



PONTIFICATING: Arlene Foster making her first appearance on GB News

The union is a sham and it's time to face the truth

DID I watch Arlene Foster's debut as a commentator on GB News? Did I hell. Life's too short and I have no intention of doubling the channel's viewing figures.

Mrs Foster has every right to a life beyond the Northern Ireland Assembly. But if she is hoping to reinvigorate herself, GB News is not the place for her. It's the last refuge of the damned – a television channel populated by the undead of TV journalism and right-wing politics.

You would have thought Mrs Foster, the unionist leader whose ham-fisted approach to Brexit placed a border down the middle of the Irish Sea, would have learned her lesson. But no. There she was pontificating alongside Brexit-beggetter Nigel Farage on a TV channel whose very name betrays the fact that English right-wingers do not consider Northern Ireland to be a fully paid-up member of their sovereign nation.

There's a reason the country is called The United Kingdom of Great Britain AND Northern Ireland – the six counties of the ancient province of Ulster is an embarrassing appendage. And there is a reason why GB News puts '...and Northern Ireland' to one side. It's irrelevant to its agenda.

We know the English would rather have Brexit than Northern Ireland – countless opinion polls have demonstrated that.

One of the funny things about modern politics is that many members of the so-called Conservative and Unionist Party don't much care for the union at all.

In their hearts, of course, the likes of Mrs Foster know that they are not wanted – which makes their neediness all the more surprising. Some day the penny will drop. But, good heavens, they are slow learners.

Pretty well every prime minister since Wilson has betrayed them (before him Northern Ireland was not even listed among 'any other business' in

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Westminster's agenda); and yet unionists continue to suck up to London in the forlorn hope that it will repay their sacrifice on the Somme, the shipyard's contribution to the Second World War, and the gift of George Best to English football.

Back in the eighties, when I was a journalism student, we were given a talk by Louis Heren – then deputy editor of *The Times*. Heren was a fabled foreign correspondent, said to be the model for Thomas Fowler, the protagonist in Graham Green's *The Quiet American*.

Northern Ireland was in the thick of the Troubles, having just come through the hunger strikes. "What would you recommend," one of my peers asked Heren, "if someone came to you and said they wanted to train to be a foreign correspondent?"

Without pausing for breath, Heren said: "I'd

send them to Northern Ireland. It's a foreign country anyway." So much for it being as British as Finchley.

Such was the power of his words, and the vehemence with which he said them, that they made an impression which has never left me. He voiced what the British establishment thought then, what it had always thought, and what it thinks today.

Just reflect on Dominic Cummings's recent admission that Northern Ireland was far from being a priority for the Leave campaign. "Ireland would have been a bit messy but so what? It's a small problem relative to others." Just dwell for a moment on that dismissive phrase "so what?" Even better, every unionist should think long and hard about it. So what about the victims of the Troubles, so what about the Edgar Grahams and the Norman Stronges, so what about the Mountbattens, so what about the terror in unionist and nationalist areas, so what about the peace process that brought the killing to an end? So what indeed.

The protocol, Cummings confesses, was signed for short-term political expediency. He told the BBC it "punted difficult questions into the future". From Britain's point of view, he said to Laura Kuenssberg last week, a deal that put a border down the Irish Sea "was the right thing to do".

This insight makes all the more shocking the failure of unionism to wake up and smell the Ulster fry.

Their future and the future of their people is best placed by opening a genuine dialogue with their fellow inhabitants of this shared island, rather than hoping against hope that England will do the right thing by them.

As for Mrs Foster's television career, she'd have more viewers – and be of more use – with a slot on the shopping channel selling Cookstown sausages, Coleraine cheddar, and Fermanagh black bacon.

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ON THIS DAY

JULY 29 1921

TDs Released

COUNTESS Markievicz was released from Mountjoy Prison yesterday. She was sentenced at the end of last year to two years' imprisonment for association with the Boy Scout movement [Na Fianna Eireann] as a recruiting agency for the IRA. The Countess acted as a Labour Minister in Dail Eireann of which she is still a member. For many years she has been prominent in the Republican Movement. She took part in the [1916] Dublin insurrection and was sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted and she was released in the general amnesty later. She was the first woman to be elected to Parliament in 1918 but refused to take her seat.

A report reached Dublin last night that Mr Joseph McGrath, MP for St James's Division (Dublin) was released during the day from Ballykinlar Camp [County Down].

Birkenhead Assailed by 'Diehards'

IN THE House of Lords yesterday, the Marquis of Salisbury (Unionist) referred to the ongoing negotiations between the Government and Mr de Valera. He said that he and his supporters 'felt the shame and humiliation involved in these negotiations'.

Responding, the Lord Chancellor [Lord Birkenhead] said the position was that some days ago proposals were made by the Government to the representatives of Southern Ireland which it was hoped might serve as a basis of reconciliation and peace. If those terms were accepted it would, of course, be necessary to embody them in an Act of Parliament and both Houses would discuss them in that form. Lord Salisbury had spoken of there being some shame involved in these negotiations. So far as his Unionist colleagues were concerned, they had a conscience clear of any shame in the matter. They could not understand why Lord Salisbury should grudge the days that were required for the attempt at conciliation – days which were, happily, free from those outrages which had alarmed and distressed the whole country.

THE Truce – which de Valera had made a precondition of any negotiations – saw the release of elected TDs including Sean MacEoin, sentenced to death for the murder of an RIC inspector. The mass of republican internees, including those at Ballykinlar, were detained until the Treaty. The Lloyd George coalition came under fire from Lord Salisbury (the son of a Tory former PM) and the Tory die-hards over its 'peace policy'. Carson was particularly angry with Birkenhead, his former ally, for defending talks with the IRA 'murder gang'.

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