



CNI

PRESS WATCH - Arlene Foster recruiting agent for Sinn Fein

Seeing off UUP will not absolve DUP's Arlene Foster from being a recruiting agent for Sinn Fein, Edmund Curran write in the Belfast Telegraph.

It will go down in the history books of Northern Ireland as the RHI election. What began as a row that had nothing to do with the constitution of this country and all to do with bungling incompetence at Stormont has turned into a defining moment for the very future of all of us who live here. Edmund Curran write in the Belfast Telegraph

The RHI issue remains unresolved, but restoring some political stability in this historically unstable place is far more important.

As the biomass boilers continue to burn the public's money for the next 20 years, of much greater consequence is whether Northern Ireland

has the will to be a sharing, peaceful society, where unionist, nationalist and republican pull together for the greater collective good of this divided community.

The British and Irish Governments need to wake up from their respective slumbers, accept that Northern Ireland is far from sorted, and reinvigorate the level of interest they showed in the years before and immediately after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

If they don't commit more effort and understanding, then inevitably the gains of the past 19 years will slip away.

Do the DUP and Sinn Fein really want to share power with one another or do they not? Does the lack of trust and respect between them mean they have nothing left in their lockers upon which they can agree?

The harsh truth about power-sharing is that it was never conceived in the first place with either of these two parties in mind, but now we know that things are not going to change. The political carve-up between the DUP and Sinn Fein brings to mind the old Stormont parliament of the 1950s and 1960s, when unionist and nationalist power blocs stared one another out across the chamber.

Respect. That one word sums up the challenge posed by this election result.

Where is respect to be found now between Arlene Foster and new Sinn Fein northern leader Michelle O'Neill?

On the face of it, there is little likelihood, but the reality is there is no alternative, unless either Foster or O'Neill are happy to let Stormont drift in direct rule.

Surely not, and surely a formula can be found whereby the stark red lines both leaders have drawn can be blurred.

It should not be beyond the bounds of imagination to create a negotiating formula between the parties in the aftermath of an election which, like it or not, has seen both women confirmed as leaders.

Foster's red line on never having an Irish Language Act looks open to question, and possibly review also.

If the two parties were to spend less time hurling insults at one another and more mutually examining the costings and practicality of any Irish language proposal, a resolution would be more likely at a price Stormont could afford.

O'Neill, for her part, needs to review her assertion that she will not do business with Foster.

That is simply impractical and undemocratic in the aftermath of an election result which reaffirms Foster's position as DUP leader.

Something has to give on either side, and it is a test of both Foster and O'Neill to show that they can open rather than close doors between them.

As for the RHI scandal, all the politicking is over.

Now it is for the public inquiry of Sir Patrick Coghlin (below) to examine the role of Foster, as well as everyone else involved, and to reach his conclusions.

The parties should leave it to him and ensure that everyone co-operates to find the truth, and also to reduce the 'cash for ash' bill as much as possible.

The DUP party faithful have stood by their beleaguered leader.

The fact that she retained support and saw off the challenge of the Ulster Unionists does not absolve Foster, whose words and manner surely

stirred and galvanised the nationalist electorate to cast their votes.

The election results show that Foster has survived all the criticism; the abuse which was thrown at her.

However, she also played the role of recruiting agent for Sinn Fein, as evident by the surge in voting amongst annoyed nationalists.

Foster has achieved quite a feat. First, she marched the DUP to the top of the Stormont hill last May. And now she has taken Sinn Fein to the top as well.

The result of the Assembly election is that the future of power-sharing in Northern Ireland is left hanging by the slimmest of threads. The opportunity of a lifetime for middle-ground unionist and nationalist parties is lost.

The Ulster Unionists failed to grasp the moment. Questions will abound about its leadership and Mike Nesbitt's controversial strategy of transferring votes to nationalists.

SDLP leader Colum Eastwood and Alliance's Naomi Long were the outstanding media performers among the five main party leaders.

The SDLP struggled, while Alliance more than held its ground.

But both - along with the Ulster Unionists - have a role, albeit diminished, to play in the forthcoming quest for a new political settlement.

When Sinn Fein said it had a shopping lists of demands, Foster responded by saying the DUP had one also. Let's see what these are.

Rather than sweep these issues under the table again, the opportunity has arrived for another proper and full-scale review of the Good Friday Agreement, as happened in 2006 at the St Andrews talks.

The choice facing Stormont today is fairly obvious. Direct rule, or a quick sticking-plaster solution somehow cobbled together before Easter.

Or a new, comprehensive agreement, which will take much longer to achieve, but should stand the test of time and not bring Northern Ireland back to where it is today.

Prime Minister Theresa May has a lot on her Brexit plate these days, but she will have even more to worry about if she doesn't take seriously the political dangers of an unstable Northern

Ireland in the middle of her negotiations with Brussels.

She might be well-advised to apply the best minds she can find in her administration, along with their counterparts in Dublin, to focus on post-election Northern Ireland.

Stormont now needs all the help it can get if it is to survive at all.

Edmund Curran is a former Editor of the Belfast Telegraph. First published in The Belfast Telegraph, March 4, 2017

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