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CNI PRESS WATCH - As Sinn Fein's true agenda emerges, RHI vanishes into Irish mist just like Shergar

Every couple of days, another new Press release arrives from Sinn Fein HQ, condemning its opponents for not managing so far to magically restore the Stormont Assembly which the republican party's own leaders deliberately brought crashing down, like Samson chained between the pillars of the Philistine temple, writes **Eilis O'Hanlon in the Belfast Telegraph**.

Each fresh piece of paper dutifully ticks off the familiar buzzwords - equality, integrity, respect, power-sharing, Brexit. You name it, Sinn Fein chuck it in to blame the ongoing stalemate on anyone and everyone but itself.

Three words, though, have been noticeable by their absence - 'Renewable', 'Heat' and 'Incentive'.

Remember that?

Sinn Fein certainly doesn't.

The clean energy scheme, helpfully abbreviated to RHI, was the 'casus belli' used to justify collapsing the Executive. The prodigal mismanagement of the scheme, and the alleged corruption behind it, were deemed so serious and far-reaching that only Arlene Foster stepping down as First Minister pending an inquiry would do to save us from disaster. This she refused to do.

The late Martin McGuinness therefore had no choice except to regretfully turn off the lights up on the Hill.

That was the official narrative.

Since then there's been an election, and talks, and then some more talks, and now another election looms, after which there will be more talks - but RHI has vanished into the Irish mist as surely as Shergar.

Four months on from being told that nothing was more important than getting to the bottom of what went wrong, it's dwindled to a half-

remembered bad dream, barely worth mentioning in the cold light of morning.

Now that Secretary of State James Brokenshire has again extended the talks deadline, this time until June, taking advantage of the breathing space afforded by a surprise general election, it's become blindingly obvious that this latest impasse was never about RHI at all.

What's astonishing is that its excuse for pulling down the Assembly was so widely accepted, when in truth it had been itching ever since last year's Brexit result to start a fresh push for a divisive border poll.

Allowing 'Oglach' Martin McGuinness to symbolically bring Stormont crashing down as an old soldier's retirement present was merely the icing on the cake.

The mystery is why the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP - who went into the previous Assembly with great fanfare as the formal Opposition, pledging to hold the two governing parties to account - should have fallen for such a cheap trick.

But then perhaps 'Opposition' should also be filed alongside 'RHI' in the drawer marked

Things That Once Seemed Important But Now Apparently Don't Matter.

If the Executive ever does return, it will once more contain ministers from parties who insisted only weeks ago that they didn't trust the DUP to run a stall in St George's Market, never mind handle a huge budget.

The Ulster Unionists are even talking electoral pacts for the forthcoming UK election with this same party.

Either the DUP is fit for office or it isn't. It can't be unfit to take its seats in Stormont, but fine to take them in Westminster. So did something change that we don't know about? All that's changed is that its one time loudest critics conveniently decided to forget about RHI.

That makes an effective voice of Opposition more crucial than ever, as we're forced into an election that no one outside of Sinn Fein really wants, and which threatens to destabilise an already precarious situation.

The recent election was one of the most toxic in recent memory. The upcoming poll looks set to be even nastier, as both sides retreat behind tribal walls and seek to consolidate the grip on their respective communities.

That leaves a huge question mark not only over whether the Assembly can be glued back together again, but what sort of Assembly it will be afterwards.

The idealistic fancy was for a chamber where differences could be reconciled, or else respected where that wasn't possible.

The past few months have presented a different model of Stormont as a place where working together is a temporary arrangement that can be ended on a whim if there's any chance of gaining some minor political advantage as a result.

Direct rule has never looked more appealing, but that may well be what the Assembly wreckers want, because they have their eye on a bigger prize.

It's lose/win whichever way it goes.

That's bad enough. Knowing this political death spiral started because of something so inconsequential to those who were stirring the pot that it no longer even ranks for them as a political issue just makes the high stakes gamesmanship of the last few months seem even more cynical and futile.

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