

Former first minister and DUP leader Arlene Foster has been appointed to the board of cross-border charity Co-operation Ireland

There's a certain irony in Foster's appointment to Co-operation Ireland

Patricia MACBRIDE



AT the start of the week, Arlene Foster was appointed to the board of Co-operation Ireland, a board that now boasts two former leaders of the DUP, along with four 'Sirs', a baroness, an ex-taoiseach, a sitting TD and loads more people with three-letter acronyms after their name.

A few months ago, I had cause to look at the makeup of the board of Co-operation Ireland and the old adage 'male, pale and stale' came to mind. Seventeen people on the board are male and with the appointment of Mrs Foster (who may have also contributed to a hefty reduction in the average age of board members), there are now five women.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no people of colour on the board.

Speaking on her appointment, Mrs Foster said: "I have long admired the work carried out by Co-operation Ireland and am delighted to be joining the board. I strongly believe in engagement, discussion and debate and look forward to working with the chairman and my fellow board members as we try and chart the way through challenging times."

It's a pity that her belief in engagement, discussion and debate did not extend to ensuring, whilst still party leader, that her ministers attended North-South Ministerial Council meetings earlier this year. She denied at the time that a boycott was in place, but it was a boycott in all but name.

Charting the way through challenging times didn't include stepping down to allow her role in the RHI scandal be investigated and, as a result, the assembly collapsed.

There wasn't much room for debate and discussion when she led the DUP delegation which met with Michel Barnier in 2018 as negotiations on the Brexit withdrawal agreement were coming to a head and she stated that the DUP would not budge on its "blood red" line that the withdrawal agreement must not include regulatory checks in the Irish Sea which were designed to avoid a hard border on the island. So much for all those discussions with Boris Johnson which resulted in the Brexit protocol.

There wasn't much engagement when then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny established an all-island civic dialogue on Brexit which Foster called in October 2016 "a complete grandstanding exercise".

There definitely was no engagement when Foster refused to attend any of the events to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. Then in her column in the *Daily Express* in September, she said that President Michael D Higgins had rudely disrespected the Queen and Northern Ireland by declining to attend a church service in Armagh to commemorate the centenary of partition. The irony was not lost on many people.

And all of that is before I even mention the crocodiles.

But in the interests of fairness, I should point out that Mrs Foster did repeatedly engage with loyalist paramilitaries and the Loyalist Communities Council where there appears to have been plenty of debate and discussion during the years of her leadership of the DUP.

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There are those who will say that Arlene Foster allowed herself as leader of the DUP to be driven by hard-line unionism and that she wasn't strong enough within the party to show leadership. Who can forget Edwin Poots's comments when she took up the role of first minister that her "most important job" remained that of "wife, mother and daughter"? That's an awful lot of gender stereotyping squeezed into one sentence.

There is no doubt that her election as leader of the Democratic Unionist Party broke a glass ceiling and that she created opportunities for other women within the party, both as elected representatives and advisers. The level of misogynistic criticism and sexism levelled at her was horrendous, and not an insignificant amount of it from within her own party.

As a woman and as DUP leader she could not have shown herself to be in any way inclined towards major co-operation with the Irish government, even if she wanted to or thought it was a good idea, as it would have been spun as weakness. The question remains, though, whether she wants to. Freed of the party, it will be interesting to observe how far she travels in developing the type of relationships and cooperation that are required of a director of an all-island charity with an income of £1.6 million plus €700,000 last year and a staff of 31.

As for Co-operation Ireland, the next time their internal nominating committee meets to consider the appointment of board members, they might want to consider that women, people of colour, united Irelanders, those below pension age and many others could make a positive contribution to the organisation's strategic direction.

An all-island charity of this size should reflect all of Ireland and right now, its board doesn't.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 25 1921

Belfast dead now 24

WITH the exception of a few minor incidents, Belfast was comparatively peaceful throughout the greater part of yesterday. However, about six o'clock in the evening, a bomb was hurled into a tram laden with shipyard workers while passing along Royal Avenue. A disastrous explosion occurred, killing two men and wounding eight others, some of them seriously.

The Orange murder gangs continued their foul work at night. A man entered the spirit grocery of Mrs Kelly, Ohio Street and fired at the son of the proprietor and a Protestant neighbour, killing both on the spot. This brings the total deaths for this week up to 24.

Dáil minister refutes 'lie'

THE following was issued last night in connection with the present pogrom upon the Nationalist minority in Belfast: 'The Publicity Department of Dáil Eireann is instructed by the Minister of Defence [Cathal Brugha] to characterise as utterly groundless statements made by the Unionist press to the effect that Volunteers have been sent or have gone to Belfast from other parts of Ireland, or that the local Volunteers have acted aggressively. The only members of the IRA who are in Belfast are members of the local battalions.'

Ex-soldiers threatened

THREE Catholic ex-servicemen employed on the Tramway reconstruction work on the Crumlin Road, where over fifty men have been engaged for some time past, were approached yesterday and ordered to leave by a mob. It was pointed out by the men affected that they had each served in the Great War, but they were told that this did not matter now and if they valued their lives they would go at once.

Fermanagh Republican court

DURING the progress of an arbitration court [Republican Court] in Old Moate School at Lisnaskea on Saturday an RIC district inspector entered and asked the chairman under what authority the Court was being held. On being told it was constituted under the Irish Republic, the DI informed the Bench that he declared it proclaimed and called upon those present to disperse. The DI thereupon ordered the police to disperse the court which included two solicitors. **The murderous activities of loyalist snipers in east and north Belfast was matched by the renewed IRA bombing of shipyard trams travelling though the city centre at the wave of violence continued. In Fermanagh the police began a much more aggressive role towards the holding of republican courts, a sign that Craig was determined to stamp his government's authority on nationalist-majority areas despite their declared allegiance to the Dáil.**

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