



STANDING DOWN:
Outgoing first minister
and DUP leader
Arlene Foster

Foster leaves unionism in worse state than at any other time in last century

ARLENE Foster did her best to sound chipper on Tuesday morning when asked about the rumours surrounding a possible challenge to her leadership. But you could see from her body language that she was cross. Cross and worried.

No amount of trying to distract the interviewer with talk of having 'bigger things to do' rather than answer questions about her leadership was going to fool anyone. And that's because there is never anything bigger than their leadership for any leader: particularly a few days before the annual confirmation of the role.

Foster hasn't been loved by her MLAs and MPs for quite some time. That's why they were openly defying her on a regular basis and leaking against her on a scale and with a frequency which suggested they thought journalists would suddenly cease to exist. On some days journalists and commentators were beating off their anonymous sources with a stick, so keen were they to put the boot into her.

What she had in her favour, though, was the absence of a clear strategy to unseat her. That's partly because there wasn't just one cabal chasing her scalp: quite a few were. As long as they remained separate and occasionally fractious then she was safe.

But over the past few weeks they began to get their act together and move together. Then over the weekend and into Tuesday they began to put their signatures to a letter expressing their lack of confidence in her.

She must have known it was happening. That's why a leader has eyes and ears everywhere. Yet she made no obvious effort to calm nerves and gather support across the party: seemingly believing that the signatures would be a trickle rather than a flow.

Maybe she thought if there was no agreed successor then people would

Alex KANE



stick with what and who they know. But that attitude ignored the possibility that they might have reached the point at which anyone would be preferable to her. Let's face it, when 22 out of your 27 MLA colleagues sign a goodbye letter then you really haven't been paying attention to their concerns.

Her departure raises potential problems for the executive and the broader political process, but my hunch is that her successor will find a way of managing them.

I don't detect any real sign of a desire by the DUP to either collapse the executive and force an early election; or abandon the Good Friday Agreement altogether and risk direct rule.

But it will spook other unionist parties. Jim Allister (support for the TUV had risen to 10 per cent in a poll at the end of January) would probably have liked Foster to have been at the helm for the assembly election, knowing

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that dislike of her across a section of the DUP was probably his best way of returning a few MLAs under his banner. A new leader will make that task more difficult.

The UUP would also have liked Foster in situ, hoping to pick up some of the moderates (and there are moderates in the DUP) who are not quite so fundamentalist on moral/sexual issues. But a new leader might yet find a way of steadying nerves and keeping those voters on board. Anyway, the UUP already has a difficult battle to keep increasing numbers of its existing voters from drifting to Alliance.

How will she be judged? I actually had high hopes for her when she became leader. She brought something different to the role, primarily a background in a party which had often been described by the DUP as 'roll-over', spineless' or treacherous. She also came from a more liberal Church of Ireland background and didn't have a record of fundamentalism on socio/ethical issues.

She also had a good first assembly election in 2016, suggesting that the DUP had completely embraced her and that UUP voters might be won over in greater numbers. In August 2016 she and Martin McGuinness wrote a very measured joint letter to Theresa May setting out how they were prepared to work together to facilitate Brexit negotiations.

In December 2016, when the shadow of the RHI fell across the political agenda, everything went pear-shaped. And it never recovered.

There was a chance, when the confidence and supply deal was cut with the Conservatives, that the DUP might have a beneficial role to play at the heart of government. Instead, it chose the uber-unionist route.

Her legacy? She leaves unionism in a worse state than at any other time in the last century. Yes, others were to blame, too. But as leader the mess lies on her doorstep.

ON THIS DAY

APRIL 30 1921

Gangs of Looters

SPRIT grocers continue to attract the unwelcome attention of predatory gangs in various parts of working-class districts in Belfast where the Unionists predominate. Premises in which the business is carried on by unprotected women appear to possess a strong attraction for those in search of free drink and whatever else they can commandeer.

The premises of Mr Heggarty who trades as a spirit and family grocer at Fox Street, off the Newtownards Road, was made the object of an attack by a mob, the shop being stripped entirely of its contents.

Mrs Kelly, who carries on business as a spirit grocer at Ohio Street in the Shankill area, was the victim of a hold-up by six men on the same night. She was threatened by the men that serious consequences would follow if she attempted to raise an alarm and was compelled to stand by while her property was looted.

Sinn Féin Election Notice

'PARTITION Election - a general mass meeting of the electors from the four City Divisions will be held in St Mary's Hall on Friday evening in support of the Sinn Féin candidates, viz: Sean Dolan (QUB); Sean MacEntee, TD, West; Councillor D McCullough, do.; Councillor D Barnes, South; Councillor A Savage, East and Michael Carolan, North.

Come in your thousands and support the cause of our country's Freedom. Take your stand against Partition, for self-determination....'

Henry Defends 'Barbarism'

IN THE House of Commons yesterday Mr Acland asked a question about the burnings in the town of Westport [County Mayo]. In reply Mr Denis Henry [Attorney-General for Ireland] said that the statement that a portion of Westport was burned was misleading.

The houses of one person and the contents of the houses of certain other persons were systematically destroyed by members of the Crown forces... The persons were known to the police to be actively engaged in the rebel conspiracy. The decision to destroy the property was taken by the responsible police officer after a brutal ambush...

Mr Hogge - Can the right hon. gentleman say when the Government is going to put an end to those methods of barbarism? Mr Henry - There are so many persons who could be brought to trial, it is difficult to do it. (Throughout the Belfast disturbances of 1920-22, Catholic owned pubs and spirit groceries in Loyalist areas were regularly attacked and looted by sectarian mobs. The Ulster Unionist Denis Henry's blatant defence of the 'reprisals' in Westport shocked MPs who accused the government of a policy of barbarism. Meanwhile, Sinn Féin contested all four Belfast seats in the Partition Election but only had a realistic chance in the West.)

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