

Sunak puts the DUP between a rock and a hard place

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Sunak has, as everyone expected, got a deal on Northern Ireland.

Let me not be churlish. It is a better deal than I expected. He deserved his moment of sounding almost prime ministerial in the Commons last night. Mark Francois on his own backbench and Sammy Wilson from the DUP might have rattled their swords but the deal is smart.

That is most especially so when it comes to the so-called Stormont Brake. This suggests that new EU laws will not apply in Northern Ireland if 30 Stormont members vote against it doing so. But there are conditions. First, the thirty must come from two parties. The DUP cannot act alone. Second, Stormont must be sitting. The DUP can no longer avoid democracy in Northern Ireland. At least they can't if they want to influence the application of EU law there.

This leaves the DUP with a neatly created problem. They have not ended the role of the European Court of Justice in Northern Ireland, as they demanded. It does remain, albeit it is going to be rare that it is ever called upon. So a DUP red line has not been met.

And by requiring that the DUP return the deal will force them to admit that they are now very much the junior party in Stormont, and on an almost inevitable declining trend given the demographic nature of politics there.

What is more, the DUP to make this work has to cooperate, which has never been one of its strengths.

And then, and only then, can it try to block the EU, which it has in principle enough seats in Stormont to do, but which block it can only in reality use on a quite limited range of issues.

We may never know who out-manoeuvred the DUP here. And, of course, the DUP might simply decide not to play ball still. But whoever thought this up was clever. Because if the DUP say no now to a deal that is very obviously in Northern Ireland's best interests then they signal their own irrelevance that can only hasten their decline and the move

of more in the Protestant community towards non-aligned parties.

The DUP is between a rock and a very hard place this morning. This is a long way from the cosy deal Theresa May was forced to make with them.

So, Sunak may well have made political as well as practical progress here with a deal that emulates the Good Friday Agreement by letting many people project onto it what they wish. I did not expect that, and acknowledge it.

What is more, this deal has the added advantage of making it clear by how much Boris Johnson and David Frost got this wrong. All Sunak's self aggrandisement about his achievement in a thirty minute Despatch Box performance last night was about noting the catastrophic errors of a previous Tory government in which he was a senior minister, but by saying what he did he made Johnson look as incompetent and negligent as he really was.

But let us never forget in all this that staying in the EU would have been so much better for everyone. This is still a second-rate deal. Nothing avoids that fact. Sunak did well, but the real issue of the biggest mistake made remains unaddressed by the terrible political alignment between Labour and the Tories that will one day be forced to address it.