

Delegates hail significance of Foster visit

THE first ever visit of Democratic Unionist Party leader, Arlene Foster, to Kerry was hailed as a very important and symbolic gesture by delegates at the inaugural Killarney Economic Conference in The Brehon Hotel at the weekend. Delegates afforded the former First Minister a very warm welcome and she, in turn, remarked: "It is a great honour to be in beautiful Killarney".

"I want to congratulate the organisers on this inaugural Economic Conference. I know that a huge effort has gone into arranging this weekend," she said.

"I wish you every success also for the years ahead as you seek to establish the conference in the calendar as a must-attend event," the DUP leader added.

The attendance at the conference felt it was very significant that Ms Foster would accept an invitation to travel to Kerry where she shared the platform with Fianna Fail leader Micheál Martin.

Dr Mary C Murphy of the Department of Politics in UCC remarked: "A Unionist voice in this debate on this side of the border is crucial to us finding a way forward. I was very struck by Arlene Foster's contribution".

She added: "Even the symbolism of the DUP leader addressing the Killarney Economic Conference, in the deep south, was very significant."

During the course of her ground-breaking visit, Ms Foster insisted that she is determined to maintain and enhance the positive relationship that has developed on both sides of the border and she acknowledged that the progress that has been made was hard won.

Ms Foster said when she grew up a few miles from the Fermanagh/Monaghan border, she saw, even during the darkest days, the close economic, cultural and social ties across the border.

“Those ties have strengthened since the Troubles ended to the extent that, in recent times, we have enjoyed extraordinarily, unimaginably positive relations between our two states,” the former First Minister remarked.

“I don’t want to lose any of that. I lose none of my unionism by saying that I am proud of that progress”.

Ms Foster said while the UK’s exit from the EU has the potential to test the progress made, it doesn’t automatically mean that everything that has been achieved is or will be undone.

In what was viewed as a strong conciliatory gesture towards the Irish Government, the DUP leader said she considered Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to be like a semi-detached house.

“The houses may look the same on the outside, but, inside, they look different and we do many things very differently. But no matter how contrasting the interiors are, they are tied together and part of the same neighbourhood and what happens on one side of the fence inevitably has an impact on the other,” she stated.

“I know that we are rivals in some respects, but in so many ways success for one of us is success for the other. As we chart a new course for the future, it is not in our interests to see the Republic of Ireland do anything other than prosper,” Ms Foster stressed.

She said while the DUP supported the UK leaving the European Union but Brexit is “not about pulling up the drawbridge and building a wall”.