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05 March 2016

Speaking to the 2016 DUP Spring Conference, Party Leader and First Minister Arlene Foster said,

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Mr Chairman, I am absolutely delighted to be here in Limavady today as we move towards the start of the most important election campaign in years.

It is good to be back and see this beautiful constituency which has served these last 15 years as a pathfinder for DUP success.

And so it will be again this year.

This is an historic moment for this party and for this country. We are starting a campaign that will determine the direction of Northern Ireland for decades to come, shape our future and – importantly – determine who will be the First Minister to chart this course.

There can be no better place to start than in the constituency of my friend and colleague Gregory Campbell. For the first time in many years, Gregory will not be fighting the Assembly election but I am absolutely certain he will be with us each and every step of the way.

I am also delighted that former Ulster Unionist Councillor Raymond Farrell has travelled from Fermanagh to be with us today. I am even more delighted that Raymond is fully supporting the DUP election campaign in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Thank you Councillor Farrell, and we look forward to having your support in the weeks ahead.

We gather here today in Limavady on the cusp of a new era for this party and new opportunities for Northern Ireland.

I took on this job at an important moment in Northern Ireland's history.

Our country has changed beyond all recognition from the society I grew up in not too many years ago. There is so much that has been achieved but there is still so much more to do.

We all know from the despicable attack on a prison officer in East Belfast yesterday that we must always be vigilant against those who would seek to take us back to the past.

But one thing is absolutely clear, no matter how hard they try, no matter what depths they stoop to, they will never ever win.

Northern Ireland has changed for the better. You don't need me to tell you this you just need to watch the news or read the papers or look around in your own communities.

We have begun the long slow process of rebuilding from the lost decades of the seventies, eighties and nineties.

Twenty years ago who would have believed that Northern Ireland would

become better known for golfers than guns? Who would have believed that our cities would be thronged by tour buses? Who would have believed that we could attract top businesses from across the globe to provide jobs for our young people and who would have believed we could attract world class sporting events to places people once feared to travel?

These changes did not come about easily or by accident but because we were prepared to tak

tough decisions.

Things are better and Northern Ireland is moving in the right direction, but we cannot be complacent. It took strong leadership to get us this far and it will take even stronger leadership to stay the course and see this journey through.

You will not believe it but I'm old enough to remember what it used to be like! But I am also young enough to see through the next phase of the transformation of our society.

I have seen the changes first hand. And I have spoken to others too.

When I was elected leader of this party last December, I made it my first priority to get out and listen to what people had to say. Since then I have continued to travel all across Northern Ireland to hear from the people who make this country so great.

Today, I want to talk to you about what the community has told me over the last ten weeks and to set our stall out for the election on the fifth of May.

I want to build on the strong foundations laid down by my predecessors Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson – Northern Ireland is much better off for their vision and strength of leadership.

The evening I was endorsed by our party executive and elected as party leader, I made it clear that while the fundamental values of the DUP would not change, I would want to make my own mark on this party.

Ten weeks on, that process of change and renewal continues.

I want to repay the faith that has been shown in me and do all in my power to help this Country and our people reach new heights.

As a mother, I understand the pressures and worries of families when it comes to relying on a strong health system, balancing the family budget, hoping there are real job opportunities

As a politician, I am uniquely placed to help unite unionism and put an end to the decades of division we have seen.

But if we want to continue to lead the people of Northern Ireland, we must first make sure our own house is in order.

That's why I want our party to set the standards in public life and not just to meet them. I want our members to know they are listened to and valued, and I want the public to get the best value from our political system.

If, in the months and years to come, that means taking difficult decisions to help restore confidence in the political system, I will take those decisions.

My plan for a stronger future for Northern Ireland comes from what I've heard, not just from party members but the wider community. It is their voice as much as mine that needs to be heard in the corridors of power, the Executive room and in the Assembly chamber. Before we can ask people to be on our side we must prove to them that we are on their side too.

In just six weeks I have travelled from Bessbrook to Ballymoney, Ballynahinch to Bushmills, Cookstown to Coleraine, Dungannon to Larne, from Omagh to Bangor, Limavady to Lisburn, Enniskillen to Portadown to Ballymena and to north, south, east and west Belfast - and all places in between.

I've been to party meetings and business breakfasts, visited schools and commercial premises and spoke to literally thousands of people.

I've been lucky to have met people in every walk of life right across Northern Ireland.

They are the bedrock of this country and why I have so much optimism for the future.

The welcome I have received everywhere I have gone has been truly humbling.

I started the tour to listen and to learn and finished more inspired and motivated than ever before.

Many of the people I met have very different experiences of life but almost all share the same Northern Ireland values. Those values are belief in hard work, belief in family, in helping our neighbours, compassion for those who are less well off, and pride in our country

These are the values I was brought up with and have lived by all of my life.

I may be the leader of the DUP and now First Minister but my story is really no different than that of so many people across Northern Ireland.

Some of the most inspirational visits of all have been to primary schools to meet children who have been untouched by the Troubles and with boundless imagination for the future. Children who have not yet been sullied by the past or have grown tired of political stalemate.

My vision for our future is simple.

What more can any of us ask than for the next generation to have a better chance and a better start in life than the last?

I want to build a stronger Northern Ireland.

It's easy to spout words –but it takes strong leadership to see it through.

When our election campaign starts I will set out my detailed plan for Northern Ireland. But today I want to set out my priorities for the next Assembly term.

They are shaped by what I have heard over the last six weeks but also by what I have known growing up in this community, all of my life.

As a politician I know that there are some legacy issues that will not be easily or quickly addressed, but as a mother I know that we have to get on and sort the everyday problems that face ourselves, our friends and our neighbours.

And what matters to people is not always what they are bombarded by on TV screens, on the radio or in the papers – it is what makes a difference to their everyday lives.

They care about the public services they receive. They know that more money isn't always the answer to every problem but they also know it takes money to run our schools and our hospitals.

They care about the health service. My mother is over eighty years of age. I know how important it is to be able to see a doctor when you need to and to get treated within a reasonable time. People want to know that the NHS will be there when they need it.

They care about being able to get a decent job for themselves and their children, so they can grow up in Northern Ireland and not have to move elsewhere. They care about having enough left from the pay cheque to look after their families and they want to see government spending money wisely before they are asked to pay more.

I know how much you want your children to have a good start in life and a fair chance from the education system. You want a good home and safe neighbourhoods in which to live and you want to see your local areas improved.

These are aspirations we all share and I want to see them delivered for everyone in Northern Ireland.

There is a renewed sense of pride in Northern Ireland - and not just from people from a traditional unionist background.

Despite all of the pain and the hurt, I feel a genuine desire in the community to put the past behind us. People tell me they want a peace process that works but they want to make sure that it is fair and balanced.

They are prepared to move on from the past but they are not prepared to allow those who terrorised this country for over thirty years to rewrite it.

They are optimistic about the future, but frustrated that progress has been slow.

The Northern Ireland people are proud, they are strong and excited that we are on a new path.

And when I go to the United States next weekend yes it will be to tell them that political progress has been made. We are a great place to invest and create jobs because a lower rate of Corporation Tax is being introduced - but more than anything, it will be to tell them to come to Northern Ireland to meet our people and share in our strong future.

I want to lead a stronger Northern Ireland and continue on the path to make it a safer place

for all of our people.

Today I want to set out the five key priorities which will be at the very heart of my plan for a stronger Northern Ireland.

Firstly, I want to continue creating more jobs and increase incomes.

In the last five years we have promoted over 40,000 jobs through foreign direct investment, business start ups and local support.

With the reduction of Corporation Tax to 12.5% from April 2018 I believe we can create tens of thousands of jobs by 2020.

Secondly, I want to protect family budgets.

Due to the tough decisions taken by DUP Finance Ministers, Northern Ireland continues to have the lowest household taxes anywhere in the UK.

We pay half as much as people in England and around 60% of the average in Scotland. That means people living here get to keep more of their hard earned money than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

In this next Assembly term I want to continue protecting household budgets, ensuring we don't raise a penny more in household taxes than is needed.

Thirdly, I will prioritise spending on the health service.

I believe the single most important role for government in Northern Ireland is to provide the best possible health service for all of our people. That's why our Health Ministers have employed 1200 more nurses and almost 300 more consultants. At the same time, we have tackled waste and saved £800m.

To build on this work will involve a significant cross party agreement on reform but will also

require prioritising funding. That's why in the next five years we will increase the health budget by at least £1 billion to employ more doctors and nurses and to reduce waiting times

Fourthly, I want to raise standards in education for everyone.

We rightly take pride in the best of our education system, which produces better exam results than anywhere else in the UK. But we must make sure that every child is given a chance in life and the best possible education.

I want to build an education system which does not play favourites but is fair to every sector, every school and every child.

And fifthly I want to invest in infrastructure for the future.

That means building new schools, new roads and new hospitals so that Northern Ireland is prepared for the future.

I want to see real investment in local communities and neighbourhoods so that everyone can take pride in where they live and improve their quality of life.

I don't pretend that government can solve all of our problems. In fact a government that tries to do too much will inevitably fall short: that is why I am clear about our priorities and our direction.

As I indicated earlier, when the election proper gets under way I will set out my detailed plan for the next five years. We will also launch a series of policy documents detailing how we will deliver on our ambitions.

But I need the strongest mandate to implement our plan to build a stronger, safer, more stable Northern Ireland.

That is why I am asking for the support of people from right across Northern Ireland, from people who have always loyally supported us and from people who are prepared to give us chance.

I can't promise the earth but I will promise to be as good as my word.

If I'm asked a simple question, I will give a simple answer. I will not change course to court popularity but will always remain resolute to ensure I do what I believe is best for Northern Ireland.

That may not always win me friends but I hope it will always win me respect.

It is on this basis that I will put myself forward to be returned as First Minister at the next election.

At the heart of this election is an important choice for the community.

108 MLAs will be elected but in reality the next first Minister will either be me or Martin

McGuinness. Your vote will decide. It's that simple.

We have come too far to now turn to the untried and untested. There is too much at risk.

This is a time for political leaders, who have stood the test of time.

It is the time for those who have made their name by having achievements of their own.

It is time for those who are rooted in the community and have withstood the political battles to come out stronger.

My record shows I can work with anyone in the best interests of Northern Ireland but make no mistake Martin McGuinness and I have very different visions of the future of this country.

I want to work with our national government to bring about a better

future, not against it.

I want to make sure that we remember the past, not rewrite it.

And I want to make sure that we have a fair and balanced peace process, not one where some are more equal than others.

It is a choice between his vision of taking this Province out of the United Kingdom and my vision to strengthen the Union.

What Northern Ireland needs now, more than ever, is strong unionist leadership.

We need to move forward to a stronger future and not go back to the past.

We must not allow all that has been achieved to be set back.

Northern Ireland needs stability, not instability.

We need a party with a plan and not half a dozen with competing and conflicting visions for the future.

That is what the DUP under my leadership will offer on the fifth of May.

Division and instability would be disastrous for Northern Ireland and would put at risk everything that has been achieved.

I have more respect for those who stand their ground than those who blow with the wind and will seek to be all things to all men.

On Election Day the people of Northern Ireland will be faced with a simple choice.

I may not be on the ballot across the Province but a vote for our DUP candidates all across the country will return a unionist First Minister.

People who vote for the DUP in East Belfast or East Antrim are voting for me to be the First Minister every bit as much as people who are living in Enniskillen.

Northern Ireland needs strong leadership.

That's why your success will give me the opportunity to deliver on my plan to strengthen Northern Ireland.

People seem to assume that this election is a foregone conclusion and that it has been decided even before a vote has been cast.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Politics in Northern Ireland is tough and brutal. This election campaign will be no different.

Make no mistake, this election is very close.

A swing of only two votes in every hundred from the DUP to Sinn Féin would see Martin McGuinness become the next First Minister.

Their real agenda in the May election is to shred and split unionist votes.

They didn't make the breakthrough they wanted in the South and will do all they can to take Northern Ireland.

They will seek to capitalise on a new and untested leader of the SDLP and on the complacency of some unionists.

That would be bad for unionism and bad for Northern Ireland.

It would take Northern Ireland in the wrong direction and send out the wrong message at this crucial time.

For many, including myself, power sharing with Sinn Fein is difficult but it is a price worth paying to keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward.

But if you think it is difficult now just imagine what it would be like with a Sinn Fein First Minister and the Executive dominated by republicans.

That's why we must stand our ground and fight for every vote.

And it's not just to stop a Sinn Fein First Minister, I want the mandate to promote my positive agenda for the future.

But we can only deliver it if we get the support of the people at the ballot box.

The next two months will determine the fate and fortunes of this party and of this country for decades to come.

Every vote in every seat will matter.

The stakes could not be higher. Not a single vote has yet been cast. The outcome will be for the people of Northern Ireland alone to decide. We serve at their pleasure and only with their consent.

If motivation were needed just imagine what our forefathers a century ago fought for and endured.

Let ours be the generation that brought unionism back together and gave unionism new hope for the future.

Let ours be the generation that made 2016 the year the people of Northern Ireland made clear our place within the United Kingdom is settled for decades to come.

Last December, you did me the honour of electing me as leader.

Today I am asking you to go out to fight for every vote and for every seat.

This party is the only party that can provide strong leadership for a better future.

A momentous choice faces the people of Northern Ireland.

To win this election we need your help.

We must remind people of the choice they face and take our plan to every city, every town and every village across the Province and up and down every lane way on the map and a few that are not!

When you meet them on the doorsteps tell them what is at stake on the fifth of May.

Remind them that their vote matters and their vote will determine if Martin McGuinness or myself wake up as First Minister on the sixth of May.

Tell them about our plan for the future of Northern Ireland.

Tell them how close this election really is.

And when you have done all of that, ask them for their precious vote on election day.

We need strong leadership if we are to build a stronger Northern Ireland that is a better and safer place to live.

I look forward to seeing you all on the campaign trail. Let us go out and make sure we can commemorate the sacrifice of 1916 and celebrate the centenary of Northern Ireland with unionism still in the driving seat.

Thank you.

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