

Press Comment - Petty, uninspiring and negative Arlene risks damaging unionism



Arlene Foster pictured during the DUP's election campaign launch at Brownlow House in Lurgan.

Arlene Foster's manifesto launch address last Monday was one of the most uninspiring, insular, self-serving and negative speeches

I've ever heard from a unionist leader, Alex Kane writes in The Irish News.

Indeed, so harsh was the tone, you could be forgiven for assuming that she hadn't, in fact and by choice, served in every executive since May 2007—involving lots of trips and photo-ops with Sinn Féin ministers—or that she had recently co-signed a self-congratulating, 'look-at-us-aren't-we-just-the-bees-knees-and-best-thing-since-sliced-bread' statement with Martin McGuinness.

It was truculent, petty stuff; aimed entirely at an audience which still thinks that 'holding your nose' is a requirement when dealing with Sinn Féin.

If that's what Mrs Foster really thinks, then so be it although I would just point out that it's an odd position to adopt when the deal the DUP brokered with Sinn Féin in 2007 recognised the necessity for both parties to work together.

I would also remind her what Peter Robinson said, in November 2006: "I recognise that Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson are not the pin-up boys in Andersonstown. The people in the Bogside will not be holding street parties because Ian Paisley would be first minister." I would then point her to the DUP's 'Devolution

Now' document of February 2004: "A new settlement must command the support of nationalists and unionists...and must be able to deliver equality of opportunity to unionists as well as nationalists."

Arlene Foster is under no personal legal requirement to become first minister, let alone serve in any ministerial role in any future executive; but if she is going to be involved in an executive then she needs to understand that she won't be involved in a 'myself alone, or DUP ourselves alone' capacity.

If, on the other hand, she has some deeper-seated problem sharing power with Sinn Féin, then maybe she should consider the position she now occupies in the DUP. Let's face it, sharing power with Sinn Féin—where she knows that no significant decision can be taken without their approval (it's called the mutual veto)—is part of the job description of a DUP first minister.

Her attacks on Gerry Adams were both pointless and predictable. I wrote a few weeks ago that, with Martin McGuinness off the scene, the DUP would need to find another bogeyman to spook the grassroots. Michelle O'Neill won't spook many unionists, so obviously Arlene had to identify someone else.

Yet, back in 2005, the DUP was claiming; “after years in decline, unionism is finally on top. Mr Adams was forced to concede that Sinn Féin was on the back foot and Irish republicans had lost the ball.” Hmm. It doesn’t say much for the DUP’s legacy if they’re now forced to play the Adams card and warn of him being, “front and centre of Sinn Féin’s campaign...hoping for the opportunity to implement his radical agenda for Northern Ireland.”

Sinn Féin’s ‘radical agenda’ (the DUP’s buzz words for this election) is for Irish unity. Yes! Really!! But that agenda requires hefty numbers of people who are presently pro-Union, or agnostic on the issue, to shift sides; and that’s only going to happen if mainstream unionism decides to present itself as an ugly, unattractive, wagon-circling philosophy.

In other words, Adams and Sinn Féin are less of a threat to the Union than some people who claim to be defenders and champions of unionism.

As someone who is a unionist I’d like to know what Arlene Foster means when she refers to unionism and unionist values, because she certainly didn’t go into any detail on Monday.

I don't get spooked by Sinn Féin or by Gerry Adams, so I'm not interested in what seems to be her near obsession with both. I want to know what she understands by inclusivity and how she plans to promote it. I want to know what she understands by the concept of equality of citizenship and how she thinks it can be protected.

I want to know why she seems to think that socio/moral rights taken for granted in other parts of the United Kingdom (I'm a pan-UK unionist, by the way) can't be taken for granted in Northern Ireland. I want to know why she seems irrationally terrified by an Irish language act. I want to hear her vision of unionism in a post-Brexit UK. I want to hear her views on a new-era Northern Ireland. I want to hear a vision of unionism that has more depth than 'Stop Sinn Féin.' I want to hear her long-term strategy for winning over increasing numbers of people to a broad-based, inclusive, tolerant unionism.

Arlene Foster is not just leader of the DUP: she is also a hugely influential voice within unionism. My concern is that she has allowed herself—mostly through her mishandling when the RHI story broke—to be steered towards the personal and the petty in this election. In so doing, she

risks inflicting incalculable, if not immediately obvious, damage to unionism.

She now needs to row back and reflect on her core political beliefs; not just the immediate needs of the DUP. What she says and does has an impact on all of us who attach the word 'unionist' to our sense of identity.

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