracting staff, and because of coronavirus they have paid massive amounts in overtime and on PPE."

"Because my wife is a self-funder, we pay every penny

"The assembly does give you a small redundancy payment, so that can be used. The pension will help, but ultimately the house will have to be sold"

**Ex-health minister Jim Wells**

of her care. If your home is worth more than £23,250 you pay everything.

"That figure is quite frankly ridiculous as it was set decades ago. You'd hardly get a garage for that these days, so all of my assembly salary, plus savings, go towards her care. Very good care it is too, and I live off her small teacher's pension," he told *Sunday Life*.

He said his wife was only 56 when she suffered a stroke and "could spend 30 years in a care home".

"I was fortunate that I was in a job where I can pay the vast bulk of it out of my salary," he added.

"I really do feel for people who have put all their life savings into their home and suddenly discover it is a liability rather than an asset."

"If nothing else, this has shown me what other families are facing throughout Northern Ireland."

# Stormont must not be paralysed by DUP's threats warns Murphy

DAVID YOUNG

**S**TORMONT must not become paralysed by repeated DUP threats to collapse the institutions, Conor Murphy has warned.

The Sinn Féin Finance Minister said DUP rhetoric about withdrawing from the Executive was less about its opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol and more about trying to shore up electoral support ahead of the election.

His comments come after DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, below, said last week he could not guarantee that First Minister Paul Givan would still be in post this week.

Sir Jeffrey has repeatedly threatened to take action if major changes to the Brexit protocol governing Irish Sea trade are not secured.

It is understood one option the party is considering is withdrawing Mr Givan from post, but keeping its other ministers in position.

While this would enable ministers to continue running their own departments, significant decisions that require overall Executive approval could not be taken.

After talks with Foreign Secretary Liz Truss on Thursday, Mr Givan indicated the DUP deadline for taking action may be pushed back to February 21 pending the outcome of a key meeting between the UK and EU.

"We cannot allow ourselves to be paralysed with the chaos that's going on within the DUP," Mr Murphy told BBC NI's *Sunday Politics*.

"The Executive has a lot of work to conclude before the end of the mandate, the As-

**"It is about trying to spook the unionist electorate in creating a crisis and spook them into voting and saving DUP seats come May 5 – that's what this is about, it's not about tackling the protocol."**

**Finance minister Conor Murphy**

sembly has a lot of work to conclude, there are very important bills that are going through in relation to organ donation, stalking, protection of women and the Executive.

"Clearly we're trying to get a budget through which would help transform health and tackle big issues like waiting lists and cancer services and mental health issues.

"So we can't, and the rest of the parties in the Executive cannot, and we haven't allowed ourselves to, be paralysed with the now year-long chaos and very public chaos going on within the DUP.

"Just to be clear, if they do pull out the First Minister or do take some pre-emptive action, it is about the election, it is about trying to spook the unionist electorate in creating a crisis and spook them into voting and saving DUP seats come May 5 – that's what this is about, it's not about tackling the protocol."

**Truss trip shows poor judgment**

**EDITORIAL P18**



**'DIVIDED PARTY'**: Irish News columnist Brian Feeney believes the move not to select Edwin Poots to run in south Down highlighted that the "division in the DUP is still there".  
PICTURE: Mark Marlow



# Poots's failure to switch constituencies 'could spell end of his political career'

SUZANNE McGONAGLE  
s.mcgonagle@irishnews.com

**E**DWIN Poots' failure to switch constituencies in the forthcoming Assembly election could spell the end of his political career, a leading commentator has said.

Describing Mr Poots as "a dinosaur" of the party, *Irish News* columnist Brian Feeney said he also believed the move not to select him to run in south Down highlighted that the "division in the DUP is still there".

It comes after the current Lagan Valley MLA had last week tried to secure a seat in the south Down constituency, but another candidate, Diane Forsythe, inset, was selected by party officers.

It is the latest blow to Mr Poots' political career after his spell as party leader lasted only a matter of weeks.

Elected last year following a coup against Arlene Foster, he stepped down shortly afterwards when faced with a revolt from within his own party.

**"Poots is a dinosaur and the DUP want rid of those classed as examples of Paisleyites. The people he appointed is a clear indicator of the Mesolithic era he lives in"**



Brian Feeney

While he still remains as agriculture minister, the decision by DUP headquarters creates fresh questions about the direction of his political career. The party currently holds two seats in the Lagan Valley constituency, belonging to Mr Poots and First Minister Paul Givan.

DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson has signalled his intention to return to the Assembly and is also expected to be a candidate in Lagan Valley, a move that Mr Feeney said could mean that Mr Poots may not even be chosen.

"The fact that Poots went

to south Down, he knows he is in trouble in Lagan Valley," he said.

"The problem is the DUP are under threat from Alliance in Lagan Valley, with Jeffrey Donaldson's majority in 2019 cut to 6,000 and a rise in support for Alliance's Sorcha Eastwood. So you will have Donaldson and Paul Givan running in Lagan Valley and you could find Poots may not be even selected to run – he's most at risk and especially with Alliance biting at the heels of the DUP."

"That could be it for Poots if he's not selected and I don't see that he would run as an independent."

Mr Feeney added: "Poots is a dinosaur and the DUP want rid of those classed as examples of Paisleyites. The people he appointed is a clear indicator of the Mesolithic era he lives in."

"You can still see the remnants of the Crowne Plaza Hotel fiasco when the old Paisleyites died – the DUP are not going to perpetuate the old Paisleyite tradition again."

"The division in the DUP is still there and what the DUP don't need is a dinosaur to be selected."



# Truss trip shows poor judgment

FOR many years, successive British governments have attempted to give the impression that they are neutral and detached observers when, as regularly happens, serious differences emerge between the main Stormont parties.

A very different picture was presented at the weekend when this newspaper set out the full details of the meeting between the UK's foreign secretary and chief Brexit negotiator Liz Truss and loyalist figures in Belfast last week.

Ms Truss was fully entitled to travel from Westminster on Thursday for discussions with first and deputy first ministers Paul Givan and Michelle O'Neill, of the DUP and Sinn Féin respectively, as well as business leaders, about the latest developments in the protocol negotiations, and it would have been entirely appropriate if those talks had concluded her programme.

However, she inexplicably also decided to personally engage with the Orange Order grand secretary Mervyn Gibson, the independent unionist councillor John Kyle and a representative of a restorative justice group at its office off the Shankill Road, failing to notify Belfast-based news organisations about her plans.

Ms Truss could not have been unaware that she was visiting a hugely sensitive area of a bitterly divided city without making any effort to reach out to nationalists based a few hundred yards away on the other side of what is infamously known as a peace wall.

She must have known that other loyalists were involved in street disturbances along the same road, involving the burning of a bus, attacks on the police and confrontations with nationalists in orchestrated but short-lived protests over the same protocol only a matter of months ago.

While Mr Kyle has taken a courageous stance by accepting that there are positive aspects to the protocol for all sections of the community, it is verging on the astonishing that he and the Orange Order were given priority over serving ministers from Alliance, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists.

What was particularly striking was that Secretary of State Brandon Lewis effectively gave his endorsement to the actions of Ms Truss by joining her bizarre trip to the Shankill but neglecting to insist that she should take a balancing two-minute drive to the adjacent Falls Road.

Ms Truss appears to be in denial over the fact that a majority of MLAs support the protocol, and her one-sided intervention is likely to have damaging long-term consequences.



BATTLING FOR SURVIVAL: UUP leader Doug Beattie was forced to fight for his political career after past Twitter posts came to light

# Beattie entitled to a second chance

**Chris  
DONNELLY**



**T**HE leader of the Ulster Unionist Party decided it would be a good idea to post a Saturday night tweet with a joke involving himself, a rival politician, and their respective wives.

It should not have required a party press officer to warn Doug Beattie that this would not end well.

The subsequent unearthing of an avalanche of tweets authored by the British soldier-turned-politician over many years targeting women and minority groups left unionism's great liberal hope looking like the emperor without his clothes.

The posting of the joke made it particularly difficult for his supporters to spin a narrative that nasty Doug has been consigned to the past, replaced with a wiser, more mature and tolerant individual.

As a 56-year-old man today, Beattie is hardly in a position to credibly play the "young and foolish" card which the trio of young female Sinn Féin politicians subsequently caught up in the historical tweets storm could reach for if they desired. They have rightly refrained from so doing and instead owned their words as the Ulster Unionist leader also did in the series of public interviews he conducted as he fought to save his career in the immediate aftermath of the revelations.

Beattie's decision to hit the airwaves and take the punches significantly helped his cause. People do not like leaders who run for cover and are, as a rule, instinctively sympathetic to humbled and contrite public figures, recognising the beam in their own eyes particularly when someone else's has been exposed under such painfully bright lights.

The former British army officer's Twitter back catalogue is indeed something to behold.

It reads like jokes from a Bernard Manning tribute act. Women were the primary and most frequent target but Travellers, French people, Italians, Muslims, the Pope, Catholicism, those

with mental health issues and the Irish language all found themselves in Doug's firing line.

In another time, Beattie would not have survived the weekend as leader, yet within 24 hours it was clear that there was no threat to his status at the helm of the UUP.

Bitter experience has taught the Ulster Unionist faithful that changing leaders does not guarantee a reversal of fortunes. All of their eggs are in Doug's basket now, which is why the decision ultimately was his to make.

Since becoming leader, Doug Beattie has projected himself as a straight talking politician open to taking unionism in a new direction. Party supporters have been clinging to the hope that a Beattie leadership, coupled with the DUP's own difficulties, could yet provide space and opportunity for an Ulster Unionist comeback at the polls.

Beattie has benefited from a notably favourable media reception since taking the top position in the party, though polling results have not been as consistently positive.

He has moved the party on to a more progressive terrain with regards to LGBT and women's issues and has successfully encouraged a number of new female recruits to join and contest elections for the party.

Scratch the surface, however, and it remains the case that there is little substantive evidence yet that Doug Beattie's attitudes towards the most significant Other in northern Irish society, his Irish nationalist neighbours, has advanced in any manner from his tweets.

He still refuses point blank to state that he would serve as deputy first minister in a power-sharing executive with a nationalist first minister. The UUP position on the Irish language is consistent with his demeaning tweets about Irish from a few years ago with the party under Beattie continuing to refuse to support an Irish Language Act.

He has railed against what he derided as a "cottage industry" of "ambulance chasing lawyers" taking retrospective actions against British soldiers, an appalling slight against legal professionals performing their duties in representing the interests of families bereaved and injured due to the actions of the British army and its forces in this part of Ireland.

Yet Doug Beattie is entitled to a second chance. In the north of Ireland, time and painful experiences have helped to shape our individual and collective perspectives with few holding to absolute beliefs and even prejudices that were once much more prevalent, to the benefit of our society.

Beattie will have to work hard to earn back the trust and support of many, including those soft unionist voters who shifted to Alliance years ago but who were flirting with a return. Women voters drawn to the idea of a kinder, more welcoming unionism will have felt particularly betrayed and it will be very difficult to convince them to give his party another opportunity in time for a May election that could yet prove decisive for him.

*Bitter experience has taught the Ulster Unionist faithful that changing leaders does not guarantee a reversal of fortunes. All of their eggs are in Doug's basket now*

**MLA: OPPOSITION TO ABORTION AND SAME-SEX MARRIAGE HURT ME**

# Wells: My DUP career ended in humiliation

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BY NIALL DEENY  
niall.deeney@newsletter.co.uk  
@News\_Letter

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**One of Northern Ireland's longest serving politicians has said his political career has ended with "a degree of humiliation".**

Jim Wells, who clocked up 27

years at Stormont, said his career would likely be defined by his staunch opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion.

In a wide-ranging interview with the News Letter following a decision by his party to select the relatively unknown Diane Forsythe as its candidate in Mr Wells' constituency,

the DUP veteran said his vociferous approach to social issues has likely defined his career as a politician – but admits that it has ultimately come at a cost.

"My demise has been very public, extremely public, but it has to be," he said of the selection battle that unfolded on Friday.

"That's a hard pill to take after 46 years [in the DUP] and it's definitely not the way that I would have wanted it to end.

"Let's be blunt about it, there's a degree of humiliation in going this way."

Asked if his views on social issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion had hurt his career, the sitting MLA

said: "Yes, there's no doubt about that. I wouldn't change it but I think a lot of people don't agree with me and don't like me constantly repeating it."

He also warned his party not to "drift away" from its traditional values.

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# I didn't want it to end this way, I wanted to bat out gracefully

**Continued from page one**

Asked by the News Letter if his political career would be defined in terms of his position on social issues, he said: "Absolutely and I have no shame, no regret."

"I have stood against what I see as the undermining of what makes society stable. Any opportunity I had to take I did, often at great personal cost. I've had to block thousands of people on social media because of the stance I have taken on these issues."

"I think somebody has to stand up and say 'hold on a minute, not everyone agrees with this.'

"And now we're moving on to the whole transgender issue, which is causing a lot of problems. If I identify as a woman, can I walk into the woman's changing rooms? A lot of women are uneasy about that."

Asked what his options are for the future, Mr Wells was frank about his prospects.

"I have no options," he said. "I will not, unfortunately, be the DUP candidate for South Down."

"I've no plans at the moment to stand as an independent."

Asked if he would rule out the prospect of running as an independent candidate entirely, Mr Wells said: "At the

minute, it's unlikely. I have to sadly accept that I put my hat in the ring to stand for the DUP and that has not been successful."

He continued: "I would have liked the opportunity to retire with grace but that has not happened."

"It's more than 40 years I've been involved with the party, 27 years at Stormont, and 17 years as a councillor. I've given a fair bit to the party and held virtually every position at Stormont."

"I have been there a very, very long time. In fact, I'd love to know if I've been there longer than anybody ever."

"I joined the party in '75, and became the chair of the Queen's branch believe it or not. I was elected to local government in '81 as a councillor. It was '82 at the Assembly, then '98 again at the Assembly 24 years ago. The average run in the Assembly is eight years and I've got 27 years, so that's an indication that it has been a long term one."

"I didn't want it to end like this. I wanted to sort of bat out gracefully and, let's be blunt about it, there's an element of humiliation in going this way."

"But, Enoch Powell said that all political careers end in failure."

He added: "The sad person that I am, I have counted 70 MLAs in my lifetime whose

careers all ended in failure. People like Mark Durkan, Catriona Ruane, Basil McCrea, Jonny Bell, Iris Robinson – it all crashed around their ears."

"That's the nature of the beast."

Mr Wells also declined the opportunity to criticise the way his party has handled the apparent end of his tenure as an MLA.

"I think circumstances haven't treated me well," he said.

"I think it was an unfortunate set of circumstances that I should have seen coming. I'm kicking myself that I didn't see this coming. I have to accept that I should have planned things better. I don't think anyone would have batted an eyelid if I had retired after 27 years at Stormont."

Mr Wells also reflected on the changes to Northern Ireland since he first got involved in politics. He said: "I remember every day of the Troubles. I remember the Troubles starting right up until now. There's no doubt that Northern Ireland is in a much better place now than it was in the '60s or the '70s. There's no question about that. Northern Ireland is a place of community, there's a lack of violence and economically it's in a much better place."

On the changes to his party in that time, he said: "The DUP



Diane Forsythe (far right) who was

has, I think to some extent, changed its values in line with the public's change. When I started out the DUP was very much a party of right-wing fundamentalists, mostly from the Free [Presbyterian] Church. I was never Free Church, I'm actually Baptist. But we all had a very similar outlook on life.

"Obviously as the years have gone by we have broadened out and we have absorbed a significant number of Ulster Unionists who are now quite high level in the party. The party has broadened its appeal and, maybe in my opinion, broadened its appeal to much."

He added: "The party is very different from the one that I joined."

## WELLS: IT'S NOT OVER FOR EDWIN...HOW CAN HE BE LEFT ON SIDELINES?

Outgoing DUP MLA Jim Wells has insisted his political ally within the party, Edwin Poots, could yet win the party's nomination to stand in the South Down constituency.

"It's not a foregone conclusion because the final decision has not yet been made," Mr Wells said of the nomination of Diane Forsythe as the DUP candidate at the expense of

former party leader Mr Poots.

"The decision that was taken on Friday night can be challenged," he added.

"I think Edwin would have a lot of support in the DUP Executive committee."

Asked by the News Letter if the selection of Ms Forsythe is reflective of the general direction of the party under leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, Mr

Wells said: "There could be a degree of truth in that, but the consequences of that are that our most experienced minister, our former party leader and our vice president of the party doesn't get a chance to run.

"I think it's unimaginable that any party would leave someone of the calibre of Edwin Poots on the sidelines in a

crucial election."

Asked if Mr Poots could rethink his stance on standing for election in a potential Lagan Valley Westminster by-election, given the rules around 'double jobbing' that could force Sir Jeffrey to relinquish his seat in Parliament if he wins election to the Assembly, Mr Wells said: "Edwin doesn't see his role at

Westminster."

He continued: "How do you ensure that somebody of his vast experience, particularly in agriculture.

"You cannot, by accident or design, leave someone of that calibre not running. No other party would do it.

"This is a guy who has held four senior positions in the Executive of Northern Ireland.

He has years of experience in local government. He was our party leader. You can't leave him not running in the election, you can't."

Mr Wells said he was quick to lend his support to Mr Poots in the South Down selection contest, saying: "When it became apparent to me that I was toast, I was gone, the obvious person I thought was a

very suitable candidate was Edwin who has vast experience and could give South Down first-class representation.

"That hasn't, as yet, happened and I think that's very regrettable.

"We're going to have to wake up on Monday morning and ask 'how do we deal with this'."

The News Letter approached Mr Poots, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, and Ms Forsythe for comment on the selection process yesterday.

The party has remained tight-lipped following Friday's selection process.

A spokesman pointed the News Letter to a brief statement outlining its selection of Ms Forsythe.

# Forsythe more likely to win than Poots, says rival

The Alliance Party's candidate in South Down believes the DUP's choice of Diane Forsythe as its candidate in the election presents a more difficult challenge for opponents.

Patrick Brown, who came close to claiming one of the five seats on offer at the last Assembly election in 2017 and is hoping for success this time around, believes Ms Forsythe is more likely to make it across the line than former DUP leader Edwin Poots had he been selected.

Speaking to the News Letter, Mr Brown said: "The most likely scenario is there is one safe unionist seat, three safe nationalist seats and then the last one will likely be a scrap between me and the SDLP.

"I don't think the UUP have even an outside chance. I maybe would have said something differently if Poots was the candidate, because I think that the candidate the DUP have gone for - I get the impression she is well liked and

respected. I don't think Poots, while he has a large profile, would have polled well."

Asked about his own prospects, Mr Brown said: "I'm a numbers guy. If you look at where Alliance used to be in South Down when I first joined the party, back in 2010 we got about 500 votes in a parliamentary election.

"If you look at where I was runner-up in 2017 we got about 4,500 [first preference] votes and that was about 500 short of what we needed to go ahead of the second SDLP candidate [Colin McGrath MLA].

"If you look at the 2019 Westminster vote we got over 6,900 votes."

He added: "I believe we can take that fifth seat."

TUV candidate Harold McKee, meanwhile, said: "It doesn't matter to me who the DUP candidate is, whether it's Edwin Poots or Diane Forsythe. It's about the party and I believe the unionist voters think it's time for a change."

# Owen Polley



# Tweets row makes a good election less likely for UUP

**L**ike many unionists, I would like to see a credible, revived Ulster Unionist Party. The chances of the UUP meeting that description under its current leader, Doug Beattie, were undermined last week, thanks to his ill-advised use of social media.

I believe that unionism needs a liberal wing to appeal to people who are put off by conservatism. The UUP, which long ago lost a substantial part of its natural support to the DUP, could potentially fulfil this role. The caveat is that it has to remain serious, and firm in its support for the Union.

Policies are important, but, before we consider a political prospectus, most of us want a political leader that we can respect. That's where 24-hour access to a smartphone may have caused Beattie irreparable damage.

When Beattie shared an inappropriate joke about Edwin Poots' wife on Twitter last Saturday evening, the UUP had a problem, but it was solvable. When the media focused on his tweets before he became involved in politics, the party's difficulties deepened.

Beattie has taken care to cultivate a 'progressive' image. He talks at length about women's issues, emphasises his enthusiasm for LGBT matters and even endorses controversial causes, like the campaign to make gender a matter of personal choice rather than a function of biological sex. In taking these positions, he is trying to appeal to people who are unforgiving when it comes to poorly chosen language or infringements against political correctness.

You could argue that he was a victim of censoriousness, but there were already warning signs about his excessive use of social media before the latest revelations. He recently described a rival unionist as an 'oxygen thief', during a spat about southerners using Northern Ireland's health service. When he was challenged about lockdown policy, rather than address the point, he posted a picture of a mountainous stomach and made a joke about 'flattening the curve'.

To be fair, Mr Beattie is just one prolific 'tweeter' among many in modern political life. Like other politicians, he seems compelled to make some response when he is challenged on social media, whether it's thought through properly or not.

Arguably, our political life has become



Doug Beattie's task in reviving the UUP will have been made more difficult by last week's furore over his use of social media

Like other politicians, he seems compelled to make some response when he is challenged on social media, whether it's thought through properly or not

far too focused on social media. Twitter in particular is an intense forum for debate, but it tends to amplify views that are not necessarily shared by people who spend less time online. We might ask, fairly, why political leaders have time, when they are supposed to be managing their parties or taking care of ministerial duties, to respond to all-comers on the internet. David Cameron is now viewed as a

failed politician but he did lead his country, and he had the measure of Twitter when he observed that "Too many tweets might make a tw\*t". There are other concerns about Doug Beattie's guidance of the UUP besides social media. The Ulster Unionists' attitude to the Northern Ireland Protocol has been ambivalent during his leadership. The party opposes the Irish Sea border, but it remains unclear whether it takes it seriously as an existential threat to the Union, rather than seeing it as an opportunity to outflank the DUP.

The protocol will continue to distance Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom and move it politically toward the Republic of Ireland, for as long as it is allowed to operate in its current form. You would think that every unionist should be putting an overwhelming amount of their energy into opposing this arrangement. Yet Mr Beattie added the former Republic of Ireland senator, Ian Marshall, to his team and made him an Assembly candidate in West Tyrone, against the wishes of the constituency party there. Mr Marshall claimed the Irish Sea border created "opportunities for business and trade" and,

rather than campaigning for its replacement, he said it's "here to stay". As I stressed previously, there is a compelling argument that unionism is strengthened by representing a variety of socio-economic views. Mr Beattie talks about being liberal and uses a great number of buzzwords.

It's sometimes unclear what these mean and they have not yet translated into solid, easily explicable policies. A lack of precision is not necessarily fatal for the UUP's electoral prospects though. Most people decide first whether they can relate to a candidate or party, then consider its policies afterwards.

Before this furore, Ulster Unionists were encouraged by polls suggesting that Mr Beattie was popular with the public. They had high hopes that he would take votes off the Alliance Party and attract back liberal unionists who had stopped voting.

Perhaps he can still achieve a creditable result for his party in May, but the task will now be more difficult. A good start might be to tweet less and forget about selling his 'woke' credentials. Neither of these avenues are likely to be fruitful for the UUP leader any more.

**MURPHY: CHAOS WITHIN PARTY MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO PARALYSE EXECUTIVE**

# DUP Stormont threats ‘about election, not the NI Protocol’

BY DAVID YOUNG  
newsdesk@newsletter.co.uk  
@News\_Letter

**Stormont must not become paralysed by repeated DUP threats to collapse the institutions, Conor Murphy has warned.**

The Sinn Fein Finance Minister said DUP rhetoric about withdrawing from the Executive was less about its opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol and more about trying to shore up electoral support ahead of the election.

His comments come after DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson said last week he could not guarantee that First Minister Paul Givan would still be in post this week.

Sir Jeffrey has repeatedly threatened to take action if major changes to the Brexit protocol governing Irish Sea trade are not secured.

It is understood one option the party is considering is withdrawing Mr Givan from post, but keeping its other ministers in position.

While this would enable ministers to continue running their own departments, significant decisions that require overall Executive approval could not be taken.

After talks with Foreign Secretary Liz Truss on Thursday, Mr Givan indicated the DUP deadline for taking action may be pushed back to February 21 pending the outcome of a key



**Sir Jeffrey Donaldson has repeatedly threatened to take action as negotiations over the NI Protocol dragged on**

meeting between the UK and EU.

“We cannot allow ourselves to be paralysed with the chaos that’s going on within the DUP,” Mr Murphy told BBC NI’s ‘Sunday Politics’.

“The Executive has a lot of work to conclude before the end of the mandate, the Assem-

bly has a lot of work to conclude, there are very important bills that are going through in relation to organ donation, stalking, protection of women and the Executive.

“Clearly we’re trying to get a budget through which would help transform health and tackle big issues like waiting lists

and cancer services and mental health issues.

“So we can’t, and the rest of the parties in the Executive cannot, and we haven’t allowed ourselves to, be paralysed with the year-long now chaos and very public chaos going on within the DUP.

“Just to be clear, if they do

pull out the first minister or do take some pre-emptive action, it is about the election, it is about trying to spook the unionist electorate in creating a crisis and spook them into voting and saving DUP seats come May 5 – that’s what this is about, it’s not about tackling the protocol.”

# Government has chance to deal with poison of protocol

This week is likely to be important for the Northern Ireland Protocol and the government at Westminster. The Agriculture Minister, Edwin Poots, is expected to order officials to stop checking goods at Northern Ireland's ports.

The DUP has opposed the Irish Sea border consistently. The protocol creates many constitutional issues, but the chief practical problem is that goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland have been subjected to onerous checks and paperwork.

After a legal challenge by the loyalist campaigner, Jamie Bryson, Mr Poots tabled a paper asking the Executive to endorse the current arrangements. His party and the UUP were expected to vote against this document, in effect exercising a veto on the sea border.

However, Sinn Fein blocked any discussion of the paper and the DUP now says that its minister is obliged to stop checks anyway, because they are unlawful.

This action puts the government in a tricky predicament. Last week, Boris Johnson described the protocol as 'insane' and the Foreign Secretary Liz Truss claimed it must be 'fixed'. The secretary of state is entitled to overrule Poots, but that approach would risk being seen to endorse a sea border that the government has acknowledged needs to go.

At the same time, the prime minister is preoccupied with the impending publication of Sue Gray's report into parties at No 10 and there are suggestions that war could soon break out in Ukraine. A row about the protocol may even provide some distraction from these issues, which are sure to dominate the media.

The Stormont Executive is on the brink of an enormous row and we are approaching a potentially angry, contentious election campaign. There has never been a better time for the government to deal with the political poison that the protocol has injected into our politics.

# Johnson says Bill will make removal of EU laws easier

PM claims Bill will lighten regulation on business and restore UK sovereign status

DENIS STAUNTON

London Editor

Boris Johnson will mark the second anniversary of Brexit today by promising to make it easier to get rid of European Union laws that remain on the statute books.

A new "Brexit Freedoms Bill" will end the special status of EU laws made before January 1st, 2020, which continue to have precedence over domestic laws.

Mr Johnson said the changes would lighten the burden of regulation on British businesses and ensure that the regulatory framework suited Britain's interests.

"Getting Brexit done two years ago today was a truly historic moment and the start of an exciting new chapter for our country. We have made huge strides since then to capitalise on our newfound freedoms and restore the UK's status as a sovereign, independent country that can determine its own future," he said.

"The plans we have set out today will further unleash the benefits of Brexit and ensure that businesses can spend more of their money investing, innovating and creating jobs."

## 'Legacy' rules

Under current rules, changing what is called retained EU law requires primary legislation, so it would take years to repeal or amend the rules adopted when Britain was in the EU that remained on the statute book after Brexit.

Attorney general Suella Braverman said changing the system was key to Britain "taking charge of our regained sovereignty" after the 2016 referendum and Mr Johnson's election victory three years later.

"Setting up a mechanism to deal with these legacy EU rules is essential. It underpins our ability to grasp important opportunities provided by Brexit. It means we can move away from outdated EU laws

that were the result of unsatisfactory compromises within the EU, some of which the UK voted and lobbied against – but was required to adopt without question," she said.

"These rules often had limited meaningful parliamentary scrutiny, and no democratic legitimacy in the UK at all. It is vital that we take the steps necessary, in this parliament, to remove unnecessary rules altogether and, where regulation is needed, ensure that it meets the UK's objectives."

**66** Former Brexit minister David Frost promised a review of retained EU law last September but it has yet to report

Some Conservative backbenchers have become impatient with the government's failure to exploit Brexit's opportunity to create a new regulatory framework outside the EU. Former Brexit minister David Frost promised a review of retained EU law last September but it has yet to report and the government continues to promise that it will do so "in due course".

Labour's shadow attorney general, Emily Thornberry, was disdainful of the government's plans, noting that it had failed to take advantage of an opportunity offered by Brexit to cut energy bills.

"For all this talk from the government about the potential legislative freedom we have outside the EU, they still refuse to make a concrete change the Labour Party has been demanding in this area for months, which is the removal of VAT on people's energy bills. The British public overwhelmingly support Labour's proposed change, and it is time the government started listening," she said.

# Crisis-hit Johnson tries to take back control with Brexit bill and policy blitz

Continued from page 1

The Met was unable to say yesterday when it will start to write to those identified by Gray as having potentially breached lockdown rules. They will be asked if they have a reasonable excuse and then police will decide whether they should face a fine. Cabinet Office sources said on Sunday night that they were still in discussion with the Met.

Opposition parties have been discussing what can be done to force the publication of a full version of the report, now only likely to be undertaken after a police inquiry.

Johnson, who spent the weekend at his Chequers residence, is said to have been struck by MPs' criticism that the government has been unable to communicate the benefits of Brexit. Last night he revealed plans for a new law – called the “Brexit freedoms” bill – intended to make it easier to amend or remove some of the bridging law kept on the statute book after Brexit. No 10 said that, as it stood, much of that regulation would require primary legislation to remove it, and the new bill could cut short that process.

Critics said Johnson must make clear whether he intended to target employment protections, and pointed out that businesses and government had already faced billions of pounds of costs as a result of additional red tape due to Brexit itself.

Sarah Olney, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for business, said: “This odd announcement raises questions about what kind of environmental rules, data protections and workers rights this government may look to water down. This bizarre press release leaves ministers with serious questions to answer.”

A Labour source said: “The key question for the government is which of the proposed changes in regulation depend on the passage of this bill, and if the answer is none, what other changes are they planning that do? Until they can explain all that, we have to ask what the point of this bill is.” Downing Street said it

would release a public catalogue of all retained EU laws to determine if they were beneficial to the UK.

In a statement announcing the new bill, two years after Britain’s EU exit, Johnson said: “Getting Brexit done two years ago today was a truly historic moment and the start of an exciting new chapter for our country. The plans we have set out today will further unleash the benefits of Brexit.

“Our new Brexit freedoms bill will end the special status of EU law in our legal framework.”

The government will also publish a new riposte to critics who claim little advantage of Brexit has been taken, with a new document titled *The Benefits of Brexit: How the UK Is Taking Advantage of Leaving the EU*.

It will claim that reforms have led to a more agile digital and artificial intelligence sector and a less burdensome data rights regime compared with the EU’s GDPR. It will also claim that there have been benefits in changing clinical trials, strengthening environmental protections and establishing a domestic subsidy regime.

With hopes rising in No 10 that Johnson can avoid a no-confidence vote, the prime minister is also understood to have told staff he hopes to save his chief of staff, Dan Rosenfield, or move him to another role.

Gray’s report will criticise the culture in No 10 and recommend changes to the organisation, according to those who have given evidence, but Rosenfield has not been implicated publicly in any egregious breaches.

No 10 is braced for further damaging revelations in the press even once’s Gray’s slimmed-down report is published. One of Johnson’s fiercest critics, Dominic Cummings, told NYMag on Sunday that it was his “duty to get rid” of Johnson as prime minister, describing it as “sort of like fixing the drains”.

Cummings, who was Johnson’s chief adviser, called his former boss a “complete fuckwit” whose only pre-occupations were “Big Ben’s bongs” and “looking at maps” to “order the building of things” in his honour.



► Sue Gray's report into the No 10 parties is still to be published. The police inquiry has cast a cloud over its content and findings

# 'Freedom bill' Plan to make it easier to get rid of EU regulations

Jessica Elgot

Chief political correspondent

Boris Johnson has announced plans for legislation to make it easier to rip up EU regulations and protections, amid criticism from his MPs that the government has not taken sufficient advantage of Brexit.

The plans claim to cut £1bn in red tape from businesses, but Johnson gave no firm details on which regulations are intended to be repealed or enhanced, instead stating five principles that would now be applied, including the value of sovereignty and creating new markets.

Johnson, who is battling to prevent a no confidence vote in the wake of multiple revelations of lockdown parties in No 10, has been criticised in private meetings with MPs that the government has not demonstrated how it is taking advantage of perceived post-Brexit freedoms.

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats questioned which EU laws the new bill aimed to target.

The new law - dubbed the Brexit freedoms bill - is intended to make it easier to amend or remove some of the bridging law kept on the statute book after Brexit. No 10 said, as it stands, much of that regulation needed primary legislation to remove it - and the new bill could shortcut that process. Downing Street said it would release a public catalogue of all EU retained laws to determine if they are beneficial to the UK.

In a statement announcing the new bill, two years from Britain's exit from the bloc, Johnson said: "The plans we have set out today will further unleash the benefits of Brexit and ensure that businesses can spend more of their money investing, innovating and creating jobs."

The attorney general, Suella Braverman, said it was right there was new scrutiny of the laws. "We can move away from outdated EU laws that were the result of unsatisfactory compromises within the EU, some of which the UK voted and lobbied against - but was required to adopt without question," she said. "These rules often had limited meaningful parliamentary scrutiny, and no democratic legitimacy in the UK at all. It is vital that we take the steps necessary, in this parliament, to remove unnecessary rules altogether, and where regulation is needed, ensure that it meets the UK's objectives."

Emily Thornberry, Labour's shadow attorney general, said the government was not taking advantage of one key aspect of leaving the EU, meaning they could cut VAT

on energy bills, as Labour has been demanding.

The British public overwhelmingly support Labour's proposed change, and it is time the government started listening," she said.

# Bonfire of EU red tape two years after Brexit

**Oliver Wright Policy Editor**

Ministers are to introduce a new "Brexit freedoms" bill that will make it easier to amend or repeal EU rules that were carried over into British law when the UK left the bloc.

On the second anniversary of Britain's departure from the EU, Downing Street said that the new measures would make it easier to "cut £1 billion of red tape" for British businesses. However, it did not specify exactly what provisions the bill would contain to speed up reforms, or how it calculated that businesses would save £1 billion through the cutting of red tape.

Ministers have so far made slow progress in identifying and altering previous EU rules and regulations that derived from the UK's membership of the bloc. Last year they altered some rules around the hours HGV drivers were allowed to work to deal with the supply chain problems. They have also promised to revoke EU regulations that ban shops from selling goods by imperial measurements only.

Some changes could prove problematic under the terms of the trade deal struck with Brussels. It requires the UK

to ensure that any changes to domestic law do not give UK firms an unfair advantage over their EU competitors or face potential trade tariffs.

Downing Street said that under present rules, changing or scrapping regulations would take "several years" because of a long-winded alteration process.

No 10 said primary legislation was needed for many changes, even if "minor and technical". Instead, it is understood that the bill would allow changes to be made by ministers through a process of statutory instrument that normally passes through parliament without a vote.

Suella Braverman, the attorney general, said the new bill meant that Britain could move away from outdated laws that were the result of "unsatisfactory compromises within the EU".

"These rules often had limited meaningful parliamentary scrutiny, and no democratic legitimacy in the UK at all," she said. "It is vital that we take the steps necessary, in this parliament, to remove unnecessary rules altogether, and where regulation is needed, ensure that it meets the UK's objectives."

# 'Brexit Freedoms Bill' to unleash benefits of leaving EU, vows PM

By Ben Riley-Smith

POLITICAL EDITOR

BORIS JOHNSON will today announce a "Brexit Freedoms Bill" which would make it easier to change or scrap thousands of European Union laws still in place in the UK.

The Prime Minister will also pledge to use powers available after Brexit to cut away a billion pounds' worth of EU era "red tape", though details are yet to be provided on how.

A Government document entitled "The Benefits of Brexit: how the UK is taking advantage of leaving the EU" will be published, outlining reforms being taken with Brexit powers.

The announcements have been timed to coincide with the second anniversary of Britain's formal departure from the EU, at 11pm on Jan 31 2020.

The drive will be seen as an attempt to refocus minds on one of his main feats as Prime Minister - securing a deal that delivered the UK's EU exit.

Brexit was a key factor in why Tory MPs picked Mr Johnson as their party leader and why former Labour Red Wall seats in the Midlands and the North voted Conservative in the 2019 election. Reminding the Tory backbench and Conservative voters about his Brexit track record could help see off a rebellion over allegations of lockdown-breaking parties that has led to an attempt to oust him by some MPs.

In a statement circulated last night, Mr Johnson said Brexit was "a truly historic moment and the start of an exciting new chapter for our country".

He added: "We have made huge strides [to] capitalise on our newfound freedoms and restore the UK's status as a sovereign, independent country that can determine its own future."

"The plans we have set out today will further unleash the benefits of Brexit and ensure that businesses can spend more of their money investing, innovating and creating jobs."

"Our new Brexit Freedoms Bill will end the special status of EU law in our legal framework and ensure that we can more easily amend or remove outdated EU law in future".

The upbeat assessment of the UK's track record outside of the EU is likely

to be challenged by pro-Europe critics who have noted analysis of the economic impact.

The independent Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that the UK's economic growth has been lower since Brexit than it would have been if the UK remained in the EU.

The new legislation is designed to speed up the process for changing laws that were adopted by the UK during the country's EU membership.

There are around 20,000 such pieces of legislation, according to estimates from the House of Commons library.

Government sources argue that the process of overturning each such piece of law would be too time consuming and are proposing a streamlined process for doing so.

However, opponents will be watching closely for the details of the proposed legislation and whether it gives Cabinet ministers too much power to change laws without full scrutiny.

Writing below, Suella Braverman, the

*We have made huge strides to restore the UK's status as a country that can determine its own future'*

Attorney General, outlines her argument for why the legislation is needed.

Ms Braverman writes: "The Brexit Freedoms Bill, announced today, will remove, once and for all, the special status and supremacy of EU law within the UK legal system.

"It will also make it easier to remove or amend EU law: reflecting the sheer volume of law that needs to be changed, and the underlying lack of democratic legitimacy in the way these came onto the UK statute book."

"We will work with Parliament on how to frame such a power and ensure its use has the appropriate levels of parliamentary scrutiny."

The Prime Minister is still facing questions as to whether there will be a staff shake-up in Downing Street, and last night Lord Frost, the former UK Brexit chief negotiator, refused to rule out taking over the operation in No10 after criticising current advisers.

# As we take back control of our statute book, freedom is on the horizon

## Commentary



By Suella Braverman

In 2016, and again in 2019, the British people voted to take back control. They voted to take back control from an organisation that was becoming increasingly interventionist in people's lives.

As we look across at the EU today, we see something with all the emblems and ambitions of statehood. We see an ever closer union with ever growing powers to pass EU-wide legislation –

which member states have no choice but to accept. We see a court that reigns supreme over all member state courts (or tries to).

We also see the limitations of a bureaucracy built on logic rather than experience. It must be a strange thing to craft laws without any direct accountability. That is the EU approach to law-making: fine in theory, but not always very well road-tested. And however badly a law works, there is no way to get rid of those that made it. No one can vote out the European Commission.

And no member state parliament can override EU law. The landmark Factortame litigation made it clear that EU law was superior to UK statute law.

The constitutional impact of EU membership was laid bare. In an increasing number of areas, it was Brussels – not Westminster – that was sovereign.

Did EU law deserve its superior status? Was it the product of a perfect, scientific process that managed to balance the interests and equities of its diverse membership? Of course not. EU law was often the result of a messy compromise, brokered in back rooms.

The most important point here is democracy. Under the European Communities Act 1972, the British people – through its Parliament – could not say "no" to new EU rules. As the competencies of the EU grew, more and more legislation was made. We

were increasingly made subject to EU laws, which we had to pass as secondary or primary legislation. Thousands of EU law instruments have come on to the UK statute book – all without the democratic legitimacy our

entirely, we had no choice. The Brexit Freedoms Bill, announced today, will remove, once and for all, the special status and supremacy of EU law within the UK legal system. It will also make it easier to remove or amend EU law: reflecting the sheer volume of law that needs to be changed, and the underlying lack of democratic legitimacy in the way these came on to the UK statute book. We will work with Parliament on how to frame such a power and ensure its use has the appropriate levels of parliamentary scrutiny.

Without fresh powers, many of these rules would require primary legislation to change. We are also conducting a major cross-government

drive to review and reform this inherited law more quickly. It is time we began the task of reshaping these rules in a way that suits UK consumers and businesses.

These reforms will be controversial among those who have built their careers around EU laws and institutions. Some may be convinced that retained EU law should remain forever – or indeed align to match EU rules as they evolve. It is surely uncontroversial to ask the question: are these rules right for us? Taking back control of our statute book means that we are finally free to answer as we wish.

*Suella Braverman MP is the Attorney General*

### *The Brexit Freedoms Bill will remove the special status and supremacy of EU law within the UK*

constitutional traditions expect. There was not one occasion when any significant piece of EU legislation was ever rejected by the United Kingdom Parliament. Short of leaving the EU

# Regions fear Westminster power grab in Brexit bill

PETER FOSTER — BRIGHTON

The UK's devolved administrations have warned that Boris Johnson's plans to cut £1bn worth of red tape for business by removing legacy EU laws risk driving a "coach and horses" through the country's constitutional settlement.

Representatives of the Scottish and Welsh administrations expressed their concerns over the weekend in a telephone call with UK attorney-general Suella Braverman and other ministers, according to two people briefed on the exchanges.

The prime minister is to unveil a Brexit freedoms bill today that will make it easier to amend or remove EU laws that remained on the UK statute book after Brexit as a bridging measure to provide legal certainty to business and society. The government wants to repeal and replace outdated EU laws such that it can cut £1bn of red tape for UK businesses.

Ministers will also today publish a 100-page "Benefits of Brexit" policy that will set out areas where the government believes deregulation after leaving the EU can help the country gain a competitive edge in areas such as gene editing and artificial intelligence. Johnson said the bill would "further unleash the benefits of Brexit", helping to drive investment and job creation.

## 'What this Brexit document is about is the next phase of a post-Brexit power grab'

However the Scottish and Welsh administrations fear the new legislation will hand powers to Westminster in key areas such as fisheries as well as environmental, food and water standards, which have long been devolved to Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Two people from the devolved administrations present on the call with Braverman said the attorney-general received a "bleaching" for failing to consult more fully over the plans.

"Braverman was just reading from her screen, going on about 'Brexit opportunities' but when there were questions she only responded with platitudes," said one of these people. "The whole meeting was called at the last minute, as if to say: 'This is what we're going to do.'"

Mick Antoniw, the Welsh minister for the constitution, said the UK government's approach was driving a "coach and horses through the concept of mutual consent" on which the devolution settlement was designed to operate.

"The government has been unable to provide assurances that its plans for future changes in dealing with 'retained' EU law would not affect the devolution settlement," he added.

Angus Robertson, the Scottish minister for the constitution, echoed those concerns, describing the Brexit freedoms bill as another move to erode the powers of the devolved administrations. "What this Brexit document is about is the next phase of a post-Brexit power grab," he added. "They will argue it's about the efficiency of the market and creating an effective level playing field, but it's not really about that."



## **PLEA Emily Thornberry PM plans bill axing EU law from statute**

**BY PIPPA CRERAR**

BORIS Johnson will today announce plans for a new "Brexit Freedoms" bill.

Two years on from the UK's departure, the Prime Minister will set out plans to "amend or remove" EU law from the statute book.

Ministers say that the reforms could cut £1 billion of red tape for businesses.

However, critics point to Mr Johnson's failures to bring in changes that he already has the power to do - such as cutting VAT as energy bills soar.

Shadow Attorney General Emily Thornberry said despite the Government's constant talk of "potential legislative freedom outside the EU" it should act now on VAT.

# DUP threats 'can't stop Stormont'

STORMONT must not become paralysed by repeated DUP threats to collapse the institutions, Conor Murphy has warned.

The Sinn Fein Finance Minister said the rhetoric was less about the party's opposition to the protocol and more about trying to shore up support ahead of the election.

His comments come after DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson said he couldn't guarantee First Minister Paul Givan would still be in his post this week.

Mr Murphy told BBC NI's Sunday Politics: "We cannot allow ourselves to be paralysed with the chaos that's going on within the DUP.

"The Executive has a lot of work to conclude before the end of the mandate, the Assembly has a lot of work to conclude."