



**CHALLENGE:** Doug Beattie, the new leader of the UUP, will hope to be the figure who finally begins to credibly challenge the DUP for the status as the lead party of unionism  
**PICTURE:** Mal McCann

# Beattie may not rush to role of progressive new unionist leader

**M**ANY days have dawned since hope resided amongst the membership of the Ulster Unionist Party. Time's relentless passage has meant it is easy to forget that, until the turn of the century, the UUP stood alone as the ascendant political force within both unionist and northern Irish politics since the foundation of the state some 80 years previously.

Today, Ulster Unionists are feeling atypically – if still tentatively- optimistic as they watch with no small sense of glee their political rivals in the DUP lurch from crisis to crisis following what Peter Robinson has described as the “savage slaying” of Arlene Foster.

The UUP made into an art form washing dirty linen in public in the handful of years after the Good Friday Agreement. David Trimble's shortcomings as a leader meant they allowed themselves to be dogged by division, fractured and harried by an anti-Agreement faction which would ultimately depart to take up prominent positions in a DUP remodelled and repackaged by Robinson, who would pay Trimble the ultimate compliment by steering Paisley into joint office alongside McGuinness.

The DUP haven't looked back since, remaining comfortably dominant within unionism, the UUP languishing well behind, viewed as bit players by a unionist electorate observing with alarm their descent into minority status well before the centenary candles could even be lit.

The current crisis engulfing the DUP has all the ingredients of a perfect storm as far as their political rivals are concerned. The party's stewardship of unionism through the Brexit and Stormont debates over the past four years has been disastrous, leaving many unionists feeling frustrated, bewildered and isolated all at the same time. Arlene Foster's tenure as leader may have been bad but few believe her successor Edwin Poots represents an improvement, including almost half of his party colleagues at Westminster and Stormont.

Doug Beattie may not be the most

**Chris DONNELLY**



experienced of the UUP's leaders to occupy the position since Trimble, and nor is he the most polished, but he is the leader who has taken up post at the most opportune time and, coupled with the strength of his own personality and leadership style, will hope to be the figure who finally begins to credibly challenge the DUP for the status as the lead party of unionism.

Electorally, Beattie has a mountain to climb. The last time we went to the polls, for the December 2019 Westminster election, the DUP had a terrible election by their own standards, losing North Belfast and South Belfast whilst failing to win North Down. Yet they still won eight seats with over 30 per cent of the vote whilst Beattie's party stumbled across the line in fifth place with less than 12 per cent of votes cast and without mounting a serious challenge in any constituency except Fermanagh South Tyrone, where Tom Elliott

*His hostile posturing over the Irish language suggests Beattie will not be rushing to take up the position of the inclusive and progressive unionist leader many have tried to depict of him*

only came close to winning due to the DUP not fielding a candidate.

Like all political leaders, Doug Beattie needs a degree of luck to succeed, and in the gripping implosion that has beset his political rivals he has found the source of the required fortune needed to make the strides necessary to inspire confidence amongst both his party faithful and a potential voting base across unionism weary by the DUP's brand of perpetually hostile politics.

Yet Beattie remains something of an unknown quantity. Plain speaking can be viewed as a virtue, and being civil and welcoming to the gay and lesbian community is certainly an advance on what the DUP has offered in the past.

But his hostile posturing over the Irish language suggests Beattie will not be rushing to take up the position of the inclusive and progressive unionist leader many have tried to depict of him.

Only last week he reiterated his opposition to an Irish Language Act, in spite of it being first promised well over a decade ago at St Andrews and once again in the New Decade New Approach deal. Beattie's allegation that it could “end up driving more division” was straight out of the DUP playbook, calculatedly so as he hopes to position his party to benefit from grassroots unionist blowback in the event of Edwin Poots having to honour the Irish language provisions contained in the NDNA deal.

Recent opinion polls have suggested a modest improvement in support for the UUP, with the TUV benefitting most from the DUP's torrid run, illustrating how unionism would appear to be splintering more evenly across three parties. Beattie's tactics over the Irish language suggest he is hoping to broaden the party's ability to compete with the TUV in mopping up disaffected DUP voters of all shades. Moderate instincts, relative or not, may have to be concealed. A strategic shift to authentically progressive terrain for Ulster Unionism would appear to remain some way off.

## ON THIS DAY

JUNE 7 1971

### Hume Warns of Dangers Ahead

A WARNING that violence and sectarianism would bring ultimate disaster to NI and create problems which would take centuries to eradicate was given last night by Mr John Hume, MP 'No-one', he said, addressing the SDLP in Derry, 'could under-estimate the serious nature of the present situation. Neither could anyone with any sense of responsibility fail to be aware of the necessity for public men to weigh their words and actions with care.'

Mr Hume said that the presence of British troops in NI to maintain law and order, and that forcing by the Westminster government of a reform programme on Stormont was a public admission that the Unionist government was incapable of governing NI in peace, justice and stability. It was the duty of the British Government to declare the 1920 Act and the system of government created by it had been an abysmal failure and they should now show their willingness to create a new system in which sectarianism will be neutralised and in which all sections could participate at every level.

Mr Hume said that prior to August 1969, in spite of their forebodings as to what would happen, the members of the Opposition at Stormont made their views known privately to the Governments in London and Belfast. Unfortunately, their sense of responsibility was not matched by those in power. Their advice was ignored.

### Church Leaders Join PM Against Violence

IRISH Church leaders have backed up statements by the Stormont Premier, Mr Brian Faulkner and the Taoiseach, Mr Jack Lynch, condemning the latest wave of explosions and violence in NI. The Churchmen, including Cardinal Conway and the Church of Ireland Primate, Archbishop George Simms, called on all Christian people to dissociate themselves completely from such actions which they condemned as 'crimes against God's law'. Earlier Mr Faulkner said the wave of terrorist attacks 'transcends political and religious differences'.

Meanwhile, the Minister of State at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Mr John Taylor said at Stormont that it had not been possible to establish how confidential RUC information had come into the possession of the Rev Ian Paisley, Protestant Unionist MP. Mr Taylor said steps were being taken to prevent further leakages of confidential information outside the force.

**(As this report shows, as early as 1971 John Hume was already thinking in terms of a broad-based settlement which would replace the flawed 1920 Act with its sectarian headcount in favour of one in which every section of the community could participate. Unfortunately, 3,600 people would die before such a system was finally achieved by consent.)**

**EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX**  
e.phoenix@irishnews.com