



JEFF WANE: A LucidTalk poll at the weekend showed support for Sir Jeffrey Donaldson's party dropping to 13 per cent

As DUP declines, who speaks for unionism?

IN LAST week's column I noted that Jeffrey Donaldson would be praying for good news over the weekend.

The latest LucidTalk quarterly poll was due to be published on Saturday morning and Donaldson was hoping to see a significant rise in support levels for the DUP, which had fallen from 23 per cent last October to 16 per cent at the end of May.

The DUP clearly believed these figures to be reasonably accurate because they dumped both Arlene Foster and Edwin Poots within a matter of weeks of the February stats indicating a fall to 19 per cent and then pinned all their hopes on Donaldson again – having rejected him the first time. And while some within the DUP are now trying to find fault with LucidTalk's polling methods (after the latest poll indicated a further drop to 13 per cent) I know from conversations with a number of party members and representatives that the ongoing fall reflects their own sense of 'what's happening on the ground'.

Jim Allister, above the DUP on 14 per cent, is very content with the poll. As is Doug Beattie, because the UUP, for the first time in about 20 years, is polling higher than the DUP (at 16 per cent).

The scale of the DUP's decline since last October may seem surprising, yet it's the sort of decline you would expect from a party which has endured a civil war and a volume of leakage which would sink a battleship. Indeed, it's exactly the same scale of decline – albeit over a much shorter period – the UUP endured between 1998 and 2005.

On Tuesday morning Donaldson trotted out the usual line for this sort of occasion, saying that the 'real poll' was next spring's assembly election and that he was focused on that rather than opinion polls. Fair enough, but it's still hard to ignore a string of opinion polls telling the

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same story over and over again. It's even more difficult to ignore them when he was supposed to be the answer to the DUP's ongoing problems – as indicated by the polls – and provide the evidence of recovery for an election which is just eight months away.

He does have one thing in his favour, though: but only if it's something that actually matters to a majority of unionists any more. In times of crisis there is a tendency for unionists to rally behind the party which they think is most likely to win seats. That's why the DUP – during the St Andrews negotiations – supported an arrangement under which the largest party in the assembly (rather than the largest party of the largest designation) would provide the first minister. It was an arrangement which has allowed the DUP to play the 'vote for us to stop a Sinn Féin first minister' card in the last four elections.

Donaldson is already playing it – within hours of the polling figures, in fact. Some DUP members are also dropping hints that a Sinn

Féin first minister could also mean a Sinn Féin justice minister: obviously hoping a double whammy of fear will make voters forget all the other unionist parties when it comes to first preferences.

But here's the thing. How many unionists still buy that argument, particularly when a Sinn Féin deputy first minister has precisely the same veto and slowing-down powers as a DUP first minister?

Jim Allister argues there can't be a Sinn Féin first minister unless a unionist party agrees to nominate a deputy. The UUP, meanwhile, argue that 14 years of DUP first ministers (Paisley, Robinson, Foster, Poots and now Givan) has done nothing to prevent Sinn Féin dictating the agenda far too often, so why reward the party with the job again? The Loyalist Communities Council, Orange Order and younger elements of loyalism are eager to bring down the assembly altogether, particularly if Donaldson seems keen to consider some sort of soft landing on the protocol.

I didn't need an opinion poll to tell me unionism is increasingly divided. I've been writing about those divisions for a number of years. So, the LucidTalk results came as no surprise. Indeed, they highlight a question I've raised a few times since the summer of 2017 (when the DUP cut its parliamentary deal with the Conservatives): who actually speaks for unionism? The UUP has a two-point lead over the DUP. The TUV has a one-point lead. And while the DUP has fallen behind, it is still within recovery distance of both.

There is no clear leader, though. No dominant party – as the DUP was between 2005 and 2019. And the absence of a dominant party makes it harder to predict where unionist votes will go next spring. I still think the DUP will do better than these figures suggest: that said, I didn't expect them to collapse to 13 per cent so quickly.

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ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 3 1971

Brutality Inquiry

THE Ombudsman, Sir Edmund Compton, head of the British Home Office inquiry into allegations of Army brutality against people arrested in the early morning swoop of August 9, said in Belfast yesterday that he was not planning the investigation on the basis that it would be boycotted by those involved. They had been promised the full cooperation of the Army and other security authorities.

The detainees had already indicated that the inquiry in its present form is unacceptable. They demand it should be held in public, that it should be headed by an internationally accepted chairman and that it should have judicial powers to summon witnesses.

46 Hurt in Bomb Blast

FORTY-SIX people received hospital treatment after four midday bombs exploded in Belfast city centre yesterday. One bomb wrecked the front of the Glengall Street headquarters of the Unionist Party. Other bombs exploded in the Bedford House complex near the City Hall. Police said that no warning of the explosions was given. In Dublin last night the Taoiseach, Mr Jack Lynch condemned the bombings.

Mr Robin Stewart (21) had just parked his car near the Unionist offices when the first blast came. 'We were only four or five yards away,' he said. 'It blew out all the car windows.' He and a passenger were taken to hospital. Mr Raymond Henderson said: 'I saw young girls running out of the building, some of them bleeding.'

The Taoiseach said he was 'shocked' by the latest Belfast bombings. 'No Irishman with the least claim to ideals and principles, no Irishman with the least shred of Christianity or sanity can justify or condone the maiming or the killing of innocent people – and I include in this all those who have died by violence or have been injured or disfigured in recent incidents.'

Paisley Calls for 'Third Force'

REV Ian Paisley, MP said at Balmore last night that a Third Force was necessary and, if the Government were not prepared to have one, they should resign. What was needed was a new force like the Ulster Special Constabulary controlled by Stormont – not a policy of containment of the IRA but a policy of annihilation.

THE claim by a number of detainees – the so-called Hooded Men – that they had been systematically tortured on their arrest were investigated by the Compton Inquiry. They described being hooded, forced to adopt stress positions and subjected to 'white noise' and food and sleep deprivation. The Irish Government would later take their case to the European Court of Human Rights which would find Britain guilty of 'inhuman and degrading treatment' but not torture.

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