



# New Year Message



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New Year Message from Party Leader Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA

## Arlene Foster MLA

Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party and First Minister of Northern Ireland

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It's common at this time of the year to hear family and friends ask, 'where did the last year go'. That question has perhaps never been more applicable than for the last twelve months. 2017 was an eventful year filled with challenges, but we leave it stronger and ready to seize the opportunities that the New Year will bring.

The General Election in June wasn't just a significant success for unionism in Northern Ireland but for the cause of the Union across our nation. Voters in Northern Ireland sent a strong and clear message to Sinn Fein that unionism wasn't as weak as they had thought. The votes of the people placed the Democratic Unionist Party in an unprecedented position at Westminster. We have used that influence wisely securing £1.5 billion in extra resources for Northern Ireland. Those additional finances will assist people in every part of our region as it aids our NHS and education system, builds much needed new infrastructure and helps tackle issues with mental health and deprivation.

Just before Christmas, the negotiations on the UK's exit from the European Union advanced to the important second phase. I welcome the progress that has been made. The Joint Report crucially makes it clear that Northern Ireland will leave the EU with the rest of the UK, that there will be no customs or trade border down the Irish Sea, that Northern Ireland will not be separated constitutionally, politically, economically or regulatorily from the rest of the UK and that Northern Ireland businesses will continue to enjoy unfettered access to the GB market. The DUP has been adamant since the referendum that we do not want a hard border on the island of Ireland. As the negotiations now turn to the important matter of trade, we look forward to discussing the many issues of mutual interest that we share with our neighbours in the Irish Republic as we seek an outcome that benefits Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom as a whole and the European Union.

Many of us will use the New Year to make resolutions. Just as we will personally set ourselves goals as to how we hope to improve our lives, so too we should seek to bring new energy and ambition to our politics.

Northern Ireland has in effect been without a government for almost a year. That is unacceptable and simply unsustainable. Every day, we are seeing the impact of having no government. No Budget. No progress on the recommendations contained in the Bengoa Report. And no advancement of essential reforms in education.

This cannot continue.

I and my Party remain ready to return to government immediately without the need for any pre-conditions

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to be met. By contrast, Sinn Fein now refuse to even engage in talks. They tell us that they want to see devolution return but their actions suggest otherwise. Their long list of red lines are prioritised over jobs, schools and hospitals. What's hurting hardworking people is the absence of a government not the absence of language legislation. Recent rounds of talks have been bedeviled by the setting of pre-conditions by Sinn Fein. Let us re-enter talks with one shared pre-condition, – that we will redouble our efforts to restore devolution and start taking the decisions that the people of Northern Ireland so desperately need. Let's set ourselves a short time frame. And let's do it here at home rather than in some fancy English stately home.

The DUP prides itself on being the people's party. We want what is best for all of the people of Northern Ireland. I still believe that the best way to deal with the issues facing our society is for Stormont to be back up and running with locally elected and accountable politicians taking decisions on the issues that matter to people across our Province. A return to Direct Rule would be an inferior alternative but it would be a government. But the people of Northern Ireland deserve a government and if Sinn Fein persist with their intransigence then the Secretary of State should move to appoint Direct Rule Ministers early in the New Year.

2018 will undoubtedly be a year that poses its own set of challenges but we must enter it with hope and confidence that we can overcome the tests that lie ahead and move Northern Ireland forward together.

I wish everyone a peaceful and prosperous 2018.

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