

Arlene Foster – *Brexit and the Union*

DUP leader & former First Minister of Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Arlene Foster, MLA,
speaking to the Bruges Group:

We are certainly living through interesting political times.

Just twelve months ago few predicted the people of the UK would vote to leave the EU, the people of the United States would elect Donald Trump as President and Theresa May as Prime Minister would be heading for an historic General Election victory.

Though given the electoral upsets of the last twelve months we should take nothing for granted!

In Northern Ireland too things have changed. After almost ten years of devolution we have had no fully functioning Executive since January and a real prospect of Direct Rule being reintroduced before Parliament breaks for the summer.

Today I want to talk about two Unions, the European Union - which we have voted to leave - and the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which I hope and trust will continue to endure.

From politics in Northern Ireland I know only too well the temptation to refight old battles and to dwell on what has been.

But that is to make a fundamental mistake.

If politics is about anything, then it is about the future.

It is why we must make and remake the case for the United Kingdom and it is why we must get on with implementing the will of the British people last June.

I voted to for the UK to leave the EU not out of some sentimental form of British nationalism or because I do not value the contribution that people from all parts of the EU have made to life in the UK, but because I believe in the right of the UK to determine its own future, or to paraphrase the leave campaign, to take back control.

All of the signs are that Theresa May will win a resounding majority in the House of Commons when the votes are counted after the 8th June.

That means she will have a clear mandate to negotiate the arrangements for the UK's departure from the European Union by March 2019.

For Northern Ireland, that is far from the end of the story. While the fact that the UK is leaving the EU is clear, the precise terms of our departure remain to be negotiated and agreed.



While the general election is likely to give the Prime Minister a stronger hand to push for the kind of Brexit that she wishes to see delivered, in Northern Ireland it has run the risk of polarising an opinion that was coalescing around an agreed way forward.

At home, we may not have agreed on the 'leave or remain' issue but we were very close to agreeing on the kind of Brexit we wanted to see.

On this basis, I believe that there is room and reason for optimism. And I hope that once the election dust settles, we can once again pick up where we left off.

At EU level, I suspect there is more sympathy towards Northern Ireland than to any other part of the UK.

Both our government and the EU in their opening correspondence have reflected the importance of getting a good deal for Northern Ireland.

During the referendum campaign and since, some of those who advocated 'remain' have argued that the UK's departure from the EU will result in a hard border on the island of Ireland.

I know of no one who wishes that to be the case.

My experience of living beside an other EU member state is different from most other UK citizens.

I was born and raised in a border constituency.

I still live there and it's where I am raising my family.

That means, more than most, I am acutely aware of the importance of the ability of people and goods to move freely across the land frontier with the Republic of Ireland.

The fact that, geographically, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK which will have a land border with the EU does make us different, as does our history and our politics.

Who could deny that the situation of Northern Ireland within the UK, and indeed Ireland within the EU, will face different challenges from other areas affected by the UK's EU exit and will require unique and tailored solutions?

However, I do not believe that a circular argument about some ill-defined and ill-conceived so-called special status for Northern Ireland is helpful: indeed, it is more likely to be counterproductive.

In my speech to the DUP conference as far back as last October, I pointed out that any deal must recognise the reality of our geography and of our history.

As someone who argued for the UK to leave the EU, I am prepared to be flexible about the precise terms and timings.



I am more interested in getting the best deal for Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole than I am in some doctrine or dogma. By far the best way to achieve this is to get a Stormont Executive up and running as quickly as possible.

The talks process that we have been involved in since early March has been protracted and frustrating but in some areas progress has been made.

A common Northern Ireland position on Brexit is one such area.

Building on the letter agreed by the then deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness and myself last August, all the parties have been making a positive contribution to an emerging consensus which can offer the best of all worlds for Northern Ireland.

Now is the time to work together and to grasp the opportunities which exist.

For those of us who argued for Brexit, that will mean looking for flexible and imaginative solutions to the challenges that face us; just as it will mean for those who argued for remain an acceptance of the decision.

It is a simple and indisputable fact that by far the most important Union for the people of Northern Ireland economically is the Union with Great Britain but that need not come at the cost of accepting the economic and cultural ties that cross the border.

For once, there need not be a winner and a loser. The Republic of Ireland needs a good outcome to these negotiations every bit as much as we do and I believe there is a shared objective between the UK and the Republic to get the right deal.

That right deal will not just be between Northern Ireland and the Republic. It will be between Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole in terms of transport and trade, and people and goods.

I don't pretend there are easy answers but collectively, if we are all pushing in the one direction, I am confident that they can be resolved. It may take a bit more time and some financial support to get things right but it can be achieved.

Whether or not devolution is restored before the summer, I am committed to working with the incoming government to get the best deal for Northern Ireland.

I am also conscious that in doing so I want us to be able to win as much support as possible for whatever deal is done.

That doesn't just mean winning a majority in Parliament at the end of the process but ensuring that whatever deal is done does not tear at the fabric of the United Kingdom.

For me the importance of the EU, whether in it or how we leave it, ranks as a distant second to the importance of the United Kingdom.



That would have been the case whether we voted to remain or to stay.

I am confident the Prime Minister will have the interests of the whole of the UK in mind during the negotiations that lie ahead.

I know for some that the cause of the UK leaving the EU has been a central goal and ambition but I also want us to reflect on the precious bonds that exist between and across the United Kingdom, and why the Union is so important to us all.

As many of you will know, I come from the most westerly parliamentary constituency in the United Kingdom. I grew up and have lived virtually my whole life in Fermanagh.

It is home. It is where my heart lies and it is where I wanted to raise my family. That has not changed.

In some ways life in rural Fermanagh could not be more different than London but in so many other ways our lives are intertwined by every aspect of our history and culture.

I got involved in politics because I wanted to make a positive difference, because of my pride in Northern Ireland and my passion for the United Kingdom as a whole. My nationality is not simply a choice like the support of a football team but is integral to who I am as a person.

My Britishness is not just about the passport I hold but the identity that I have. It cannot be reduced to a name or a badge but is a culture and a way of life. It is about decency and respect.

It is about a shared history going back generations and hundreds of years, it is about a shared cultural experience which encompasses the newspapers that we read, the television we watch and the football teams we support.

It is about a pride in our role for good in the world, not just through two world wars and the fight against communism in the past but the battle for freedom and democracy today.

It was that devotion to country that led so many of our people down the years to serve in the armed forces and make the ultimate sacrifice for a greater good.

By today's standards the UK is not a large county in population terms but our influence extends to every part of the globe. We retain a leading role on the world stage, not just because our past record but because we can be relied up as a force for good when times are tough.

Fundamental to all that we are as a nation is our belief in freedom and democracy. For us these things do not need to be codified in a written constitution but are the beating heart of who we are as a society.

The United Kingdom today has a very different cultural make up in 2017 than it did in 1917 but we have retained the values that made our country great.



Whatever the debate today about immigration from the EU, there is no doubt that our country has been enhanced by the people who have over decades come to our shores.

The fact that, to this day, the UK remains a beacon attracting people from all over the globe to work, to settle and to make their lives, tells us more about our country than any other statistic really can.

Our democratic system has stood the test of time over centuries. In my view Westminster remains a model and an inspiration for democracy everywhere.

And who can doubt the role our Queen has played. I confess that I am an ardent royalist but even those who aren't cannot dispute the part Her Majesty has played in holding this country together.

My belief in and support for the United Kingdom does not rely upon the economic arguments, though there can be no doubt that it is overwhelmingly the case that we are all better together than apart. The United Kingdom has allowed the sharing of wealth and prosperity, not just between people but across our entire country.

It is because of all of these things and countless more that I want to see our country succeed and prosper. Of course we can evolve and change but we must retain those things that have made us what we are.

Political leaders from Northern Ireland understandably often remain neutral, at least publicly, about the outcome of a Westminster General Election.

After all we have to work with whomever the British people elect.

Over recent decades we have had both good and bad experiences of Labour and Conservative administrations.

But this election is different.

While Theresa May is well within the political mainstream and has proven herself to be a solid and reliable unionist, Jeremy Corbyn is beyond the proverbial and the political pale.

It is hard to take seriously the proclaimed unionism of a man who was so close to the political representatives of the IRA at the height of the Troubles. It is hard to see much good coming for the Labour Party from the coming election except the replacement of their party leader.

In just four years' time we will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of Northern Ireland. Given the history and events of the last hundred years, that is an achievement of which we can be proud.

It has been possible, not just because of the resolve of the people of Northern Ireland in the face of threats and attacks from many quarters, but also because of the support we have received from the rest of the United Kingdom.



The Union will only survive if it is a two-way process. I am delighted that it has always been so. While from time to time British governments have often strayed from the path that we would ideally like to have seen pursued, we have always been able to count on the support of the British people.

That is why as the leader of unionism in Northern Ireland I want us to play as full a part as possible in the life of the United Kingdom as a whole. I want us to be able to contribute as much now and in the future in terms of the cultural and economic life of our country, just as we did a hundred years ago on the battlefields across Europe.

While so many of us take it for granted as a fact of life and integral to our existence, it does bear considering what is so valuable about our membership of the United Kingdom.

In Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein have been pushing for a border poll to be held to test opinion on the issue of the Union. I have no doubt that our position in the UK would be resoundingly endorsed and all recent polling makes that abundantly clear. However, as we have learned from the experience in Scotland, such campaigns by their very nature are divisive and disruptive.

In Northern Ireland, I want our Executive back up and running and dealing with the problems that face people in their everyday lives.

The case for the Union is strong. It is sound. And even those who would deny our cultural links have to accept that, quite simply, the case for the Union makes financial sense.

By making the case for the Union, I believe the facts would ultimately deliver a verdict which would render any future demand for a border poll devoid of credibility.

I see this 'case for the Union' being aimed at those in Great Britain as well as our fellow citizens in Northern Ireland. It is an opportunity to make the case for the Union in terms of our history, our culture, our economy and every other facet of life.

We should remind ourselves of the value of the Union and persuade others of its worth. I want us to put on the record the contribution that Northern Ireland has made and will continue to make to the life of our Nation.

This work should not be the property of any political party but should encompass contributions from right across life both in Northern Ireland and in the United Kingdom as a whole.

I have no doubt that the case for the Union can and will be able to command widespread support but we should also ask the question of what we can do to make it even more appealing to everyone within our society

This will require us to challenge ourselves as well as others. It may mean posing questions about what it is that we value about our membership of the United Kingdom and be careful not to deter support as a result of things that are not fundamental to that vision.



We are at the start of what I expect to be a long process. Our goal must be by the time the centenary of Northern Ireland comes around in 2021 to have a persuasive case that those of us who believe in the United Kingdom can confidently make anywhere and to any audience.

Despite the setback at the Assembly election in March, the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland is not under threat in the short term. But we must ensure that remains the case in the medium and long term.

If we take the wrong turn, we could see everything we hold so dear under threat in the years to come. But if we ask the right questions and take the right steps now, we can ensure that we pass on to the next generation the same rich inheritance that was passed to us.

Soon the election will be over and it will be time to get back to work. For the Prime Minister that will mean getting the best deal for the UK in Europe. For us in Northern Ireland it will mean getting devolution up and running again on a sustainable basis that works for everyone.

While those are very different goals and ambitions the one guiding star for all must be that we ensure the maintenance and the survival of the one Union that is so precious to us all - the United Kingdom.