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Unionists want to live in harmony with their nationalist neighbours



21 May 2018

Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA today writes in the Times about the Union, it's past, present and future within Northern Ireland.

Arlene Foster MLA

Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party

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Today's Conference in London, The Union and Unionism- Past, Present and Future is an important and timely event. During the early years of my life, just as Northern Ireland was on the edge of the Union geographically, it felt that it was also hanging over the edge politically and constitutionally.

Today the Democratic Unionist Party is playing our party in ensuring stable government as a crucial time in the nation's history.

Some have sought to use the UK exit from the EU as a means to foment division in Northern Ireland, but I have full confidence that a very healthy majority recognise the wealth of benefits the Union brings.

Northern Ireland is transformed, and the old siege mentality is no longer applicable.

Unionism does best when it is confident, outward looking and welcoming.

I have always been seized by the importance of making positive case for the Union. And a modern vision for the Union in the decades ahead is needed more than ever at this time of uncertainty across the world.

The UK is not a large country in population terms but our influence extends to every part of the globe, not just because of our past record but because we can be relied on as a force for good when times are tough.

The Union has brought safety, stability, security and success for all of us.

I am hugely proud to be British. To be part of this Union that has endured for centuries.

With a shared history going back generations. Pride in a United Kingdom which ended the slave trade, was home of the industrial revolution and 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. The institutions we cherish like the National Health Service.

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.

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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, 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 a shining 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 and exert an influence well beyond our own smaller size might merit.

I am immensely proud of our shared history. But, equally, I am optimistic and excited about our future together. Our nation has not remained rigid, unable or unwilling to change, but exhibited an ability to adapt. What has remained fixed firm are those principles, those common values of democracy, freedom and tolerance.

Northern Ireland is approaching its 100th birthday, an anniversary many thought it would never see. The bulk of our first century has seen us either in actual conflict or arguing over our constitutional status. The next 100 years need not be the same.

Unionists want to live in harmony with their nationalist neighbours. They want to grow our economy and share prosperity. They want the next generation to live in better times.

Though Northern Ireland has been without a devolved government for over a year, the many and complex reasons behind its collapse can and will be resolved. I am determined to ensure that is the case in the time ahead.

I want to see Stormont return, not just to help deal with the issues like our exit from the EU, but also to build the society that has eluded us for too long, and is best achieved as part of the United Kingdom, with the safety, stability, security and success that provides.



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