

# Pleasing libel win for Arlene Foster as she departs politics

Newton  
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**A**RLENE Foster has been awarded \$125,000 in damages from television personality Dr Christian Jessen, who tweeted false and defamatory statements about her private life.

It is a pleasing win for the first minister as she departs politics and also interestingly timed for moves to reform Northern Ireland's libel laws. A final obstacle was cleared this week when the Northern Ireland Office confirmed Stormont can introduce its own reforms, after the DUP secretly blocked Westminster legislation in 2012.

Former UUP leader Mike Nesbitt, who has just been appointed his party's economy spokesman, hopes his long-stalled private member's bill can be law by next year.

A DUP politician receiving a large libel award she clearly deserves, to widespread public approval, gives all this important context. Reform was never about politics or even the press, although politicians and journalists tend to think so.

The Westminster legislation was aimed at new commercially-motivated threats to academics, medical researchers and high-tech industries. Appropriately enough for Nesbitt, it has always been an economy issue.

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SINN Féin and the SDLP are increasingly exasperated with Edwin Poots for failing to attend the North-South Ministerial Council, causing meetings to be cancelled. The DUP leader and agriculture minister is not admitting to a boycott, which would breach his legal duties.

He is just making weak excuses for his absence while saying cross-border relations have "never been worse".

However, it is difficult for the Irish government to express its exasperation while southern health minister Stephen Donnelly is refusing to meet Robin Swann, his northern counterpart, to discuss Covid policy coordination.

Unlike Poots, Donnelly does not have any obvious political reasons for his boycott.

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A SPITTLE-FLECKED statement from the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) has warned summer could "descend into chaos", told the Irish government to "man up" and dismissed European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen as "yet another unelected German".

Horror and hilarity at these phrases has distracted from the significance of the statement, which calls for the Northern Ireland Protocol to be scrapped. The LCC had only been calling for it to be "amended" - a less stark position than all unionist parties. This is why the British government has been meeting loyalists and the Irish government has been quietly optimistic about avoiding loyalist unrest.

The LCC's new position was supposedly provoked by von der Leyen saying "the protocol is the only possible solution to ensure peace and stability".

The change has actually been

DAMAGES: Television personality Dr Christian Jessen has been ordered to pay £125,000 damages to Arlene Foster for 'outrageous libel'  
PICTURE: by Hugh Russell



driven by the LCC's weakening authority among loyalists, who are losing faith in its 'peaceful protest' strategy and competence in general. This is what really risks summer descending into chaos.

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THE LCC's behaviour has provoked Tom Kelly, Tony Blair's spokesman during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, to write a Times column claiming: "the loyalists of that time, led by the DUP, strongly opposed it".

In reality, the loyalist organisations represented by the LCC supported the agreement in increasingly fraught opposition to the DUP. It is extraordinary Kelly has forgotten this, especially as the LCC was set up by Jonathan Powell - Tony Blair's chief of staff during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations.

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TUV leader Jim Allister has asked all unionist parties to pledge to boycott the executive after the next election if unionism remains the largest designation but is not allowed to keep the office of first minister, should it no longer have the largest party.

Unionism would have kept the office in this scenario under the original Good Friday Agreement rules, which the DUP and Sinn Féin changed at St Andrews.

Allister quit the DUP over St Andrews but alas he cannot bring himself to mention the Good Friday Agreement, as he opposes it as well.

The truly consistent opposition is from Alliance, which is demanding designation be reformed to reflect growth in the centre ground - a stance it has always taken.

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SINN Féin turned up to a demonstration outside Stormont calling for Irish language legislation before the next election, as promised in New Decade, New Approach.

It is unclear who the party was protesting against, other than itself. Sinn Féin controls the Department for Communities, responsible for bringing the legislation forward.

Although DUP cooperation is required in the executive, Edwin Poots says he is fully committed to New Decade, New Approach. Only the UUP objects to the legislation but it says it will not support a petition of concern, meaning there cannot be one. While it is true the agreed timetable has slipped due to Covid, both Sinn Féin and the DUP have been frank about this to the assembly's executive committee.

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PROTESTS outside abortion clinics in Newry can be "intimidating and threatening" for staff and patients, according to Sinn Féin MLA Liz Kimmmins.

The Southern Health Trust has approached police and moved services from the city centre to Daisy Hill but the protesters have followed. Although the PSNI claims it is powerless to act, it can apply for anti-social behaviour orders to prevent harassment, alarm or distress. PSNI priorities on this issue remain suspect, having taken such a hard line against abortion pills before they were legalised.

Perhaps as much policing initiative could now go into protecting women as previously went into pursuing them.

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## ON THIS DAY

MAY 29 1921

### Quiet Rural Election

FULL details of the County elections are not yet available but it is evident that the contests were carried out peaceably as a rule though an exciting incident is reported from Tyrone.

The poll in County Armagh was a fairly exhaustive one. There were many cases of personation. The candidates included Mr John Nugent [Nationalist], Michael Collins and Francis Aiken [Republicans] and Mr R Best, KC and Major D G Shillington [Unionist]. The poll was the heaviest ever recorded in the history of Lurgan. Things passed over quietly and good-humouredly and it is understood that Mr J D Nugent [Nationalist] had secured a large percentage of the Catholic vote. The Sinn Féin agents were very active, both at the polling stations and at their tally rooms in Edward Street and North Street.

In County Antrim there is every reason to believe that Mr Joseph Devlin [Nationalist] will be returned with a large margin to spare. A Lisburn voter states there was a good deal of intimidation and that very many Catholics were intimidated. The keenest anxiety was manifested in Newry where the contending parties claimed to have polled very exhaustively. The Unionists displayed Union Jacks. The Nationalist and Sinn Féin parties worked very harmoniously.

Reports from Tyrone indicate that all parties have polled very well and each side was confident of victory. Agents reported that everything passed over quietly. Over 400 B Specials were on duty.

At Roslea, Newtownbutler and Magheraveely in Fermanagh there was an exhaustive poll of Sinn Féiners and Nationalists as well as Unionists. Across the public street of Roslea was a Unionist arch on which were the words, "No surrender of our rights. Up Carson. 1888 and 1921". There was a force of military and Auxiliary police in the village.

### RIC Man's Funeral in Fermanagh

THE funeral took place to the Catholic cemetery of Brookeboro' on Wednesday of Sergeant Peter Joseph McDonagh, RIC of Mountfield police barracks, County Tyrone who was shot dead on Saturday.

The remains were conveyed by a body of police in motor lorries to the church, this escort forming a guard of honour. Rev James O'Connor, PP regretted that a young man like the deceased should have been cut off so quickly and said he had a letter from the parish priest at Newtownstewart giving deceased the highest character. The chief mourners were the deceased's mother and two brothers. (A typical member of the old RIC - a Catholic from a small farming background - Sergeant McDonagh had been in Greencastle to arrange a polling station for the elections when he was shot dead by the IRA.)

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