

# An Awkward Relationship? Ulster Unionism and the Rest of the UK

**By Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA PC**

Northern Ireland is enjoying relative peace and a growing number of people see being part of the United Kingdom as the best way forward.

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have unique qualities and different emphasis but we are stronger together than any individual part standing alone.

I have travelled here from my home in County Fermanagh.

Fermanagh is as far west as you can get in Northern Ireland. It is on the edge of the United Kingdom.

We might have different accents and there might be a bit less hustle and bustle than London but Fermanagh is every bit as integral a part of the Union as our nation's capital.

I was born in County Fermanagh. I often walked across the Irish border - it was three miles away.

During the early years of my life, just as Northern Ireland was on the edge of the Union geographically, it often felt that it was also hanging over the edge politically and constitutionally.

As a child, I observed my parents' unionism. Their loyalty was to the United Kingdom.

Our home was a household where loyalty and allegiance were to the fore.

My father served Queen and country as a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Being proud to put that uniform on and defend democracy against terror saw him shot at the door of our family home by the IRA.

I remember my father crawling into our kitchen with the blood streaming from his head. I didn't fully understand the Troubles at that time but I realised that the enemies of the Union had tried to kill my dad.

A moment like that often has the capacity to shape a child's thinking growing up.

Like thousands and thousands and thousands of people across Northern Ireland during the Troubles, I was determined that no bullet or bomb would dampen our loyalty, our unionism or our Britishness.

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Yet the relationship between Unionism in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom has at times been strained. Northern Ireland's Unionists will have been considered down the years, and perhaps still so by some today, as being hard to understand or relate to.

But if we appeared a little different, there were understandable reasons. Unionists felt little loved and saw dangers at every turn. Everyone seemed out to get them.

Some in the Irish Republic.

Some of their own neighbours in their hometowns and villages.

International opinion too was perceived to be against Unionism and some in North America in particular.

And multiple Westminster Governments. When our Government acted against our interests and over our heads, it was those hurts that often ran the deepest.

Our relationship I believe has developed and matured over the years, often through the experience of difficult times.

Today Northern Ireland is a world apart from the years of the Troubles and the dark years of sectarian terrorism.

We have come far and yet we have a further journey to travel.

Unionists want to take the next steps on that journey.

Politically the Democratic Unionist Party, now the main party of Unionism in Northern Ireland, is playing its part in ensuring the national government is able to govern at this most crucial time in the history of the United Kingdom.

We have been able to use our influence at Westminster to make a difference to the lives of people in every part of Northern Ireland. But we have also demonstrated that our priority is to help bring stability and sensible Government to our nation.

Our Confidence and Supply Agreement with the Conservative and Unionist Party was about much more than Northern Ireland.

We ensured that pensioners in every part of the country have the security of knowing that the triple lock on pensions is safe and that the winter fuel payment will remain universal.

We have also held the Government to its commitment on maintaining defence spending at the 2% of GDP NATO target.

For us our unionism doesn't end at the Irish Sea. We are bringing that same philosophy of doing what's in our nation's best interests to the other challenges that the United Kingdom faces over the course of the current Parliament.

In 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union.

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We voted in the referendum as one nation. We must implement that decision and leave as one nation. Again, Northern Ireland is a central element to that debate. But unionists, throughout the country - those who voted remain and leave – accept that we must exit the EU in a way that causes no damage to the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom.

In particular, the Prime Minister has been categorical on this matter. We will NOT support any Withdrawal Agreement that creates, through a legal protocol, a new regulatory border down the Irish Sea that acts as an impediment to Northern Ireland businesses trading with Great Britain or Great Britain businesses trading into Northern Ireland.

This 'red line' is grounded not only in constitutional reality but also in good economic sense.

There is little doubt that delivering on the referendum result is perhaps the most substantial and complex process the Government and Parliament has undertaken in recent times.

We want to maximise the opportunities that will flow from our exit of the EU.

We want to see more flexibility for locally elected Ministers to set policies that work for our regions.

And as a unionist I see no logic or rationale for a hard border being created between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Indeed we do not want to see that at all.

The only people stirring up myths of border checkpoints are those who are committed to unpicking the Union. They seek to use such imagery to advance and build support for their long-term political objective. They will not succeed.

Some have sought to use the UK exit from the EU as a means to foment division in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is transformed, and while we should never be complacent that prevailing feeling of constantly being under siege is no longer the case.

Unionism is at its best when it is confident, outward looking and welcoming. We must move forward with confidence.

Citizenship and rights are essentially unionist issues. They are issues we should set out to reclaim. Nationalism is by its nature narrow and exclusive. Being a Unionist is the opposite. Unionism stands for pluralism and multi-culturalism. We are inclusive and welcome all.

Confident unionism can capture the diversity that nationalism cannot. It transcends nationalism, and allows individuals to express the cultural values or identity they wish.

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The surest way to cement the Union is for Northern Ireland to be open and provide a successful environment in which to live and work. A Northern Ireland which embraces differing cultures and where minorities feel valued - is one that few will choose to abandon.

I want to be a leader who reaches out to promote the value - AND the values - of the Union.

23 years ago, I penned the foreword for a booklet entitled 'Selling Unionism Home and Away'. It included articles from a number of eminent contributors including some speaking at today's event. I have always been seized by the importance of making the positive case for the Union.

By today's standards the United Kingdom is not a large country in population terms but our influence extends to every part of the globe. The Union has brought safety, stability, security and success for all of us. And in an ever-changing world with challenge and uncertainty everywhere, that safety, security, stability and success has never been more crucial.

We have faced great challenges before. External, even existential threats. But we overcame them. And we were able to, because we stood together against those threats as one.

I am hugely proud to be British. To be part of this Union that has endured for centuries. For my culture, heritage and identity to be British.

But our Britishness is about much more than the passport we hold. It cannot and should not be reduced down to a name or a badge. It is about a shared history going back generations. Pride in a United Kingdom which ended the slave trade, was the home of the industrial revolution and which founded the welfare state.

It is about a shared cultural experience which encompasses the newspapers we read, the television we watch and the sporting teams we support.

A global history manifested through the Commonwealth, something that will receive renewed focus and attention as the UK leaves the European Union.

It is about the institutions we cherish – like the National Health Service – which is the envy of others.

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

What knits us together isn't a common political creed, one religion or the same skin colour.

We are bound together by a set of common values. Values like democracy, freedom,

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and respect for the rule of law and tolerance for others.

For us, these things do not need to be codified in a written constitution. They are the beating heart of who we are as a society and what makes us British.

Our democratic system has stood the test of time over centuries. Westminster remains an inspiration for fledgling democracies everywhere.

And the Union has allowed people from all of its parts – including Northern Ireland – to make a contribution political, economic and cultural life that otherwise they might not have been able to.

I know that some see Northern Ireland's relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom as one of more 'take' than 'give'.

Certainly, in an economic and financial sense, the United Kingdom has allowed the sharing of wealth and prosperity, not just between people but across our entire country and Northern Ireland has been a huge beneficiary of that.

My belief in, and support for, the United Kingdom does not depend upon the economic arguments, though there can be no doubt that it is overwhelmingly the case that we are all economically better together than apart. It would defy logic to decouple Northern Ireland from, what is today, the fifth largest economy in the world.

Northern Ireland's people and businesses pay into the Exchequer like their counterparts in every part of the Kingdom. But our contribution to the Union cannot simply be measured in pounds and pence alone.

It is measured in the blood sacrifice at the Somme and Messines and across Flanders fields during the Great War. In the leadership on the battlefield of great leaders like Montgomery and Alanbrooke. And in the engineering excellence of the men and women of Belfast who built the ships and planes that helped win the Second World War.

It is measured in the enrichment of our cultural life made by writers like C. S. Lewis and Seamus Heaney.

It is measured in the contribution of our eminent scientists. People like Lord Kelvin – the founder of modern physics – and Jocelyn Bell Burnell who discovered pulsars.

And it is measured in the industry and innovation of our entrepreneurs. Our modern day industrialists such as William Wright whose company Wrightbus manufacture 1 in 3 of London's famous red buses and Peter Fitzgerald whose life sciences company Randox makes 1 in 10 of the world's cholesterol tests.

One of the keys to the success of our Union is that Northern Ireland – like Scotland and Wales – can exert an influence, can have a voice and can play a valuable role well beyond our own smaller size would otherwise merit.

The overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland understand and appreciate that they are better off being part of the United Kingdom. They also understand and greatly appreciate the incomparable contribution that the rest of the UK makes to Northern

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Ireland.

I am immensely proud of our shared history. But, equally, I am optimistic and excited about our future together. The great thing about our nation is that it has not remained rigid, unable or unwilling to change. The United Kingdom has exhibited an ability to adapt.

But what has been fixed firm are those principles, those common values of democracy, freedom and tolerance.

The United Kingdom of 2018 is a very different place to the one of 1801 or 1707. And in no more obvious a way than in how we are governed. We were brought together in political union yet, today, the four constituent parts of our Kingdom have devolved institutions with very different political complexions.

As many of you may know, Northern Ireland has been without a devolved government for over a year. The reasons for its collapse are many and complex, but the range of cultural and other issues can and will be resolved.

I am determined to ensure that is the case in the time ahead.

Our Union of the nations of the United Kingdom has been one of the most successful in the history of nations. If we are to continue to thrive and work together we need to continue to make the case for that, whether in Northern Ireland, or Scotland or indeed England and Wales. Our people need reminded of the benefits of, and the values that shape our nation.

For our part we will continue to make that case and argue for policies that grow our economy, reward ambition and aspiration, and benefit individuals who work hard so they see real reward for their labours.

Over the next decade the United Kingdom has the opportunity to reassert itself on the global stage and together we can achieve great things in the years ahead.