



THE ARLENE ALTERNATIVE



"I don't think that I would feel comfortable [in a united Ireland] and that's why I think I would leave," Arlene Foster, 28 March 2021.

The erstwhile NI First Minister, Arlene Foster, led the way. The time has perhaps arrived to think what was previously considered unthinkable, namely, that some resettlement of population from north-east Ireland to Britain may be an option in helping to solve the northern Irish crisis.

Parameters for the constitutional future of Ireland have been set by the Good Friday Agreement, particularly in relation to the North. Ireland currently consists of two polities: an Irish Republic of twenty-six counties and a semi-autonomous province of the United Kingdom consisting of six counties entitled Northern Ireland. The status of Northern Ireland is not determined *in perpetuo*. It is subject to border polls, which may be held every seven years. If one of these decides that Northern Ireland should leave the United Kingdom and become part of a sovereign united Ireland, however defined, that situation will be brought into being.

That raises the question of what happens regarding unionists in the new dispensation. Nationalists, in the broadest sense of the term, thus including republicans, have clearly indicated that they seek to be as accommodating as possible to unionists within a united Ireland, taking account of their legitimate traditions and senses of identity. In mind here, on the one hand, is Reformation Protestantism, and, on the other, those who either do not either identify as Irish at all or describe themselves variously as Irish, Northern Irish, Ulster, Ulster Scots, or British. Of course, some of these categories can be, and often are, combined, including in the case of northern nationalists.

Accommodation can refer to devolution within Ireland, guaranteed rights, participation in government, and symbols. Specifically, in the latter instance, one thinks of flags, emblems, anthems, and the full official title of a sovereign State.

At the same time, it is now clear that, whatever democratic decision is taken in a border poll, and whatever accommodations and agreements are reached among most people, there are those unionists who would not be able to tolerate the idea and actuality of a united Ireland in any shape. This has been encapsulated most succinctly by Arlene Foster in her declaration that, should a united Ireland be endorsed in a plebiscite, her intention would be to leave the

island and live elsewhere, in Britain or wherever. And, no doubt, there would be other unionists, of an indeterminate number, who would join her in that journey.

Population movement in the course of decolonisation is not an unusual phenomenon, although it can occur in particularly ugly ways. However, it should be made absolutely clear in an all-Ireland context that nobody should be forced to go; likewise, nobody should be forced to stay. And compulsion can be present in different forms. For example, one may wish to move and have nowhere or nothing to move to. That raises the question of a resettlement programme.

Britain is no stranger to resettlement within its shores. One only has to observe the many Caribbean, Asian and African communities which are now part and parcel of British society to realise this. Therefore, it would not be all that challenging to devise a resettlement programme for those unionists who prefer to leave in the event of a united Ireland being realised. As already noted, at present, it is not feasible to assess what numbers would be involved beyond Ms Foster. And how much of a programme would be necessitated could only be assessed when that becomes evident. Nonetheless, the elements of a programme are not hard to envisage.

Firstly, exact locality has to be considered. It is not predictable what the reaction of the 'mainlanders' would be to arrivals from the North, but there is no reason to believe that it would be antipathetic. Next, suitable housing and apartments would need to be provided, as the case may be. Then, employment would require to be found for those giving up work in the North. This could be facilitated to some extent by exchanging suitable jobs with nationalists in Britain willing to come back to Ireland. All this would demand adequate financing, both for grants to cover the costs of moving with one's goods and for expenditure in respect of infrastructure for the new environment.

Some population movement in modern history has often been the only manner of dealing with persons who will never be content under a new regime created by the departure of the metropolitan power. It has also frequently been geographically close to the 'motherland'. For example, in Algeria, several *pieds noirs* left in the wake of independence. However, it is not being suggested that all or most unionists should or would want to leave. But, it indicates that resettlement programmes are not untypical or unachievable. In fact, we believe the majority of unionists will choose to abide on appropriate terms. Yet, a number will not, some of whom, if they did remain, would be inclined towards disruption. For all those discontented to stay, and particularly the latter, there should be another choice - the Arlene Alternative.

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, May 2021

NOTE: There are about 900,000 unionists in the north, not the magical million often referred to. If, say, a thousand or so of them wanted to leave, that is a significant bloc of people, some of whom could otherwise be a disruptive element, in one way or another, in a united Ireland. But the departure of some would not exactly constitute a mass exodus. And that is quite possibly all that one may be talking about here.