



A VERY LONG TIME IN POLITICS: Within a year Ian Paisley was dumped as first minister, party leader and moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church – leaving him without his ‘Chuckle Brother’, Martin McGuinness, and with precious little else to chuckle about

# If the assembly goes down again, it isn't coming back

AN Paisley was leader for 37 years. Peter Robinson for seven. And Arlene Foster for five. Edwin Poots or Jeffrey Donaldson might be lucky to make it until the summer of 2024.

Paisley was able to hang on for so long because, for most of those 37 years, he didn't actually take any risks. He always positioned himself to the right of the UUP, accused its leadership of serial treachery and kept himself busy by touring his bad-tempered badger routine to Westminster, Brussels, Stormont and the Martyrs' Memorial.

Then one day he took a risk. The risk was to nod through a plan hatched up by Peter Robinson and the DUP's backroom boys, which saw him agree to head a government with Martin McGuinness. Worse, he gave every sign of enjoying his new role. Within a year he was dumped as first minister, party leader and Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church: leaving him without his 'Chuckle Brother' and with precious little else to chuckle about.

Peter Robinson spent the next seven years taking one risk after another in an effort to keep the show on the road. He was helped by the fact that enough unionists still believed that the best way of keeping Sinn Féin at bay (and out of the first minister's office) was to vote DUP. He was also helped by the UUP's

interesting new strategy of changing leaders every five minutes (Empsey, Elliott and Nesbitt during those seven years) and reinventing policy and positions every other weekend.

The serious briefing against him began around 2012, so it was to his credit and canniness that he managed to hang on for another three years. Foster started well in the May 2016 assembly election, with one of the DUP's best ever results. It was the highpoint of her

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leadership. The briefing against her began a year later, when the election forced by her refusal to stand aside when the RHI story broke saw unionism lose its overall majority and the assembly remain in lockdown for three years.

It was incredible that she clung on for so long; although that may have had something to do with the fact that she was already being lined up as the sacrificial scapegoat from the end of 2018, when Theresa May's first version of the Withdrawal Agreement saw the light of day. For most of that period from March 2017 to January 2020 Foster was a leader without a base, with most of the action centring on Dodds and Donaldson in Westminster. In essence she was leader in name only: hanging on and on and on because no one could be bothered to wield the dagger.

When the New Decade New Approach deal

was offered to the DUP in 2020 she grabbed it and ran straight back to the first minister's office. There was no other choice. The DUP's power base in Westminster had imploded in the general election in December 2019 and it needed to be seen in an alternative base; and any alternative would do. Had it not been for the Covid crisis she would probably have been dumped within a couple of months, but even the DUP acknowledged that an internal power struggle would look particularly heartless in the middle of a pandemic.

A number of factors combined to create a perfect storm against her in early 2021. The scale of the opposition to the protocol (even among small-u unionists) came as a surprise to the DUP; which is why her initial 'there are opportunities' response backfired so spectacularly. An opinion poll indicated the party was shedding support and likely to lose votes to both the TUV and Alliance. The Loyalist Communities Council (with whom she had met) withdrew support from the GFA; the Orange Order expressed hostility; and a younger generation of loyalists took to the streets.

The killer blow, of course, was the collective recognition by her 27 assembly colleagues that seats were likely to be lost at the election scheduled for the Spring of 2022 unless changes were made to the leadership and the strategy. She had to go. She went. Brutally, quickly and without so much as a 'we need to talk' option being offered by those MLAs who remembered ten of their former colleagues disappearing in the storm of the 2017 election.

But a leadership change won't, by itself, save their seats. The party has to find a way of resolving the protocol problem which doesn't include crashing the assembly. Because, if the assembly goes down again it isn't coming back. End of.

*For most of the period from March 2017 to January 2020 Foster was a leader without a base, with most of the action centring on Dodds and Donaldson in Westminster; leader in name only, hanging on and on and on because no one could be bothered to wield the dagger*

## ON THIS DAY

MAY 7 1921

### Craig on His Adventure

THE fears which filled the hearts of Sir James Craig's extreme supporters on Thursday night have been banished to some extent but doubts still remain embedded in many hearts. Captain Herbert Dixon, MP (Unionist Chief Whip) met Sir James on his arrival from Dublin and told him what the extremists were saying. Hence the haste with which a 'Manifesto' was issued to the public in yesterday morning's press. Having learned all that Sir James cared to tell, Captain Dixon hastened to an anxious Tory meeting and related a tale of his leader's heroic daring which reads like a chapter from the Adventures of Buffalo Bill or an exploit of the heroes that figure in the novels of Mr Zane Grey.

A meeting of the Ascendancy party magnates was held yesterday morning and after two hours' consultation the following statement was issued as coming from Sir James Craig: 'My conversation with Mr de Valera having taken place and Ulster having already, with the acceptance of the provisions of the Government of Ireland Act, reached the limit of concession, no further discussion will be entered into. When the Parliaments have been established and the Council of Ireland has been constituted, there will be the necessary constitutional link between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland.' He asked the candidates to carry this message to the Loyalist electors.

Sir James Craig told a Unionist meeting at Holywood last night: Regarding the meeting, 'Ulster stands where she did. (Hear, hear). Secondly, Mr de Valera and Sinn Féin are fully aware that Ulster stands where she did and are also fully aware that neither you nor I, nor indeed any Loyalist in Ulster, could for a moment consent to a Republic or to any weakening of the ties between Ulster and GB and the Empire. No change has taken place, no single atom has been given up and won't be given up – not one.' He went on to say that the Act provided the machinery for setting up a Council and in that Council, with the consent of his colleagues, he proposed to sit and take part and if the South and West function its Parliament and return Mr de Valera as leader, he (Sir James) will be able to meet him there and talk matters over affecting the welfare of Ireland.'

Significantly, in his efforts to calm unionist nerves following his meeting with the Sinn Féin president, Craig expressed a willingness to operate the Council of Ireland – the last fragile bridge between north and south under the Partition Act.

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