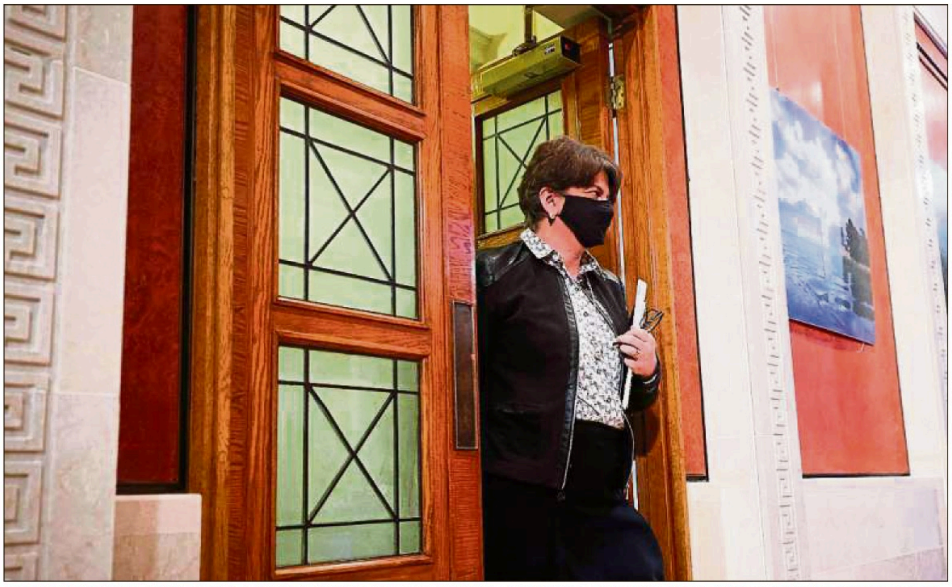

MAKING AN EXIT? The DUP would, I suspect, quite like a pan-unionist election deal but I'm not sure the UUP or TUV would be interested in one if it includes Arlene Foster as leader

Will Foster's leadership be the price of a unionist election pact?

Alex KANE

ONE of the DUP's most remarkable abilities (one it shares with Sinn Féin, as it happens) is the ability to walk its supporters from Point A to the polar opposite Point B without so much as a hint of embarrassment, let alone the merest whiff of an acknowledgment that it has, in fact, performed a U-turn of epic proportions.

Which is why Sammy Wilson, for instance, doesn't 'take a redner' when, having spent most of a year lambasting the Northern Ireland Protocol for undermining NI's position within the UK, he still manages to conclude there are opportunities for NI and unionism even with the protocol in place.

There is, of course, nothing else the DUP could do in the circumstances. Admitting that the protocol seriously damages the constitutional integrity of NI's position within the United Kingdom leaves unionism in a very difficult position (particularly as NI enters its centenary year and needs reasons to celebrate). And it doesn't help matters that it has been left in that very difficult position by Boris Johnson, the man in whom the DUP placed so much faith after it fell out with Theresa May over her 'backstop' proposals in 2018.

Johnson was always going to prioritise the interests of Conservatism and English nationalism over the DUP and Northern Ireland. Everybody warned the DUP what he would do. Everybody warned the DUP that the European Research Group (in whom the party had also placed too much faith) would cast them aside and follow Johnson's lead – even if it meant undermining the constitutional link between NI and GB. Everybody warned the DUP that Johnson's threat to the protocol a few weeks ago (when Secretary of State Brandon Lewis talked of a willingness to break international law) was mere smoke and mirror stuff: the sort of linguistic legerdemain which is a key element of his stock in trade.

But since the DUP can't own up to any of this without looking like fools it was inevitable that the talk of opposing the protocol would quickly turn to searching for the opportunities within it. Again, there'll be no hint of their hope that it might yet open the door to what some have described as the 'best of both worlds', yet that's precisely the outcome the party is praying for. The prayer didn't stop the party voting against the UK/EU trade deal and it won't stop the chatter about the assembly being able to revisit the protocol in four years time: but it does give the party the chance to prepare a platform in time for the next election.

That election – to the assembly – is due in the spring of 2022, less than 18 months away. The DUP will be looking to widen the gap between it and SF (just one seat), as well as winning back the unionist majority lost in 2017. Unionists hold 40 of the 90 seats, so would need to win six seats. That will be difficult, which is why there have been suggestions of some sort of pan-unionist election deal to maximise votes and seats. The DUP would, I suspect, quite like a deal but I'm not sure the UUP or TUV would be interested in one if it includes Arlene Foster as leader.

The smaller unionist parties, albeit for different reasons, are very critical of the DUP, blaming it for the mess in which NI unionism now finds itself. They'll want someone to take responsibility and pay a price: and the someone they have in mind is Foster. Would she prepared to step down? Would her party be willing to let her go? Is her possible replacement likely to win the confidence of the other unionist parties? More important, would an election pact (which proved quite useful for the SDLP and Alliance in last December's general election) prove quite as useful for unionist parties in 2022 (bearing in mind the problems they had in December 2019)? Would an election deal be an easier sell for unionism in NI's centenary year?

Anyway, we'll see how all of this plays out in the next few months, against a background in which the unionist/loyalist/broader pro-union community finds ways of coming together to commemorate/celebrate the creation of Northern Ireland.

There's a lot of tetchiness between the DUP and UUP at the moment and it'll be interesting to see how the damage is repaired: if, indeed, there is a willingness to repair it.

Meanwhile, let me wish you all a very happy new year. I hope that 2021 will be kinder, gentler and less stressful for all of us.

Admitting that the protocol seriously damages the constitutional integrity of Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom leaves unionism in a very difficult position

ON THIS DAY

JANUARY 1 1971

Belfast Director Shot Dead

MURDER squad detectives were over Christmas hunting for two men after a 65-year- old company director was shot dead during an attempted robbery at his luxury home on the outskirts of West Belfast on Christmas Eve. The dead man was Mr Andrew Jardin and he was killed as the men, both armed, tried to break into his home, the White Gables at Hannahstown. Police think one of the raiders may have been injured.

As the murder team, led by Chief Superintendent William Meharg, carried out investigations in the Jardin home, soldiers guarded the wooded lane leading to it and police with tracker dogs searched surrounding fields for clues. Police and troops had raced to the scene in Belfast's Upper Springfield Road after a 999 call from a woman believed to have been the dead man's wife. They found Mr Jardin dead from gunshot wounds.

A spokesman for the RUC said: 'We are treating it as a case of murder.' Early today an official police statement said: 'We believe that the two armed men who forced their way into the home of Mr Jardin did so in an attempt to rob him. Mr Jardin was fatally injured in his attempts to resist them. It is thought that the raiders were armed with a shotgun and a revolver.'

Police were able to put out a description of one of the raiders. He was young, medium height, feminine appearance and had shoulder-length fair brown wavy hair. He wore dark clothes and may have been injured.

A neighbour, Mrs Mary Finnegan who lives in a cottage nearby, said she was in her kitchen when she heard what she thought was an explosion. 'There was a terrific crack', she said, 'and I thought there had been some sort of blast nearby. It really shook me.' She described the Jardins as good neighbours. 'They would do anything to help you and they were always very pleasant.'

Mr Jardin was managing director of the Blackmountain Quarry, not far from his home.

First Stormont Catholic Chaplain

CARDINAL Conway announced yesterday that the Catholic Bishops have nominated Rev Robert Murphy, PP, Newtownards, to be the first Catholic chaplain to the Northern Ireland Parliament.

Fr Murphy (57) is a native of Duneane, Toomebridge. He was educated at St Malachy's College and at Queen's University where he graduated in 1933.

Exactly 50 years after Cardinal Logue had spurned an invitation form Lord Londonderry to appoint a Catholic representative to the Lynn Committee on educational reform, the Church appointed its first chaplain to the Stormont Parliament – a formal act of recognition following the civil rights reforms.

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