



Danny Kennedy announces Upper Bann MLA Doug Beattie is the new leader of the UUP . Picture by Mal McCann.

DUP, Sinn Féin problems have given other parties opportunities

When the DUP and Sinn Féin finally eclipsed the UUP and SDLP in the 2003 assembly election their options were brutally simple: patch up some sort of deal together or allow the entire Good Friday Agreement process to be mothballed. They went for the deal, although it took them almost four years to get there.

The DUP sold it on the basis it was the end of David Trimble's era of rollover unionism; while SF went for the default position, we'll get unity faster than the SDLP ever would. It was a handy enough way of covering their blushes at the time - helped by the willingness of Paisley and McGuinness to serve as the pin-ups for it - but there was never any indication that the deal represented anything which could be described as genuine consensus or cooperation. Both needed the assembly for their own, albeit mutually contradictory, purposes.

Fourteen years later and they still need the assembly for their own purposes: one of which they have in common this time. Neither of them really wants an early election. The DUP has just had a brutal coup which has ended with a leader with a one vote victory over his rival. Edwin Poots doesn't have much room for compromise, although if it were left to his own MLAs he'd have more room. Some of them fear if the assembly were allowed to collapse again it might never come back: meaning their political careers would come to an end.

No, Poots's problem lies outside the assembly: with the Orange Order, the Loyalist Communities Council and a younger section of loyalism making it clear they don't want concessions on the protocol and would be happy enough to see the assembly tumble. Indeed, some elements want the assembly collapsed, along with all the other institutions and processes of the GFA, even if the protocol was changed or dumped.

Alex KANE



An early election would force Poots and the DUP into a position they probably wouldn't want to be placed in. It would mean upping the ante and raising the stakes to secure their position as the top dog of political unionism and then trying to find a way afterwards to get themselves off an absurdly high hook. And if the protocol was still in play during that election Poots would be pushed further and further towards an elephant-trap position which would make subsequent negotiations very difficult.

Sinn Féin is having problems of its own, neatly summed up by fellow columnist Chris Donnelly a couple of weeks ago: 'Whilst Mary Lou leads a Dáil-based party brimming with talent and potential, the northern wing of the

party has become stale and blunted, requiring significant change in personnel to turn the tide in advance of the next assembly election.' Even unionist commentators like myself are being told by sources within Sinn Féin that 'Michelle O'Neill hasn't got to grips with problems that dogged the party before she became deputy leader.'

The brutal defenestrations in Derry and South Down (with probably more to come) indicate that SF recognises it has an electoral problem and is prepared to move quickly to get it sorted. Which is precisely what the DUP did with Arlene Foster. Both parties know the next assembly election will be a battle for the first minister's office and both will want to be fully prepared for that battle - which is why I think they'd both prefer it to come in the spring of 2022, rather than this autumn.

For both parties there is also the possibility of something resembling a recovery by the SDLP and the UUP (now under a wonderfully laid-back Doug Beattie); as well as a threat from an Alliance party which seems able to reach into both of their strongholds. I'm not so sure about the SDLP's preference, but I think the UUP would prefer their man to settle into place before he faces his first election. Whether he decides to row in behind the DUP and give Poots some support remains an unknown at this point; but if he wants to gauge the real strength of the UUP he will need to field in every constituency.

Anyway, we are now in full-blown election mode. Normally I would say, as I have since 2007, that the DUP and SF would take an overall majority of seats and votes between them. But I'm not so sure this time. They both have huge problems, the UUP and SDLP have unexpected opportunities and Alliance, if the 'surge' continues, could do very well. All in all it could be a very interesting election. And that would be no bad thing.

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ON THIS DAY

MAY 21 1921

Murder in Tyrone

A SHOCKING murder occurred at Gortfad Glebe, about five miles from Cookstown, County Tyrone, in the early hours of Thursday morning. The house of Mr Joseph Hayden was forcibly entered by a gang of men who were said to have been dressed in police uniforms, armed with rifles. The two brothers, James and Joseph Hayden, farmers, lived together. The district is entirely peopled by Protestants and the Haydens, who are a Catholic family, lived in peace and in friendly intercourse with their neighbours.

At about 3.30 a.m. yesterday morning the Hayden brothers were awakened by a knocking at their door and, in answer to his question, 'Who is there?' James received the reply: 'Neighbours.' Before he reached the door it was burst open and the intruders rushed into the bedroom, stabbing him through the lung with a bayonet. Another member of the band rushed to the bed of the other brother, Joseph, presenting a rifle which Joseph grasped in his effort to save his life. The man who had previously bayoneted James came to his comrade's assistance with a loaded revolver, killing his victim who was also bayoneted in the head and body. James Hayden lies in a very critical condition.

It is the confirmed opinion of the supporters of the Anti-Partitionist candidates that this conduct is part of an organised scheme to intimidate them from expressing their free will at the forthcoming elections.

Nationalist Campaign in Down

CONTINUING his successful campaign against Partition, Mr Joseph Devlin yesterday visited County Down where he addressed three meetings in support of Mr Patrick O'Neill, Nationalist candidate.

At Ballyvarley Canon McPolin said they were engaged in a very serious fight for very important rights which were seriously threatened. Mr O'Neill said that the Government had given this Partition Act as a 'settlement of the Irish Question', but it was no settlement - on the contrary. They were not going to accept the dictation of the Ascendancy Party in Ulster and work this Act. (Cheers.) As an instance, he referred to the breaking-up of the Labour meeting in the Ulster Hall by an Orange mob who had used the platform for an indecent and sacrilegious attack upon the Pope and the Catholic Church... That was the first taste of what they might expect under the Partition Act.

(In his published memoir of his time as an RIC officer in Cookstown, Head Constable John McKenna records that murder of his brother at The Rock in 1921 was carried out by B Specials and that the crime was covered up by the authorities.)

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