

Message

From: NR (TEO) [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=C3AE794F86464DE290B680CB1EF66B83] NR
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To: TEO EIS MinisterialCases [eis.submissions@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]
Subject: Transcript: Extension of restrictions - Arlene Foster - GMU - 13/11/20

Importance: High

NR | **The Executive Office | Press Office**
Stormont Castle | Stormont Estate | BT4 3TT
Tele: I&S

From: DoF EIS Media Monitoring Unit

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To: DoH Press Office <PressOffice@health-ni.gov.uk>; DOF PressOffice <dof.pressoffice@finance-ni.gov.uk>; DfE Press Office <DfE.PressOffice@economy-ni.gov.uk>; NR @executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk; NR

Names Redacted

NR @executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk; McNabb, Chris <Chris.McNabb@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk>; NR (TEO); NR @executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk; NR @executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk; Richard Cushnie (NI Bureau) <rcushnie@nibureau.com>

Subject: Extension of restrictions - Arlene Foster

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Media Monitoring Unit | Digital Shared Services
Massey House | Stormont Estate | Belfast | BT4 3SX
Email: EIS.MediaMonitoringUnit@finance-ni.gov.uk

Media Monitoring Coordinator – I&S

Press Clips – I&S

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Programme	Good Morning Ulster
Date & Time	13.11.20 (08.05)
Subject	Extension of restrictions
Prepared By	Typist: NR MMU: PF

JOEL TAGGART

So Northern Ireland's Executive finally reached a compromise last night, which will see the current circuit breaker extended for one more week with a partial reopening of some sectors next Friday.

Close contact services and unlicensed premises can reopen, but the wrangling at Stormont over the eventual COVID deal has left the Executive deeply divided. First Minister and DUP leader Arlene Foster is with us this morning.

First Minister, we've heard from the deputy First Minister who says that only imposing one more week of these full restrictions potentially means that we're coming back to this situation before Christmas and the strong advice from the Chief Medical Officer should have been adhered to. Why did you decide not to adhere to that advice?

ARLENE FOSTER

I've been listening very carefully to what the other parties have had to say, but none of them have told you that the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser both indicated that even with the two weeks that they were proposing that there was a chance that we would have to come back to a lockdown before Christmas. So there is no certainty around that. I think what is certain is that this week has been a torturous example of how not to take decisions. I regret that deeply and what I want to see happening now is us to look to the future and move on on this because it has been a very difficult week for everyone in Northern Ireland watching as we struggled to make decisions. And I think what we need to do now is to move back to all of those messages that we were trying to get people to abide by in terms of behavioural change and for everyone to take personal responsibility for their actions.

JOEL TAGGART

I appreciate what you're saying in terms of no certainty, but surely by doing this it increases the likelihood of having to come back to this before Christmas?

ARLENE FOSTER

Well look Joel all of the decisions that we take in relation to medical advice is just that, it's advice, it's based on modelling, not on predictions. And I think people need to take that into consideration, because earlier in the year when we were looking at modelling and we were told about thousands of deaths, those thousands of deaths did not materialise and we're very thankful for that. But as well as looking at the modelling that comes from our medical officials we also look at the reality of people living in poverty not able to make ends meet and this week one of my colleagues was telling me that there are women in his constituency who, because they work in the hospitality industry, because they're not getting their normal pay, are going to loan sharks. Now that's caused me a great deal of concern. When I hear that young women are going to loan sharks, they're single parents, they want to prepare for Christmas, they can't prepare for Christmas because they don't have the money, I think everybody should stop and think about the decisions that they're making. And they are very difficult decisions, but they're decisions that we need to take in the knowledge of all of the information and not just one side.

JOEL TAGGART

But you'll appreciate that people will hear what you've been told about the potential of not extending these restrictions by two weeks, leading potentially to excess deaths and they'll be familiar with the many times that you, and many of your colleagues, have used the phrase that you're 'guided by the science'....?

ARLENE FOSTER

That's right.

JOEL TAGGART

I mean is it the case that perhaps you're not relying on that advice as much as you were previously?

ARLENE FOSTER

Yes we're guided by the science, but we're not blinded by predictions and models because you have to deal with the reality in front of you as well as the predictions, Joel, and I think that that is very important for us all to reflect on. Because these are real

lives we're talking about and therefore it is important that we take all of these things into consideration as we...

JOEL TAGGART

Would you say that you are still giving as much weight to what is being said to you by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser as you were, say three, four, five months ago?

ARLENE FOSTER

I am absolutely and I have always said, and you will have heard me say this at press conferences at Stormont, that all of these decisions that we take are having a detrimental impact on people's lives, on people's liberties and therefore it is important that we take proportionate and necessary interventions, not just any intervention but proportionate and necessary, so that we have a balanced way forward. And I think that that is all that I am trying to do as First Minister.

JOEL TAGGART

Conor Murphy this morning said that he was appalled that the DUP had used a cross community vote when, as he suggested, you didn't get your own way. Do you think it was an appropriate use of that mechanism?

ARLENE FOSTER

Well you know it always amazes me that the parties that actually negotiated the Belfast Agreement like to rewrite the Belfast Agreement when it doesn't suit them, unilaterally changing what is there. If you look at the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act of 1998 it very clearly says that any three members can call a vote, it is then taken on a cross community vote, and it is there for a reason, to protect minorities in the Executive. And let me say this, Joel, and I want to be very clear about this, I don't know whether your listeners are aware but in an Executive I chair meetings and then, on the next occasion, the deputy First Minister chairs meetings. On this occasion the deputy First Minister was chairing the meeting and on no occasion did she try and find consensus, she pushed everything to a vote. If I had been chairing the meeting I would not have pushed a vote until we had found consensus on the way forward. But instead she pushed everything to a vote and instead of having that duty to find consensus, she wanted to try and isolate the DUP. However we have now found a way forward, we have now found consensus, I am thankful for that and it is important that we build on that consensus (unclear)...

JOEL TAGGART

But do you think it was an appropriate use of that mechanism? I mean we're in a situation this morning where, as a result of this and other things that happened during the course of the week, we have a member of the Executive who's saying she's spent the week reconsidering her position within the Executive...

ARLENE FOSTER

Well look this isn't about Naomi, it's not about Arlene, it's not about Michelle, it's about all of those vulnerable people who are waiting on us making decisions and frankly they've waited far too long.

JOEL TAGGART

I mean it's not a good look, is it, for the Executive, I mean not for the first time, lastminute.com, we've had what, a couple of days of people in hospitality and in other sectors kind of thinking to themselves we have to make a decision for ourselves, we can't wait any longer. Hotels were thinking well we'll just open up anyway, restaurants and bars doing the same. I mean it's hugely embarrassing, it's damaging and it's not the best way to try and bring the public with you. If you don't know where *you're* going, how can you take *them*...?

ARLENE FOSTER

Absolutely, I agree with all of that, and over the weekend we thought that we had a way forward. The deputy First Minister went on the television and announced the way forward then performed a reverse (unclear)...

JOEL TAGGART

Which she says is on the basis of medical advice...

ARLENE FOSTER

Let's be very clear, the medical advice had not changed from last week until this week. They are clinging on to a false interpretation of what we were told last week and what we were told this week. The medical evidence did not change, the predictions did not change, however agreements that were reached were broken and I think it's very important to say that. However we have now reached a consensus so let us move forward from there and let us all go back to dealing with the very important medical advice to this. And it is very difficult to take seriously Conor Murphy lecturing the rest of us on public health when we seen what they thought of the public health advice at the end of June at Bobby Storey's funeral.

JOEL TAGGART

You obviously don't believe that this...

ARLENE FOSTER

Joel, you cannot pick and choose when you decide to listen to the public health advice, we have to always continue with it.

JOEL TAGGART

So you obviously don't believe then that this change of heart was as a result of the medical evidence, why do you think there was a change of mind?

ARLENE FOSTER

Well that's a matter for Sinn Fein to explain. I don't know why they changed their mind, but they have scrambled about looking for a reason to justify their change of mind and I am telling you the medical evidence did not change from one week to the next.

JOEL TAGGART

So on the issue of certainty and providing certainty, it was interesting with regard to what Naomi Long had to say, can you clarify this, come what may can hospitality open in two weeks?

ARLENE FOSTER

Yes, the regulations are in place now for a further two weeks and they fall on that date and let me say we do not want to go back into another week of what we've just had, therefore it is vitally important that we now work with the sector about opening up safely, to have COVID secure premises and it's also important, and I think I do want to say this, I've been speaking to colleagues in Westminster this week about the testing pilot that is happening in Liverpool. There are some very good results coming from that mass testing pilot, I'm looking forward to us having a very similar regime whereby we can identify asymptomatic patients earlier and therefore they can isolate earlier, thereby cutting down the transmission of the virus. I think that's very important. We can also use testing in some of what are called the riskier sectors in our society to identify people in those sectors earlier, so the testing regime is very important coming forward as is the vaccine and we understand that the vaccine will come on-stream in early December for health workers and that will help very much in that setting as well. So let's (unclear)...

JOEL TAGGART

But just to be clear, is there any set of circumstances where hospitality may not open in two weeks' time, if there is a review of these proposals over the course of the next two weeks and the health advice changes and the numbers get worse, is it possible that that could be delayed again?

ARLENE FOSTER

Look I'm on record as saying nothing is inevitable about any of this. It wasn't inevitable that we had to go into a four week limited restriction period, but because of the actions of the wider community unfortunately we had to do that. So personal responsibility is very important around cutting the transmission of the virus, as indeed is the regime of testing and the vaccination that's coming in, so that will allow us not to have this continual circuit breaker scenario that we can learn to live with through this pandemic and that we have the tools to do that. And that's what I'm focusing on now, the tools to live through the pandemic without us having to have these interminable circuit breakers which do so much damage, not just for the economy of Northern Ireland but to people's wellbeing as well and that's what I'm focusing on.

JOEL TAGGART

But I suppose the point I'm trying to make is, if there are Ministers who are suggesting that perhaps it's not certain that that will happen in two weeks, as Naomi Long has suggested this morning, what is there to say we won't be back in that set of circumstances again Wednesday, Thursday of that particular week, because obviously there are some very vocal people within your party who would be firmly opposed to that being extended again....?

ARLENE FOSTER

Look Joel we can't have it both ways. If Naomi and other colleagues are saying that we were told by medical experts that two weeks was enough to get us past Christmas, and that's what they've been saying, then are we seriously saying that we should now start saying to people, but really we didn't mean that, actually we might have to have another circuit breaker before Christmas as well? What we should all be focusing on is how we can make sure that we have the economy and our businesses ready to deal with this pandemic, ready to deal with the spread of the virus so that we can protect our NHS workers and we can protect the most vulnerable in our society. That's where my focus is, trying to make sure that we don't have to be back in this situation again and I hope that determination is shared right across the Executive.

JOEL TAGGART

And do you feel, when you're making these decisions, that you're under pressure from some within your own party, who are very much on the page of 'enough is enough'...?

ARLENE FOSTER

No, I'm not under pressure at all because I've said all along, and I wrote in one of our daily newspapers that what we needed was a proportionate and balanced approach, that is still what I believe in and I think it's where most people want to be, that we respect the health guidance, that we respect the fact that we have to take action but that we also make an acknowledgement of the fact that the economy has to work as well for the wellbeing of all.

JOEL TAGGART

But there are some, and you will know this, who are painting a very different picture. Sammy Wilson doesn't seem to be particularly happy with many of the restrictions, Edwin Poots is saying we need to open up now. I mean there are some voices within your party that are looking for change much sooner than two weeks away...?

ARLENE FOSTER

And I think that is an acknowledgement of the fact that these restrictions are very limiting on society, they take away personal freedom. I've always acknowledged that, but what we need to find is a way forward that is proportionate and balanced...

JOEL TAGGART

Just finally, I mean is this a bad week for mandatory coalition and I know you've mentioned in the past quite a bit about it's difficult, you've five parties around the table, but in reality, from what we've heard about Sinn Fein and the DUP leaving meetings and going into rooms, it's almost like a two party Executive and the smaller parties are there to kind of rubberstamp things and give a thumbs up...?

ARLENE FOSTER

Well I don't think anybody can say that the DUP and Sinn Fein were going into rooms this week, apart from anything else we're doing everything virtually, but apart from that it is important...

JOEL TAGGART

Virtual rooms...

ARLENE FOSTER

...everybody has been around that table this week, it hasn't been a gratifying experience, it's been far from it, mandatory coalition is always difficult, that's why I'm not a fan of mandatory coalition. I think you will recall Joel that I didn't support the Belfast Agreement and mandatory coalition, but it's the system that we have to work and I hope that everybody will come to the table next week afresh, make sure that we're doing the job that we're paid for and that is to represent the interests of all of the people of Northern Ireland.

JOEL TAGGART

First Minister Arlene Foster, thank you very much.