



TOO WEAK? Edwin Poots will find that nothing matters more in politics than perception

Can Edwin Poots beat the curse of perception?

NOTHING matters more in politics than perception: particularly when it comes to political parties.

The UUP, for example, went through Reg Empey, Tom Elliott, Mike Nesbitt, Robin Swann and Steve Aiken without ever shaking off the perception (among its core vote, broader unionism and the media) that it wasn't worth wasting a vote on.

Robin Swann was ridiculed when he was leader of the party (because the party itself was relentlessly ridiculed): but as soon as he stood down from the role and took on the much more difficult role of health minister during a pandemic, his approval ratings soared.

Each new leader of the UUP between 2005 and May 2021 tried to reshape and reinvent the party.

Did their best to make it seem new, interesting and relevant. Some were woeful media performers. Some weren't.

Some seemed to have the pulse of the party, but only for short periods. Some had blips of electoral encouragement, but all failed to deliver the sort of breakthrough required to have the party taken seriously again by voters.

Some had opportunities to land substantial blows on the DUP, yet always pulled their punches at the last moment.

None of them came to the job at a moment which seems so dangerous for the DUP.

That doesn't mean Doug Beattie will be able to shift the perception of the party overnight, but it should mean that electoral progress is now his to lose.

Because the key to success for a party in the UUP's position lies in conveying the impression that a vote for it is no longer a wasted vote.

It doesn't matter how useless and fractious the DUP looks right now. The only thing that matters is whether people who have been voting for the party since November 2003 (when it



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eclipsed the UUP in the assembly elections) are prepared to stop voting for it and give their vote to someone else instead?

It's too early to make the call on that question. Beattie is certainly having a honeymoon (which no UUP leader has enjoyed since David Trimble replaced James Molyneux in September 1979), but that's not enough.

Let's face it, if DUP voters are cross with the party for 'going soft' aren't they more likely to drift towards the TUV?

Maybe: yet the willingness to make that journey may depend on whether they think a vote for Allister is more likely to increase the chances of a Sinn Féin first minister and minister of justice.

TUV has one seat now. How likely is it to increase that to 27-plus? Similarly, the UUP requires an extra 17-plus seats to put the keys

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of the first minister's office in Beattie's grasp. How likely is that?

With no disrespect to either Doug or Jim, I'm pretty sure even their most ardent supporters wouldn't expect either of them to make those sorts of gains in an election which must be held by next May (and maybe sooner). Which is good news for Edwin Poots: but only if a majority of unionist voters actually prioritise keeping the first minister's office above and beyond the negative perception they presently have of the DUP.

Let's go back to that assembly election in 2003.

The balance between pro-agreement and anti-agreement unionism in the 1998 assembly was 30 to 28.

It was a small enough margin to encourage unhappy UUP/PUP voters to risk shifting to the DUP five years later.

A decision made easier by the fact that Sinn Féin had just 18 seats and was not expected to surge ahead.

Today, the DUP has 28 seats – just one ahead of Sinn Féin, which is also leading the DUP in opinion polls.

The UUP/TUV/and independent Claire Sugden have 12 between them.

Those figures will worry voters tempted to shift from the DUP, because, unlike 2003, there is now the distinct possibility of Sinn Féin nudging ahead if the unionist vote shreds. Again, good news for Poots.

But can he beat the curse of perception? His party is drunk on score-settling and grudge-matching and with enough leaks to fill a reservoir.

Poots was only in the job five minutes before he suffered his first defeat in a party group meeting on Tuesday.

It got much worse for him yesterday in a truly calamitous day for his leadership and his party.

In the space of a dramatic few hours, the question became just how long Edwin Poots could survive.

ON THIS DAY

JUNE 18 1921

'Executed' in IRA Reprisal

IN DUBLIN yesterday, before Mr Justice Dodd, leave was asked to presume the death of District Inspector Potter of Cahir, County Tipperary who, it will be recalled, was captured by the IRA who offered to exchange him for Mr Edward Traynor, afterwards executed in Mountjoy Prison in connection with an ambush in Dublin.

Gilbert Potter was District Inspector of the RIC in charge of the Cahir district. In the course of his duty last April he proceeded to Cloughreen. On his return journey he was taken prisoner by the IRA and he had not been seen since that date.

On April 26, his wife received a letter from him dated May 1921 and this was the only communication which she received until 7th May when she received a package containing articles and documents. He left his wife and four little children.

Mrs Potter produced a letter from her husband, written while a prisoner of the IRA stating: 'The officers of the IRA are here today and one has informed me that they had reported my capture to Dublin and were awaiting instructions. Meanwhile I was to be treated well and given what I require.

Whatever happens, dear Lily, I feel so much that I brought such great unhappiness and distress to you and I pray you may be comforted and be assured that there is nothing else on earth I value except you and the children – you first. With my love, your husband, GILBERT.' He asked her to send him papers to read, smokes and a little money. Mrs Potter also received the following from IRA HQ, Tipperary, Number 3 Brigade, dated April 27, 1921: 'Madam, it is my sad duty to inform you that your husband, G Potter, was legally executed yesterday.

Your husband was charged with and found guilty of waging war against the Republic.

We offered to release your husband if the British Government would release Volunteer Traynor who was similarly charged.

Personally I don't believe the offer went past Dublin Castle. Traynor was hanged on Monday, the law had, therefore, to take its course. Your husband was treated with the utmost consideration while a prisoner in our hands. I am, madam – Yours, O C.'

Mr Justice Dodd granted the application.

(As in the famous case of Mrs Lindsay in Co Cork, DI Potter had been held by the IRA as a hostage for the safe release of an IRA prisoner then under sentence of death. The details of the inspector's personal letters to his wife and the IRA's confirmation of his fate make poignant reading even after a century.)

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