



ALL CHANGE? The makeup of the next assembly – an assembly the majority of unionism seems to want closed – is unlikely to be much different than what we've seen before with the DUP and Sinn Féin leading the way

# Don't expect a major shift in voting patterns at the next election

**A** FEW days after the Good Friday Agreement referendum I bumped into a friend who has since become a senior figure within the DUP.

I was particularly struck by his view of what the vote told us about unionism: namely, in his opinion, that it didn't actually represent a victory for David Trimble. As we parted company he left me with a few words: "Count the pro-agreement and anti-agreement unionist votes at the coming election; that will tell you all you need to know".

That election was for the new assembly a few weeks later. The pro-agreement unionist vote was 201,510 while the anti-agreement parties/independents mustered 207,869. But within the pro-agreement UUP vote there were a number of anti-agreement candidates (selection rules back then were very loose) and about five of the party's MLAs were, at the very best, lukewarm in their support for both the agreement and Trimble.

In other words, from day one pro-agreement unionism had a problem. The UUP/PUP may, on paper, have had 30 seats to the DUP/UKUP/Independents tally of 28, but in reality there were always more anti-agreement votes and MLAs. That's why Trimble was hung out to dry by Sinn Féin, the DUP and, eventually, the British and Irish governments. Key members of his own party were in open civil war with him and rarely a month went by when he didn't face an emergency meeting of the party officers, executive or Ulster Unionist Council.

What saved the assembly – in the sense that it didn't collapse, rather than in the sense of unionism developing a fondness for it – was the DUP eclipsing the UUP in 2003, cutting an 'ourselves alone' deal with Sinn Féin in 2007 and creating a structure which is best described as two governments in the one executive. The DUP still doesn't

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support or endorse the Belfast Agreement – although it is having to feign concern for it by claiming the Northern Ireland Protocol represents a breach of it.

A majority of unionism/loyalism still opposes the agreement. Indeed, it looks like a majority also supports the closure of the assembly. The TUV, Loyalist Communities Council, Orange Order and a section of younger loyalism (organising itself around a Unionist & Loyalist Unified Coalition) has made it clear the assembly should be abandoned if the protocol remains in place. A recent LucidTalk poll indicated 74 per cent of DUP voters support crashing the assembly if necessary. And Doug Beattie has said the assembly's existence is threatened by ongoing problems related to the Bobby Storey funeral.

Sinn Féin has no particular interest in the assembly, either. That's why it allowed it to

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collapse in January 2017. It knows that the relationship between it and unionism (and it doesn't matter if the roles are reversed again and the UUP eclipses the DUP) isn't going to change.

It knows, too, that the executive can never become a genuinely consensual and cooperative institution. It will remain two governments in the one executive and each government will have no priority higher than blocking the agenda of the other.

I think it was David Owen, who helped found the Social Democratic Party in 1981 along with Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams, who noted, during the 1983 general election: "If you believe politics can be done differently and you want politics done differently, then you should vote for the party you think is most likely to do politics differently."

I mention that because I think of it every time I hear people in Northern Ireland complain about the self-preserving antics of the DUP/SF axis. The only way politics will be done differently here is when the DUP and SF have about 20 seats between them and the other 70 are held by parties which have, at least, demonstrated a willingness to work together.

But how likely is a massive shift in voting patterns? Or, putting that another way, how likely is it that people now voting for the polar opposites of the DUP and SF would suddenly decide to vote for parties who do want to work together? It doesn't strike me as likely at all.

Yes, there may be a bit of shuffling around the edges but I would still be quite surprised – and I am rarely surprised – if the DUP and SF weren't the largest parties (comfortably so) at the next election. And that's because an awful lot of voters will still sense the presence of the old political ghosts when they stand at the voting booth.

## ON THIS DAY

JUNE 4 1921

### 'Sinn Féin not a Murder Gang'

LORD Buckmaster (ex-Lord Chancellor of England) was the principal speaker at a crowded meeting at Oxford last night organised by the Peace with Ireland Council.

"Throughout recorded history", said Lord Buckmaster, "there has never been a time that the Irish people have relinquished their passionate desire for national independence... That sentiment has been made the subject of unprincipled sport by party politicians and used when they wanted to gain their way with Ireland. Sinn Féin, as a political faith, is a thing of which no-one need be ashamed and the cruel deeds by which that cause had been stained did not touch the heart of the faith. Sinn Féin did not mean murder; its political faith was that Ireland had the right to govern herself and the murders by which it had been disgraced were violent, passionate, criminal outbursts of people thwarted, mocked and cajoled for centuries in their effort to attain that end.

"Murder was just as base and abominable committed by armed forces of the Crown as by some desperate fanatic who thought he was serving the Irish cause. They must not think that they could solve the Irish problem merely by putting on one side those Irishmen as a common gang of murderers, because they were not. They did not find 20,000 people kneeling in mud and rain and begging in all sincerity for the intercession of the Most High God for common murderers!"

### IRA Raid Belfast Jail

A DARING but unsuccessful attempt to release political prisoners incarcerated in the Crumlin Road Jail in Belfast was made yesterday evening. It appears that three men, two of whom were dressed as military officers and one as an RIC sergeant, drove up the Crumlin Road in a taxi cab. They walked up to the great door and knocked for admission. A warden opened it and the three men coolly walked into the guardroom. The officers explained that they had come to remove some Sinn Féin prisoners. Apparently the suspicions of the warden were immediately aroused for he threw the bunch of keys he was carrying into the inner yard of the prison while shouting for help. Realising the danger of their position, the visitors left.

(The rising tide of indignation in Britain again Lloyd George's 'Reprisals' policy, voiced here by the respected Liberal jurist, Lord Buckmaster, extended even to King George V himself – the present queen's father. Distressed by atrocities being committed by his forces, the king consulted the South African PM, General Smuts, and the scene was set for the conciliatory 'king's speech' in Belfast which would finally end the conflict.)

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