

## **My Views - Unionist Unity 11/12/2009**

There has been a flurry of letters and comment recently from DUP politicians on the subject of Unionist Unity.

Let me say that as a Unionist who lives west of the Bann, and represents a predominantly nationalist Constituency, no-one more than me wants to see the representation of the Unionist family maximized, and the family united.

One cannot view the present without fully understanding the past, and how Unionism got to this point today where we are so divided, and in turn, weakened as a result. The disunity that we now suffer was caused when Ian Paisley chose to form the DUP and split the Unionist family in exactly the same way as he split the Churches and the Loyal Orders. Under his leadership and beyond, the DUP launched attack after attack on fellow Unionist politicians and Parties and never gave a moments thought to the impact this was having on wider Unionist morale.

This culminated in the DUP's shameful decision to endorse an Independent Unionist candidate in the 2001 General Election in Fermanagh & South Tyrone, a decision which effectively gifted the Unionist seat to Sinn Fein. Unionists in the west of the Province will be forgiven for finding the DUP's new found concern for the Westminster seat of Fermanagh & South Tyrone as ringing very hollow indeed.

We must recognise that post St Andrews, the Unionist electoral landscape has changed. The decision to go into Government with Sinn Fein and the arrival of the "Chuckle Brothers" routine came as a 'sell-out' to the DUP's base. The 2009 European Election saw the DUP get a shock as a huge slice of their vote remained with Jim Allister on ground which the DUP had traditionally occupied, whilst the DUP chose to willfully follow the path trodden by David Trimble and the Ulster Unionists a full ten years previously.

The Unionist people are not stupid. They want Unionist Unity, but they do not want some hastily cobbled together electoral arrangement to paper over the cracks. The DUP need to accept that the attacks it made on the Ulster Unionist Party for the past 40 years have been proved totally wrong. Recent events at Stormont have proven the onslaught they unleashed on David Trimble and the UUP at the time of the Belfast Agreement was due totally to party politics and nothing to do with principle.

I find it curious that while the DUP are seeking to focus the minds of the Unionist electorate on the Westminster seats of Fermanagh & South Tyrone and South

Belfast, they are less keen to discuss the ticking bomb they have left under the political process at Stormont.

Prior to St Andrews, the First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly would be drawn from the largest designation in that Assembly. Put simply, as long as the combined Unionist family controlled at least 55 of the 108 seats at Stormont - irrespective of how many Unionist Parties were in the Assembly - then a Unionist would occupy the First Minister's position. This wasn't good enough for the DUP.

At St Andrews, the DUP insisted that the Government change the legislation so that the First Minister would come from the largest Political Party rather than the largest designation. This was a cynical attempt to seek Party advantage and scare wavering Unionist voters into voting DUP to prevent Martin McGuinness – or any other Sinn Fein bogeyman – from becoming First Minister.

Unfortunately for the DUP the move has backfired horribly. The DUP effectively stole Ulster Unionist clothes and as a result the TUV has gained the ground the DUP once claimed to stand proud for. Based on the European Election results, in all likelihood Sinn Fein will emerge as the largest Party in any new Assembly Election, and thanks to the DUP would be in line to take the First Minister's position. If and when an Assembly Election is called, the DUP will have to explain to the Unionist people why they opened the door to the possibility of a Sinn Fein First Minister at St Andrews.

Once the scale of this folly dawns on the Unionist people, I have no doubt that they will pass their own judgement. I want to see Unionist Unity, but that Unity must be based on truth, reality and an honest assessment of where we are, how we as a People got here and where we go next. Any objective appraisal of events over the past ten years, will demonstrate that the Ulster Unionist Party's analysis and judgement has been proven correct. We acted honourably in the best long-term interests of our Country, not the short-term interests of our Party. We told the truth even when it was hard. We did not lie to people, we did not make promises we knew we could never keep. We are the only Party capable of *Uniting the Unionist People*.