**‘And I hereby declare the runner-up to be the winner’: The extraordinary 2021 DUP leadership election**

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**Abstract**

The first-ever election for the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in May 2021 proved eventful in terms of both its instigation and outcome. Founded in 1971, the DUP’s three previous leaders had either been self-appointed (Ian Paisley, the party’s founder) or nominated without a rival opponent (Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster). Foster’s unseating in an internal coup triggered a contest between Northern Ireland Executive minister Edwin Poots and Westminster MP Sir Jeffrey Donaldson. The outcome was determined by one of the smallest selectorates of any party in the UK or Ireland, 28 DUP members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (MLAs) and the party’s eight Westminster MPs. They voted narrowly to elect Edwin Poots as their new party leader. Yet Poots lasted merely 21 days in the job, replaced by Donaldson, who was unopposed when the leadership vacancy re-arose. This article analyses an extraordinary saga.

**Introduction: a leadership result that resolved nothing**

The 2021 DUP leadership election was significant in several respects. One was that this was the first leadership contest in the party’s history. Second, it showed the power of the party’s members of the Northern Ireland Assembly team, a majority of whom moved against Arlene Foster as party leader and then moved almost immediately against the leader it had installed to replace her. Third, it revealed significant divisions within a party previously keen to convey an image of a tightly knit united entity. On May 14th, Poots triumphed over his only rival, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, by 19 votes to 17, voting confined to the 28 DUP members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the party’s eight MPs.

In an ominous portent for Poots, ratification of this result by the party executive, as required under the rules, was not straightforward. At the executive meeting arranged to confirm the new leader’s elevation, party officers proposed a secret ballot of the full executive. The move was defeated by 56 votes to 47 (on a show of hands) amid fears that a re-run of the original contest was the opposite of a ratification. It risked emphasising the closeness of the result among MLAs and MPs, or even possibly overturning that outcome. Poots was then confirmed by leader in a separate vote, again by show-of-hands, by 72 to 28. Several of the party’s most senior figures left the meeting before Poots delivered his victory speech.

On June 17th, Poots resigned as leader after party officers indicated they had no confidence in him. He had lasted 504 hours in post. Only Donaldson came forward to fill the new vacancy created by Poots’ premature demise. Accordingly, on 22 June, the runner-up in a two-contestant race held only 39 days earlier became the victor. Six days later, Donaldson was formally voted in as DUP leader-designate by 32 of the 36-member electoral college, with four people not voting. Donaldson was then endorsed by the party Executive to complete the process.

The first contest was triggered when the majority of the DUP’s MLAs signed a letter to the party chairman, Lord Maurice Morrow, declaring no confidence in Arlene Foster as leader. The letter was also signed by half of the party’s MPs. The letter was not made public by Morrow and Foster claimed not to have seen it. Nonetheless, on April 28th 2021, within 48 hours of becoming aware of the letter’s existence, Foster announced she would resign as party leader, to take effect upon the emergence of a successor. Formally, the DUP leader is subject to re-election annually by the party executive (comprising the parliamentary party and constituency associations) before April 30th each year but no vote had ever been exercised and every year the leader simply continued leading.

With Foster aware that a vote would, embarrassingly, be forced this time and that most of the party’s elected representatives no longer backed her leadership, she stood aside. She had been leader for five-and-a-half years, two years less than her predecessor, Peter Robinson. Ian Paisley had led the DUP for 37 years, from when he founded the party in 1971 until ousted under internal pressure in 2008. Thus, only Robinson of the DUP’s leaders had quit of his own volition. Foster’s verdict on her own political demise was that ‘even by the standards of the DUP, this was brutal. I had absolutely no idea’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Edwin Poots, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in the Northern Ireland Executive and a signatory of the letter demanding Foster step aside, was the first to announce his candidature for the party leadership. He was followed a few days later by Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, an opponent of the coup. Northern Ireland’s longest-serving MP, Donaldson was first elected to Westminster for the Lagan Valley constituency in 1997 as an Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) MP but, along with Arlene Foster, defected to the DUP at the start of 2004.

A simultaneous contest, with the same selectorate, was also held for the Deputy Leadership post, again the first such event. Lord Nigel Dodds, elevated to a peerage after losing his North Belfast Westminster seat in 2019, stood down. Those launching the coup against Foster also wanted him deposed. Dodds was seen as part of the ‘guilty’ team blindsided by the Prime Minister, leading to the infliction of the EU Northern Ireland Protocol, a trade barrier between Great Britain and Northern Ireland (see below). The MLA Paula Bradley beat the MP Gregory Campbell by 18 votes to 16.

**A contest not a coronation: unusual for a Northern Ireland party**

That there was a DUP leadership contest at all was sufficient to generate considerable interest. Coronations, not contests, are normal leadership events within Northern Ireland’s parties and, with one exception, the selectorates are not large. There has been a trend evident towards greater democratisation in terms of contests being held.[[2]](#endnote-2) The two parties with ‘democratic’ in their title (the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is the other) managed a combined 90 years without ever having a leadership vote. Of the leaders of the five largest parties at the time of Foster’s departure, only one, SDLP leader Colum Eastwood, was elevated to the top job via a contest containing rival candidates. The SDLP took 40 years to hold a leadership contest. Then three came along within five years, before the party settled on Eastwood in 2015. Across all three battles, eight candidates stood but only 1,101 votes were cast. Local branches send delegates to a leadership conference to support a particular candidate. How many depends on branch size. Elected representatives and various party groups, such as youth and women, also get leadership votes.

Sinn Fein has managed to avoid a presidential contest since its 1970 reincarnation. The party’s constitution is ostensibly democratic. Anyone can stand for president anytime and they need support from only one cumann (branch) to trigger a ballot but it has not happened. Representatives of each cumann across all of Ireland, North and South, can vote if a contest does transpire.

The Alliance Party has occasionally held a leadership election. The last one was in 2001, when David Ford defeated Eileen Bell by 86 votes to 45. Ford led his party for the next 15 years. Nonetheless, his successor, the current incumbent Naomi Long, was ‘elected unopposed’ in 2016. Voting structures are akin to those of the SDLP.

Alone of Northern Ireland’s top five parties, the UUP uses one member, one vote to elect its leader. This direct democracy replaced the chaos of the previous arrangements when the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) chose the UUP leader. That body contained more than 800 members drawn from disparate groups, including representatives from the Orange Order, some of whom belonged to the rival DUP.

The DUP offers the narrowest leadership selectorate of any political party in the UK or Irish parliaments. Only 29 men and seven women were involved in the 2021 selection process, confined to the party’s Northern Ireland Assembly members (MLAs) and Westminster MPs. The result needed to be ratified by the party executive, a broader body of 130 DUP members including MLAs, MPs, peers and constituency association representatives.

**The candidates, the campaign and result**

The party set campaign rules forbidding public hustings, leading to a contest characterised more by secrecy than showcasing. The two candidates were located on different wings of the party, Donaldson seen as more moderate and not associated with religious fundamentalism. Donaldson’s electoral appeal seemed considerable. He had won 160,000 unionist votes at Westminster elections in his Lagan Valley constituency since 1997, for two different parties: the UUP in 1997 and 2001 and the DUP since, with comfortable majorities, albeit one trimmed substantially in 2019.

In terms of robustness, there was little to choose between the unionism of Donaldson compared to that of Poots. Both had opposed the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), Donaldson deserting the UUP negotiating team on the morning of the deal and eventually quitting the UUP partly because of its continuing attempt to work the arrangement. Poots had been a prominent campaigner against the GFA from the outset, in line with the DUP’s stance. Nonetheless both candidates had long accepted the GFA was not going to disappear and Poots sat in the power-sharing Assembly it created from the outset.

Both candidates were socially conservative. However, such tendencies were particularly attributed to Poots. He is a creationist, believing the world was only created in 4000BC and a Free Presbyterian, a member of the fundamentalist Protestant church established by Ian Paisley. The DUP was later created by Paisley partly to offer political expression to that church. One-third of DUP members are Free Presbyterian, even though the church represents less than one per cent of Northern Ireland’s population.[[3]](#endnote-3) Poots is strongly opposed to abortion and same-sex marriage but Donaldson, from the ‘mainstream’ Presbyterian Church, not the Free one, also rejected (unsuccessfully) the legalisation of both in Northern Ireland by Westminster in 2019, when devolved government was absent. Poots gathered the support of most, but not all, of the Free Presbyterian elected representatives in the party.

Whilst a desire for the DUP to reconnect more to its old austere religious roots may have been a factor in the contest, it was of minor importance compared to the pressing political concerns. Opposition to the EU’s Northern Ireland Protocol united both candidates, as it did most of unionism. Culpability was the fissure. Donaldson was portrayed by critics as ‘Continuity Arlene’, part of the DUP group that had been comprehensively outmanoeuvred by Boris Johnson and squandered the DUP’s strong position as holders of the balance of power at Westminster from 2017 to 2019. According to such critics, Foster, as DUP leader and Donaldson, as Westminster Chief Whip, were negligent in allowing Johnson to hoodwink the DUP. Johnson had been feted at the DUP’s 2018 conference for ruling out any trade barriers between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, telling the gathering that no Conservative Prime Minister ‘could or should accept such an arrangement’. Within one year, Johnson had accepted precisely such an arrangement, the EU-UK Northern Ireland Protocol.

Recognising his vulnerability on the issue, Donaldson hardened his initial campaign language. He began promising to achieve ‘meaningful reform’ (unspecified) of the Protocol and used conciliatory language of a ‘shared future’. Two days from the leadership poll however, Donaldson indicated that the Northern Ireland Assembly could be brought down by stopping North-South cooperation, with a boycott of the all-island institutions created by the GFA.

Having not been part of the leadership negotiating team, Poots were less tainted by the Protocol. However, Donaldson supporters pointed out that, as Agriculture Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, Poots had overseen the building of border control posts enforcing the physical new trade frontier between two parts of the UK. Poots also offered little clarity on how the Protocol would be removed, promising only a legal challenge. After his victory, two other ‘plans’ were set out; pressure upon the British government to negotiate away the Protocol and for unionists to restore their overall majority in the Assembly at the next election to vote away parts of the Protocol. The proposals appeared politically and electorally unrealisable. Neither candidate quite elevated the principle of getting rid of a trade border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland above practical progress in diminishing checks, so a modified Protocol, with reduced checks on goods travelling between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, might be later claimed as a victory.

The contest demonstrated an obsession with internal party reforms. Poots was keen to remove some of the special advisers who had no mandate within the party and alienated those MLAs who did need to secure votes. Poots also declared he would not be First Minister and would give MLAs some say in that choice, attractive offers to ambitious contenders. Donaldson offered nothing in that respect as he would occupy both the party leader and First Minister posts if he won. Donaldson was up against the structural problem of being at Westminster, his transfer creating a difficult by-election and the displacement of someone to either immediately obtain a co-opted Assembly seat, or become a candidature in the next Assembly election, due by May 2022. Donaldson’s electoral support from MPs was smaller than that of Poots’ MLAs. Poots knew the MLAs better, given his Assembly longevity and those MLAs were keen for a transfer of party power to Belfast from Westminster, given the perceived failings of the parliamentary team.

**Repenting, not at leisure: how the DUP overturned the result**

The disquiet expressed at the ratification meeting held by the party executive indicated that some in the party were concerned that Poots was the wrong choice. A *Belfast Telegraph*/LucidTalk poll conducted immediately after Poots’ election appeared grim for the DUP.[[4]](#endnote-4) Poots’ overall negative rating at -52 was the worst of any UK party leader since Jeremy Corbyn. Much of the negativity came, predictably, from nationalists but the views of DUP voters offered greater cause for concern. By a three to one margin, they declared they would have preferred Sir Jeffrey Donaldson as leader. Donaldson had released his own poll with similar findings late in the campaign. Among unionists, 43% held a negative view of Poots. That is a worse figure than the 36% thinking similarly of Mrs Foster. The DUP had seemingly swopped someone they thought politically flawed for an individual who the unionist electoral base view as worse. Party purity trumped polling in the coup. Whatever the opposite of a honeymoon period, Poots was occupying the space.

Poots’ tenure was to be very brief. Once Arlene Foster resigned as First Minister of Northern Ireland on June 14th (separately from her earlier resignation as party leader) the DUP, as largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, had seven days to nominate a new First Minister. Under Northern Ireland’s dual First Minister system however, Sinn Féin, as the second largest party, had also to re-nominate a Deputy First Minister. The parties had seven days to complete these tasks following Foster’s departure, or the Executive would fall and an election called.

Cognisant no doubt of his party’s perilous polling position, Poots was keen to nominate a new First Minister, his close political ally Paul Givan. Sinn Féin was also willing to re-nominate its northern leader, Michelle O’Neill, as Deputy First Minister – but at a price. That price was the implementation of the Irish language provision contained in the New Decade New Approach deal agreed between the main parties and the British government to restore devolution in January 2020.[[5]](#endnote-5) Moreover, if there was not progress on such implementation, the British government would intervene directly to legislate on such matters. The government had first pledged to introduce an Irish language act in 2006 but it was still awaited.

Poots had not cleared all this with his party. As he prepared to nominate Paul Givan as First Minister, most of his MLAs, including many who supported him for the leadership, voted against nominating anyone. Poots left the meeting, entered the Assembly Chamber and nominated Givan regardless. Sinn Féin reciprocated by nominating O’Neill. Poots was immediately summoned to a meeting of party officers to explain his actions and, without the support of most of his MLAs, MPs and senior party officials, tendered his resignation. Those party officers also determined that Givan could remain in place only on a caretaker basis, until a new leader decided upon a replacement. A new leadership vacancy was announced. Donaldson emerged as the only contestant and was duly installed.

**The tasks confronting the DUP leader**

The issues confronting Donaldson were identical to those that briefly faced Poots: how to defend the Union, sort the Protocol, stop votes heading to the UUP, or Alliance in the centre, or the Traditional Unionist Voice to the right; hold the First Ministership in the DUP’s gift, prevent the Assembly collapsing again and heal party wounds. Donaldson also faced the logistical issues involved in moving from Westminster to Stormont: a potentially tricky by-election when he resigns his Lagan Valley seat and an awkward co-option into a Northern Ireland Assembly berth. He also had a DUP First Minister in place who had not been his choice.

With an Assembly election looming, the DUP’s commitment to devolved power-sharing will be tested if Sinn Fein becomes the largest party and the DUP loses the First Minister position. The DUP only became enthusiastic for devolved power-sharing after Ian Paisley could become First Minister. Once the top job is lost, the party could contemplate exit.

The DUP faces a similarly new leader of the UUP, Doug Beattie, who took over without a bruising contest. Poots’ party holds 28 Assembly seats; Beattie’s party holds 10 seats. An increase for the UUP at the expense of the DUP will be good news for Sinn Fein’s ambition to become the largest party and claim the First Ministership. Sinn Fein trails the DUP by a single seat. Fewer people are identifying as unionist. Annual Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys have charted the decline. 40% identified as unionist in 1998.[[6]](#endnote-6) That figure had fallen to 26% two decades later.[[7]](#endnote-7) Both leaders need to attract a new generation seemingly more agnostic about the Union.

Unionism has a serious problem with its three-way vote split. A DUP polling on 16%, UUP on 14% and TUV 11% might allow Sinn Fein to become the largest party at the 2022 Assembly election without doing much. Yet the DUP has been in previous crises. The party’s obituaries were written immediately after the Good Friday Agreement yet the party, under a hardline stance of opposition to the deal, soon became the largest unionist party. Unionists desperate to prevent Sinn Fein seizing the First Ministership will face a dilemma. Which of three unionist parties, on 28 seats (DUP) 10 (UUP) and 1 (TUV) respectively, can realistically be the largest party, the only one possibly capable of blocking Sinn Fein’s route to the First Ministership? Some DUP waverers may stay loyal. But it may not be enough.

**Conclusion**

The DUP waited half-a-century before a leadership contest and given the chaos that ensued, the party might be anxious to wait another 50 years before the next. Internal divisions revealed by the event demonstrated that coronations can, in the words of the unopposed DUP former leader, Peter Robinson, offer an ‘enormous advantage’. [[8]](#endnote-8) Even though the DUP leadership selectorate was tiny, the acuteness of its split (an almost even division) and the tensions between members of two different institutions, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the House of Commons, were laid bare. Edwin Poots won the votes of most Assembly members but not those of his MPs. It proved far easier to get rid of Foster than manage the role of leader. Poots fell at the first hurdle in trying to reconcile difficult dealings with an awkward trio of his own party, Sinn Féin and the UK government.

Poots won an internally focused battle about party structures and the DUP’s brand of unionism. For DUP stalwarts, Arlene Foster was the wrong type of unionist offering the wrong type of unionism. They thought Poots would better connect with the party’s true values without coming to terms with the reality that the DUP cannot operate in political isolation if it wants the devolved power-sharing apparatus to hold. Its replacement, direct Westminster rule, could be even worse for the DUP. The actual policy differences between the initial and eventual winner were slight. Both opposed the EU Protocol which placed Northern Ireland under different trading rules from the rest of the UK.

The questions begged are whether Donaldson’s unusual eventual victory after initial defeat means that he can achieve sufficient reforms of the EU Protocol to keep his party happy whilst also keeping his main partners in government, Sinn Féin, content on cultural issues such as Irish language. The party leadership victory proved pyrrhic for Poots. It may also seem likewise for Donaldson if his party loses the First Ministership to Sinn Fein at the next Assembly election.

1. BBC Newscast, 27 May 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For details of the electorate in each, see Matthews, N. (2016) ‘The Selection of Party Leaders in Northern Ireland, Parliamentary Affairs, 69.4, 901-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Tonge, J. Braniff, M., Hennessey, T., McAuley, J. and Whiting, S. (2014) *The Democratic Unionist Party. From Protest to Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.lucidtalk.co.uk/single-post/lt-ni-quarterly-tracker-poll-spring-2021> See <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/belfast-telegraph-opinion-poll-northern-irelands-changing-political-landscape-as-support-for-parties-revealed-40453232.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. HM Government (2020) New Decade New Approach, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/1998/Political_Attitudes/UNINATID.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2018/Political_Attitudes/UNINATID.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/columnists/peter-robinson-a-purge-of-the-dup-by-supporters-of-edwin-poots-would-be-a-monumental-mistake-3245000> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)