



RETIRING... BUT NOT EXACTLY SHY: Peter Robinson with Arlene Foster on the day she succeeded him as DUP leader

Now is the time for unionist leadership

U NIONIST anger at the Brexit debate is growing beyond just spray cans on walls but who is really to blame?

Edwin Poots caused concern earlier this year after warning difficulties around the Irish Sea border could mean schools and hospitals would not be able to get food supplies. That dire prediction has since changed somewhat from famine style conditions to arguments over English sausages and Amazon deliveries, the most first-world-of first-world issues. As my mother would say when confronted with a complaint not worthy of a tantrum, 'wise up – there's people in the world with real problems'.

The problem unionists have with Brexit is not a practical one, as any issues regarding the protocol can be – and already are being – dealt with. The issue is an ideological one, and how they perceive they are being excluded from the rest of the UK. That is a problem between unionism and the British government and is not something that can be blamed on the EU or the current administration in the south.

I have no doubt that many unionists are angry, angry at a pace of change that they were unprepared for, angry at the prime minister of a government they have been fiercely loyal to having so little regard for their feelings, but mostly angry because unionist politicians have for decades constantly reminded them of their obligation to be angry. Unionist anger, unionist outrage, unionist unrest, is not new and is not solely caused by the Northern Ireland Protocol.

I will never fully understand why the DUP championed Brexit. Beyond the flag waving and the Rule Britannia sentiment surrounding the referendum build-up, it seemed obvious that it would cause serious difficulties for the north and spark debate around the constitutional question.

That republicans and those pushing for a border poll would use the political fallout from Brexit to their advantage is

Allison
MORRIS



hardly surprising. Why would they not kick a ball into an open goal?

The DUP's answer to this, a five-point plan to resisting the protocol, had more than a whiff of Jim Allister off it. But the problem for the party with this tactic is that the more headline they become in order to appease their base, the more extreme their opponents will become in return. The old guard, anti-agreement elements of the DUP can sense this and are encouraging this gravitational pull towards the extremes.

Loyalism is only too happy to facilitate this by piling on the pressure. A letter said to be from 'all loyalist groups' in Ards and North Down, understood to mean the UDA, UVF and Red Hand Commando, didn't get much attention when released during a crowded news cycle at the weekend.

However, the letter stating there was "growing sentiment against all aspects of the peace process" will have raised the antennae of the PSNI who have been paying close attention to feeling on the ground.

In January Assistant Chief Constable Mark McEwan told MPs at a Westminster committee

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hearing that police were monitoring "stress" and "growing discontent" within unionist communities over the Irish Sea border. He added that the health pandemic may be "moderating people's behaviour in terms of the desire to protest". For this very reason politicians, regardless of what side of the Brexit debate they sit on, need to carefully consider the language they use.

The DUP are well tapped into the feelings of unionists and loyalists on the ground. But they can never out-Allister Jim Allister, so why even try? To do so creates a situation where the DUP are being continually pulled in a direction of travel that will alienate more moderate unionists, and send them running where? Back to where they came from in the UUP? That has not been the trend so far. Those voters are far more likely to end up in the Alliance camp, something that is devastating long-term for the future of the union.

Former first minister Peter Robinson said last week that those unionists calling for the scrapping of the protocol should either "suck it up" or bring down Stormont. Writing in the *News Letter*, he also took aim at the DUP's five-point plan, suggesting a tougher approach was needed.

"One lesson learned after decades of dealing with governments is that they don't yield unless life has become uncomfortable," he said.

"Statements and speeches will not turn them nor, frankly, will petitions and debates." Strong language from a former party leader who was known to compromise when the situation called for it during his time in power but seems to enjoy throwing cats into pigeon sheds now that he is retired.

Now is not the time for settling scores against political opponents, nor bringing down institutions during a health pandemic.

Now is the time for leadership – but who is willing to step up to the podium and speak those uncomfortable truths?

ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 18 1921

Cork Lady Kidnapped

FOUR armed men raided Leemount House, Coachtford, County Cork, the residence of Mrs. J. W. Lindsay, at three o'clock yesterday morning and carried her off, together with her chauffeur, Clarke, to an unknown destination.

Nothing has since been heard of them and the occurrence had caused consternation in the district. Mrs Lindsay's late husband was a well-known landholder. Leemount House is in the vicinity of the scene of the Dripsey battle as a result of which eight men were captured by military and two killed.

Kilmainham Escape Sensation

THE following was issued from Military General Headquarters in Dublin last night: A Military Court of Inquiry has been held on the escape of three prisoners from Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin on the night of February 14. As a result, disciplinary action is contemplated against certain of those believed to be responsible.

Riot in Belfast Street

A RIOT, which lasted for over an hour but was fortunately not attended with serious consequences, broke out in Belfast's Corporation Street last evening. The disturbance originated during the passage of trams containing workers from Messrs Workman, Clark's shipyard at about six o'clock when it appears that, arising out of a verbal altercation between workmen and a number of persons standing near New Dock Street, iron nuts and bolts and stones were exchanged between the opposing sections.

Soon the outbreak developed into a serious riot and revolvers were used indiscriminately on each side. The arrival of the RIC and military compelled the rioters to retreat.

Sequel to Glens Raid

THE daring raid on Carnlogh Coastguard Station on Sunday night has had a sequel in the arrest by the Cushendall police of three young men – all respectable farmers' sons – residing in the townland of Lenny, near Cushendall.

THE dramatic escape of Ernie O'Malley and two comrades from Dublin's Kilmainham Jail coincided with the IRA kidnapping of Mrs Lindsay, an aristocratic Unionist lady who had alerted the authorities to an ambush being prepared in her locality. As a result, six young men were executed in Cork. Held as a hostage by the IRA, she was later shot dead in reprisal. By this stage – the last phase of the war – five southern counties had been placed under martial law.

Belfast had been enjoying a welcome respite from the bitter sectarian disturbances of the previous year. However, a violent confrontation between Catholic crowds and Protestant shipyard workers in the nationalist Dock area showed how just fragile this 'peace of exhaustion' was in the polarised city.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com