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Speech by DUP Leader Arlene Foster to Party Executive members



01 September 2017

Speaking at a DUP Executive (party's ruling body) meeting in South Belfast, DUP Leader Arlene Foster MLA said,



Arlene Foster MLA

Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party and First Minister of Northern Ireland

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"This is the first occasion that we have met as a Party since our tremendous victory back in June.

We have fought so many elections of late that we maybe haven't taken time to reflect fully on the scale of our success.

By any measure, the June General Election was an amazing one for the Democratic Unionist Party.

We returned the highest number of Members of Parliament in our history.

We secured the highest percentage share of the vote for the Party ever.

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And we obtained the largest total vote for any Party in Northern Ireland since 1985.

So resounding was our win that it would be easy to get carried away on a wave of euphoria believing that it was solely because of our policy platform or the performance locally of our MPs.



We know – because we knocked doors across the country and spoke at length with voters – that it was, above all, a victory for our precious Union. People turned out to vote for the Union.

The characterisation of the March Assembly election result as a “wake up call” for unionism wasn’t some fancy piece of spin or marketing. It was what we heard time and time again coming from unionist voters all over Northern Ireland.

The shock of seeing Sinn Fein come within one seat and 1,200 votes of becoming the biggest Party in Northern Ireland had a galvanising effect on many unionists.

Between May 2016 and June 2017 – just 13 months – almost 100,000 voters flocked to the DUP banner.

Let me say that I am deeply appreciative of those who voted for us in June, many of whom will have done so for the first time.



As a Party let me say to them that we do not take their support for granted. Nor do we believe that they are all sudden converts to the DUP. We know that, for many, they saw a vote for the DUP as the best way to express support for the Union that they care so deeply about.

Unionists came together like never before remembering the old rallying cry that “united we stand, divided we fall”. They have placed an unparalleled trust in the DUP and it is now our job to work to prove the value of their vote and demonstrate how we can advance the unionist cause.

I have said many times before that the Union between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom is stronger and more vibrant today than at any time in my life. But that does not mean that there aren’t those who will seize every opportunity to make the alternative case for a United Ireland weak though that case may be.

June’s election result was an astounding affirmation of the enduring attraction of the Union across the UK but it must not be taken as a signal to send us back into some sort of complacent slumber. It should instead be the spark that reignites our commitment to articulating its benefits for us all.

We cannot rest on the laurels of June. Nor can we sit back and rely on the present strength of our numbers.



We must take every opportunity we find to make the convincing case for the Union. And that includes persuading those who don’t vote for the DUP or indeed any unionist party.

Perhaps in the past we have taken the Union for granted to the extent that we have failed to articulate why Northern Ireland is better off being part of the UK.

All too often, our arguments for the Union have centred on finance and the economy. Northern Ireland undoubtedly benefits hugely from being part of the world’s fifth biggest economy and our membership of the UK rewards us with a quality of life and standard of living that we’d never achieve in a united Ireland.

But as crucial as it is, the case for the Union doesn’t rely solely upon the economy and finances.

The United Kingdom is not the biggest nation in the world but our language, our music, our literature, our arts and our sporting success projects a power around the globe that pure numbers of people can never do.

There are few countries that can boast of the rich tapestry of peoples who populate the UK all of whom make an invaluable contribution to the diversity and strength of today's United Kingdom.

Our United Kingdom is an inspiration to fledgling democracies looking to establish freedom and democracy in their own lands. And through our sacrifice on the battlefields of World Wars and other conflicts we have helped set millions of people free from tyranny.

Our shared values, our shared history and our shared culture are the threads that have tied us together as one nation down through the generations and they are what gives us more strength and more influence today than we would have if we were apart.

Unionism is and always was a "broad church". But the one thing that tied us all together regardless of our background was our support for the Union. We are bound as one by our resolute belief that the interests of all of our people are best served by Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom.



Unionism is, by its very nature, all embracing. It is not an ideology that styles itself as "ourselves alone". If you love the Union as much as we do then it doesn't matter about your class, your religion or your ethnicity.

Our unionism unites people in a common cause. As we make the case for the Union, it is imperative that those who cherish the Union should stand side by side in defence of what we value the most.

The General Election result placed a huge responsibility upon this Party. We have – because of the votes of the people of Northern Ireland – been charged with assisting in bringing stability to our nation at the time when it needs it most. Unionists from this corner of the Kingdom want – and are entitled – to play their part in strengthening our great nation every bit as much as their countrymen in England, Scotland or Wales. And that is what we have done and what we will continue to do.

Some who sought to undermine us from the start said that we would selfishly pursue Party interests in our discussions with the Conservative Party. Instead, we secured a financial package worth £1.5 billion that is intended to boost our economy, rebuild our infrastructure, help reform our NHS and will be to the benefit of everyone, everywhere in Northern Ireland.

I've heard it said that the unprecedented position that the DUP now finds itself in at Westminster means that we don't want or need a return of devolution.

Unionism has never had so much influence in Parliament and nationalism's voice isn't heard at all in Westminster. But as appealing as it first appears, that view fails to take account of our longer-term best interests.



The Democratic Unionist Party has always believed that Northern Ireland is best governed by a democratic, fair and accountable government comprising locally elected representatives. While the new parliamentary arithmetic delivers a measure of influence it does not change our fundamental belief in Northern Ireland shaping its own destiny.

want to see devolution restored immediately and we are working to that end. But, as we all know, Sinn Fein have built a barrier to the return of Stormont and, as I indicated earlier in the Summer, I question whether Sinn Fein is serious about wanting to see an early return of Stormont. This is not an unreasonable question given some of the recent comments from Gerry Adams.

Serious negotiations are always marked by signs of intent with a willingness to find agreements that both sides can support. The talks earlier in the year were characterised by a sense that everyone must move to facilitate Sinn Fein demands.



If we are to have an agreement then there will need to be a willingness on all sides to reach out in order to secure a durable outcome.

The challenge of our devolved system has always been working together for the common good while satisfying the needs and aspirations of the communities who elect us. These tensions were never easy to manage or balance both within the institutions or the impact of actions elsewhere.

For our part we have kept our focus on the common good.

Over the last number of months, I have visited a range of cultural and language groups in Northern Ireland. I was conscious of the criticism laid against our Party and wanted to go out and listen to people. I thank all those who engaged with me. I met people whose passion for their culture and language was clear, deep and genuine.

Perhaps it was my discussions with Irish language groups that attracted the greatest publicity and thus caught the public attention. I very much appreciated the time taken by those whose passion and commitment for the Irish language was self-evident.



We have nothing to fear from the Irish language nor is it any threat to the Union. We have previously supported practical measures for the Irish language and we will do so again if we can reach a wider agreement on these matters.

However what we cannot and will not do is simply agree to one-sided demands.

have also heard from those within the unionist community who hear others speaking about respect whilst at the same time they engage in a campaign to denigrate and demonise any and all aspects of our British identity in Northern Ireland or insult the Ulster-Scots community.

That is not acceptable.

In 2021, Northern Ireland will celebrate its centenary. Too much of the tale of our first century has been hallmarked by division. Now we stand on the cusp of a new century for Northern Ireland. I want the story of Northern Ireland's next 100 years to be of a place and people that thrive within the United Kingdom. And I believe that cultural security and confidence are vital to this new, more positive chapter in our history.

We must celebrate and promote the diversity of cultural wealth of Northern Ireland in all its aspects.

We must affirm the identities people hold here.

We must enable those identities to develop and to be passed down to future generations.

We must welcome and integrate the new identities that have made Northern Ireland their home and who are adding to our cultural wealth.

And we must celebrate our pride in our home and the achievements of all of our people.



Short-term patches or political expediency is not what is needed. I believe a new vision and new commitment on identities is needed. We must establish a new cultural deal to provide comprehensive and long-term approach to the sensitive issue of identity.

In practical terms, Government actions and policy should be built around

respect, recognition, representation and resource for the identities here.

truly believe that as small as Northern Ireland may be, there is sufficient space for our wealth of cultures to thrive side by side.

As issues of identity, culture and language remain unresolved, what is becoming increasingly clear is that Northern Ireland needs government.

When Departments are preparing for 12% cuts.

When bowel cancer patients can't access new tests that people in the rest of the UK can.

And when small businesses can't get the rates support they're entitled to.

You can see how a lack of decision making at the highest level of government is beginning to impact negatively of them lives to our people.

It might be popular to talk Stormont down but any amount of negativity can't mask the reality that devolution has delivered much for all of our people and that a locally elected Assembly and Executive are best placed to grapple with the challenges that Northern Ireland faces.

Unless agreement can be found very quickly then London will be required to take decisions. Northern Ireland simply cannot continue without democratic oversight and that means the speedy introduction of direct rule if agreement is not reached.



The DUP still wants devolution. We were prepared to restore the Executive 5 months ago and we have drawn no red lines and we are willing to enter Government immediately without pre-conditions.

want to get government up and going again not so the DUP can take up ministerial posts. But rather because we need an Executive in place to take crucial and increasingly pressing decisions on a raft of important issues such as public finances, health and education reform and infrastructure development.

Sinn Fein has said that they won't go back into office until so-called previous agreements are implemented. Many of the issues they cite are not in fact part of previous agreements with this party and, in some cases the issues they pursue were not part of agreements with any party or Government in the past.

I disagree with them that the issues that they are pushing are the most important that we face. That's not me saying that language or culture isn't important. To me - and to many - they just should not have a greater priority than health or education or the economy.

But I understand and appreciate the need to deal with matters of culture and language in a mature way that aims to engender real respect for the multitude of cultures that co-exist in Northern Ireland today.

How then do we resolve these issues and establish the Executive and have the Northern Ireland Assembly sitting to do the business the people elected us to do?

Well we can enter into another round of talks. Parties can state and restate their positions. All the while waiting lists will get longer, investment opportunities will be missed and Northern Ireland's voice will continue to absent from Brexit negotiations.



Or we can try something different.

For our part, it is clear another prolonged talks process is little short of a waste of time unless there is some new thinking.

I am putting forward a common sense solution that can give us the Executive we need and resolve outstanding issues.

I am proposing that we restore an Executive immediately. Put Ministers back into posts so that decisions can be made and that Northern Ireland can have a government again.

But we also agree to bring forward legislation to address culture and language issues in Northern Ireland within a time-limited period to be agreed. If we fail to do that in a way that commands cross community support then the Executive would cease to exist.

This is an offer made in good faith with Northern Ireland and its people's best interest at heart.

Let's not permit our political disagreements to get in the way of what needs to be done right now in striking a Budget. In pressing ahead with much needed health reforms. And in attracting jobs and investment.

Given the size of Northern Ireland and the scale of the challenges we face, we will only succeed if we all move forward together. Agreements can only be achieved when there is recognition that the support of both unionists and nationalists is required if they are to stick. That is how we succeeded previously.



A winners and losers approach to discussions will only guarantee failure in both the short and long-term. If we are to work together successfully then trust will have to be built between the parties in the Assembly.

Just as our United Kingdom has succeeded down through the generations because its sum is greater than its parts, so too Northern Ireland can succeed if it moves forward together.

Wherever I go in, whoever I speak to and whatever community they come from, I find that there is an incredible commonality in what sort of society they want to see us create.

My vision is of a Northern Ireland that is confident, outward looking and, one where we work together to build better lives for everyone. Learning from the past in order to build for our future together.

I want us to achieve the goal of having our children educated together.

I want to reform our NHS so that it produces better outcomes for patients.

I want to create an innovative economy that benefits every part of our country and to work with our own Government and with our neighbours in the Republic to get the best deal for Northern Ireland as the UK leaves the European Union.

And I want us to get down to work at Stormont so that we can get on with the job that people elected us to do for them.

In spite of the obvious political differences that still exist, the truth is that most people in Northern Ireland want the same thing.

They have the same values. The same beliefs. And the same aspirations for themselves and their families.

It is our job to demonstrate that the best way to achieve their dreams is a Northern Ireland where everyone can prosper while respecting and embracing diversity.

Northern Ireland has been through some difficult times. Thankfully, things are far, far better than they were. The peace that we now enjoy presents us with the chance to prosper as a society. To seize the opportunities denied to so many generations. And to build on the indisputable potential that Northern Ireland possesses.

Northern Ireland faces new challenges in an increasingly uncertain world.

Northern Ireland succeeds when we all move forward together. Just look at our brilliant football team. They may not be the best players in the world but they have worked hard, often played beyond themselves and have now attained their highest ranking ever. And of course, I wish them all the best as

they take on San Marino tomorrow night.

Theirs should be an example to all of us that by moving forward together we can fulfill our potential and make Northern Ireland as great as we know it can be.

I know that things can be tough for families, for business and for communities and I appreciate that we face a future filled with challenges. But above all, I believe in Northern Ireland.

I believe in our people. I believe in our communities. I believe in our industry.

And I believe that by moving forward together we can make Northern Ireland even better.

Let's get our government up and running again now and deal with our problems in parallel.

We've done it before. We've succeeded before. Let's do it again.

And let's get Northern Ireland moving forward together.

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