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# 2017 DUP Conference - Leader's Speech



25 November 2017

Speech by DUP Leader Arlene Foster to the 2017 Annual conference.

## Arlene Foster MLA

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

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Mr Chairman, colleagues, members – my friends.

Thank you for that welcome.

I count it an honour to be your leader as we embark on a new phase in the history of our party. Our conference takes place against the backdrop of unprecedented interest in the Democratic Unionist Party from right across the United Kingdom.

I want to welcome and thank our many friends and allies who have joined with us during our weekend events but, most of all, I want to express my deep appreciation to you our members for your support over the last twelve months.

The Democratic Unionist Party is not like other political parties. What marks us out is the dedication, loyalty and faithfulness of you – our members.

So today, from the bottom of my heart, I say thank you.

If the last year has proved anything it is that we live in an uncertain world.

We've been through a lot together over these past 12 months.

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When last we gathered, no one could have foreseen that in four months time we would be fighting an Assembly election and it was a tough election.

We lost good and faithful public servants and I want to pay tribute to and say thank you to Maurice, Nelson, Brenda, Adrian and Philip.

That election was a wake up call for unionists. We warned that republicans were cynically seeking to exploit the election as an opportunity to close the gap on unionism.

Many didn't believe our warnings. They said we were scaremongering.

However, Sinn Fein came within one seat and 1,200 votes of becoming Northern Ireland's largest party

Thankfully, the unionist electorate didn't have to wait years for an opportunity to register support for our precious Union. The snap General Election provided such a platform within just three months.

I want to thank the nearly 300,000 people who rallied to our banner in June. Not only did their votes help us to emphatically return all of our existing Members of Parliament, they also won back South Antrim. And they returned the South Belfast seat to the unionist fold for the first time in 16 years.

Emma and Paul's excellent victories further strengthen our team at Westminster so brilliantly led by Nigel. At such a crucial time in our country's history we are truly fortunate that our Parliamentary Party is led by someone as trusted and as able as Nigel.

I want to again very publicly acknowledge and thank Nigel for the support he has given to me. Nigel is a steadfast and loyal Deputy Leader and his service to this party and to our country cannot be overstated.

We all worked for success but to return the highest number of MPs in our history, to register the largest percentage share of the vote ever for our Party and to record the biggest vote of any Party since 1985 was an astounding achievement.

The people proved that more votes means more seats which means more influence.

Your efforts knocking doors, delivering leaflets and putting up posters all added up to almost 300,000 votes. Together, you all helped make history.

And that momentous result put our Party in an unparalleled position at Westminster.

For our part, we made it clear that our priority was to help bring stability to our nation.

Do you remember how some said that the DUP would pursue a narrow agenda in our negotiations?

What was secured was for everyone across Northern Ireland.

Not narrow and not sectional. But a deal that benefits all of the people of Northern Ireland.

And it wasn't just an agreement about Northern Ireland.

We have ensured that pensioners in every part of our Kingdom will have the security of knowing that the triple lock on pensions is safe and that the winter fuel payment will remain universal.

We are the party for Northern Ireland but our unionism doesn't end at the Irish Sea. We will always fight hard for the best deal for Northern Ireland but we care about vulnerable people in Bristol and Birmingham every bit as much as those in Belfast.

That of course is the very essence of our unionism. Whether English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish, we aren't competitors or rivals in this United Kingdom.

We are bound together as one. Stronger together than apart.

It is an honour underpinned with a solemn responsibility to be able to help bring stability to our United Kingdom in these challenging times and we do it seized with an abiding sense of duty to the national interest.

We will avail of every opportunity now and in the future to advance the Union as a whole and Northern Ireland's place within it.

Securing support for our pensioners, a determination to support our Armed Forces, and a commitment to maintain the same cash support for farmers until 2022 are illustrations of what we mean when we say we will help shape policies in the national interest.

We will bring that same philosophy of doing what's in our nation's best interests to the other challenges that the United Kingdom will face over the course of the current Parliament.

Now there is no doubt that delivering on the decision of the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union is perhaps the most substantial and complex process the Government and Parliament has undertaken in the modern political era.

From the UK's entry to the old European Community to the failure of member states to agree to reform the European Union, this Party has been consistently sceptical about Brussels.

Much has been said about Brexit.

Listening to some quarters you would be forgiven for thinking that life, as we know it, will end.

During the referendum campaign and ever since, some of those who advocated 'remain' have argued that the UK's departure from the EU will result in a hard border on the island of Ireland.

I said from this platform twelve months ago that no one wishes that to be the case.

We want our border to remain open for people to move freely north and south for work, for education and as tourists. We want to see continued trading across the border in the economic interests of our two countries.

I also said that any exit deal must recognise the reality of our geography and of our history and that for us we wanted to get the best deal for Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole.

We want a sensible Brexit. A Brexit that works for Northern Ireland and for the United Kingdom.

However, we will not support any arrangements that create barriers to trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom or any suggestion that Northern Ireland, unlike the rest of the UK, will have to mirror European regulations.

I have written to the heads of government of each of the EU 27 member states setting out our views and Diane will continue her work in Brussels in the coming days to reinforce our position.

The economic reality for our economy is that our most important trading relationship is with the rest of the United Kingdom and we will do nothing that puts that at risk in any way.

We welcome the assurances from the Prime Minister and the UK Brexit team that no such internal barriers will be countenanced and that as we joined the then European Community as one nation we will leave as one United Kingdom.

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The General Election provided unionism with the perfect opportunity to bounce back. But we've no intention of resting on our laurels or taking success for granted.

Our mission is to secure Northern Ireland's place within the Union.

Our mission is to make Northern Ireland as good as we know it can be.

And our mission is to make life better for all of our people.

I am a unionist by conviction and unashamedly so. I believe that the Union is the best basis upon which we can build a peaceful and prosperous society in Northern Ireland.

Regardless of some of the propaganda the truth is the Union is secure and no matter how many times we are told that "the North isn't British", Northern Ireland is British and British it will remain.

I was motivated to enter public life precisely because of my desire to protect and preserve Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom.

But defending the Union isn't our only job. We are also charged with the crucial task of advancing our vision for Northern Ireland.

Perhaps precisely because in past years we have had to guard against those who would destroy the Union, we haven't always spent sufficient time spelling out that positive vision.

We need to spend more time outlining the kind of Northern Ireland we want to see flourish and why that is best advanced through being part of the Union.

A country is nothing without its people.

A society's real strength isn't generated by its GDP but by its people.

I never cease to be astounded by the exceptional nature of our people.

Northern Ireland is all too often characterised by what divides us, but I am always amazed by how so many of the people I meet might have very different life experiences but almost all share the same Northern Ireland values.

They are as humble as they are hardworking.

They are deeply devoted to their families.

They believe in personal responsibility, but they'll not be found wanting when a neighbour is in need.

They possess a compassion for those who are less well-off no matter where in the world they live.

And they have a pride in our country and the achievements of all our people.

But what I believe sets us apart. What marks us out as special and what gives us a real edge over others is a spirit of never giving up. It is embedded deep in our DNA.

We experience adversity yet face it down.

Through all the tough times of the Troubles, our people never stopped believing in the promise and potential of Northern Ireland.

We owe it to the generation that came through the Troubles and – maybe even more so to those generations that follow – to fulfil that promise and potential.

Northern Ireland people want their children and their grandchildren to do better than them, to realise their dreams and to enjoy life in ways that were maybe denied to them.

Everywhere I go I see a real sense of ambition.

That same sense of aspiring to be all that you can be was ingrained in me from an early age. My mother and father instilled in me a belief that the only barrier to becoming whatever I wanted to be was myself.

That desire to inspire the next generation is as strong today as it was when I was growing up.

It is exactly that desire to not only ensure that Northern Ireland is a better place to live than it was when I was growing up but that we bestow to the next generation a Northern Ireland where they can get a job, afford a home, raise a family and live out their lives to the full, that is at the core of this Party.

And that is why we are the people's Party.

The Party that puts people first.

The Party that prioritises attracting jobs and investment and improving our health services and our schools and our housing and our infrastructure so that all of our people can live better lives.

We are the Party for people trying – but finding it difficult – to get a foot on the property ladder for the first time.

For young families who find the cost of childcare a barrier to work.

For the pensioner who has worked hard all their life and just wants a retirement free from worry about who will look after them and how it'll be paid for.

For the small business owner who finds their ability to grow and create more jobs stifled by unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape.

They are the people we serve.

They are the people that motivate me to keep moving forward.

In everything we do. In everything we say. And in everything we try to achieve as a Party. We must be the Party for the people.

Most people don't want or expect their government to do everything but what they do demand is that their government puts the taxes they pay to good use and delivers the sort of services they, their families and their community need to enjoy a good life.

Government's only job is to serve the people. It is there to protect people, provide the vulnerable with a safety net and act when and where markets fail to serve the people properly.

Our mission is to do all that we can to make life a little easier for people who get up early in the morning, get their kids to school, go and do a hard day's work.

Our mission is absolutely about affirming our British identity. Upholding the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom.

But our mission is also about ensuring that people all across the UK can have a good life too.

I want everyone in Northern Ireland regardless of whether they're unionists or nationalists or don't consider themselves to be either, to enjoy a good quality of life and to be able to pass on to the next generation a better Northern Ireland filled with opportunities for all.

It's popular to bash Stormont and to criticise devolution. To say it has delivered nothing.

But the truth is that during devolved government – while far from perfect – there were record levels of inward investment, scores of new schools built, miles of new roads constructed and hundreds of millions more spent on health.

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While we have more influence than ever before at Westminster we also want to see our local institutions functioning and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland.

Making our mission a reality is best achieved by getting the Assembly and the Executive back doing what the people elected us to do.

That is why we would have re-established the Executive 8 months ago without any pre-conditions. We would have got the government going again while dealing with issues of language and culture in parallel, but such a pragmatic approach was rejected by the 'heavy' brigade in Sinn Fein.

That shouldn't surprise us.

Let's not forget how Sinn Fein stopped the Executive from meeting for almost a year over policing and justice.

Or how they allowed over £150 million to be lost as they delayed the implementation of welfare reforms that, in the end, they largely agreed to.

They walked away from office earlier this year knowing what that would mean for public services and the hurt and harm it would cause hardworking people.

They protest against health cuts yet held that very portfolio in the last Executive where they would have been able to do more good than complaining at public meetings.

They moan about what they call "Tory austerity" yet their Finance Minister failed to bring in a Budget leaving it to a Conservative Secretary of State to legislate for our Budget at Westminster.

They complain about Brexit all the while refusing to form an Executive or take their seats in Parliament.

They go to their conference and glory in the murder of the IRA.

Today conference my thoughts are with the victims of Enniskillen, Kingsmills and La Mon and the many thousands of innocent victims who have conducted themselves with such dignity over the decades.

Yet when you listen to Sinn Fein they blame everyone else.

It's time Sinn Fein got serious.

Our team has been working hard over the last few months in the talks process. Some progress was made but that can only be built upon if all sides are genuinely serious about obtaining a deal that is balanced.

This party will conclude a balanced deal but we will not be party to a one-sided arrangement that rewards intransigent behaviour.

Northern Ireland needs a government and we cannot continue without Ministers. Time is short and those in Sinn Fein blocking the restoration of local decision making need to decide whether they want to do business with us or have direct rule ministers in place.

I still believe that devolution is the best way to govern Northern Ireland but to do that in a way that delivers for all of our people we need serious partners in government.

One key element of the talks that is critical is that if any new Executive is to be restored it must be on a sustainable basis and all parties who share that view must insist on that being the case.

I said back in the summer that this Party was prepared to legislate for the Irish language in the context of legislating for the plurality of cultures that exist in Northern Ireland.

The Irish language is spoken and enjoyed by thousands of people in all parts of Northern Ireland. It does no damage to our unionism or the Union we cherish.



I respect the Irish language and those who speak it. However, respect isn't a one-way street. Respect works both ways.

It is time that Sinn Fein started to respect our British culture. For too long they have shown nothing but disdain and disrespect for the national flag, the Royal Family, the Armed Forces, British symbols, the constitutional reality and the very name of this country.

So we are up for respect. And we're up for rights.

Republicans like to lecture us about rights. They're fond of rights now. They weren't so concerned about that most fundamental of rights – the right to life – during the Troubles.

We are for rights. We respect rights. What we oppose is using the cloak of rights as a Trojan horse designed to break unionists.

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I know that our politics can be tough. Brutal even. But I am passionate in my belief that politics has to be about making a difference in the lives of every single one of our citizens.

Back in the Spring, I visited Our Lady's Grammar School in Newry. I came away with two things. A greater understanding of the genuine passion and love that many have for the Irish language and a beautiful gift of a framed picture. The picture was inscribed with the words "Together we are strong".

Those words really registered with me. If we are to generate the opportunities for the pupils at Our Lady's and all the other schools across Northern Ireland to fulfil their potential then we have a far, far better chance if we are moving forward together.

I'm very fond of the work of C. S. Lewis – one of our greatest sons – and I want to conclude with one his quotes.

He once wrote, "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending".

C. S. Lewis was right. We cannot go backwards and undo what has been done. We cannot start again from somewhere different. We have to deal with things the way they are.

But that doesn't mean the end is already written.

We can shape a future for the next generation that is so much better than what we had to experience.

Build a Northern Ireland where everyone can live a good life.

Create a country where ambition and aspiration are encouraged, and opportunities exist to fulfil them.

I love this country. I want it to be the best that we all know it can be.

That is my vision.

That is our mission.

Together we are strong and together, standing strong we will achieve that mission and move Northern Ireland forward to a better future.

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