

STATEMENT FROM:



# BILLY ARMSTRONG MLA

ULSTER UNIONIST ASSEMBLY MEMBER FOR MID-ULSTER

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## **Billy Armstrong MLA retires from the Assembly this week**

Ulster Unionist Assembly Member since 1998, Billy Armstrong is retiring on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2011 when this term of the Assembly dissolves. This is a monumental day for Billy, who has spent almost thirteen years at Stormont representing the people of Mid-Ulster, and as he looks back over a career that has brought many changes to the lives of the people of Northern Ireland, as well as to the personal life of this dairy farmer turned politician, Billy also considers future of Northern Ireland.

Billy said, "Back in 1998 I stood for the Assembly in an election I didn't expect to win. I was never a career politician, nor had I harboured lifelong political ambitions, but with the faith of the Mid-Ulster electorate then and in consecutive elections in 2003 and 2007 I went to Stormont to represent the views and concerns of the people.

I was frustrated at the impasse which had developed in this Province and wanted to see a real change, so that the nightmare of death and destruction brought about by terrorists and which we lived through in the 1970's, 80's and early 90's did not blight the lives of a new generation growing up. My lifetime commitment to making Northern Ireland a better place to live was first marked by my service in the RUC Part-Time Reserves for fourteen years up until 1989.

Something had to change and that change emerged in the shape of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. It was far from perfect, but it did enable us, as a community, to find a way out of the Troubles and to re-establish a devolved Assembly at Stormont which would bring government closer to the people of Northern Ireland.

Unionism and the unionist people paid a very high price but emerged from that conflict unbowed and secure in the knowledge that IRA violence had failed to deliver a united Ireland. The sight of Sinn Fein Ministers in Stormont is difficult for many to accept, but I, for one, would rather have democratically elected representatives in a local Executive working with a Unionist majority to administer British rule in Northern Ireland and rebuild the economy which IRA/Sinn Fein did so much to destroy, than to have them outside carrying on a campaign of terror.

As recent events in the Republic of Ireland regarding their economy have shown, the prospect of a United Ireland is further away than ever. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, the fifth largest economy in the world. To leave it and join with the Republic of Ireland would be economic suicide.

It is quite clear now that republicans have no political strategy to achieve a United Ireland and that their dream of Unity is over. They complain about the Westminster Government and the level of cuts being imposed in Northern Ireland, yet their alternative is to unite with a much smaller country with a much weaker economy. Having lost the military battle they have now tasted defeat in the economic one.

At the fine age of 67 the time is right for me to step down from front-line politics and to enable a new generation to emerge. I may be retiring from politics, but I am not retiring from active life! I will continue working in the background to promote the Ulster Unionist Party and to support our Leader, Tom Elliott as he strives to bring forward the Ulster Unionist Party and deliver positive change for the people of Northern Ireland.

Obviously as an Ulster Unionist I want to see talented and energetic people join the Ulster Unionist Party and to help Tom to restore the Party's electoral fortunes. Tom will be assisted in his task by a good range of Ulster Unionist candidates at both Local Government and Assembly.

I am a great believer in the old saying that *all it requires for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing*. In any healthy democracy good men and good women need to get involved by joining political parties and putting themselves forward for election. At its most basic level, they need to turn out and vote at election time.

In the run up to the Election on 5<sup>th</sup> May I will be campaigning for my daughter, Sandra, as she stands for election to the Assembly to represent Mid-Ulster, as well as our seven local government candidates. Sandra (Overend), another dedicated Ulster Unionist, has been Women's Development Officer for the Ulster Unionist Party for three years promoting the role of women in the political arena and encouraging more women to become elected representatives, and I am extremely proud that the Ulster Unionist Party has chosen Sandra to represent Mid-Ulster.

Both Sandra, and Tom, the Party Leader can be assured of my full support, and I wish the Ulster Unionist Party success in these Local Government and Assembly elections. My political aspirations back in 1998 are still a work in progress – we have devolved government but it is not yet working in a cohesive manner, with the biggest achievement of this term being that the Assembly managed to survive. The Ulster Unionist Party will as before lead forward with unselfish leadership and our proposed game-changer to agree a Programme for Government before Ministers are allocated departments is a positive way forward. In voting for the Ulster Unionist Party as your first choice this goal can be achieved.

It has been my pleasure to serve as an Ulster Unionist MLA since 1998, and I can assure the people of Mid-Ulster that it has been an absolute privilege to serve them. To represent the people of Mid-Ulster in Parliament Buildings, Stormont has been a truly humbling experience and one which I will never forget. No greater honour can be bestowed on an individual than to be returned as an elected representative of the people, and with an increased majority each time. My sincere thanks to those people of Mid-Ulster who have loyally supported me over the years, to fellow Ulster Unionists who have campaigned to return me on three occasions and to my family who have supported me and endured the pressures of having a politician in the family!"

ENDS ...