

Is Unionism in Terminal Decline?

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THE future of Unionism looks decidedly bleak, and I am not complaining. The 6 counties were set up 100 years ago on a sectarian head count, with a two thirds Protestant, Unionist majority. Even the 9 counties of Ulster would have given the Unionists a majority, but they rightly realised that the ‘Fenians’ would have outbred them in a short time.

Ok, it has taken 100 years and Unionism is in a slight minority, but that slight minority is in the process of tearing themselves apart, all self-inflicted with their reactionary anti-Gay, anti-abortion, creationist, extreme right wing ‘kick the Pope’ politics. I have to say that I wouldn’t include Doug Beattie’s Ulster Unionist brand in the above characterisation, but I would be surprised if he could take other than a small minority of the sectarian DUP electorate with him.

As for the Democratic Unionist Party, a significant number of senior members recently walked out of the leadership ratification meeting before the new leader Poots gave his speech at a Belfast Hotel. The walkout was said to be a protest at the ‘brutal’ way Arlene Foster was ousted as leader in May. It was described by a well-known figure in the DUP as the “worst meeting he had attended in over 40 years as a DUP member”.

Alex Kane, writing in the *Irish News*, described the process as a sort of freak show and wrote: “It’s a bit like that moment in *Fawlty Towers* when Basil and Manuel are rolling round the floor and a psychiatrist, who is a guest, mutters: ‘There’s enough here for an entire conference’. That’s how bad it is”.

Arlene Foster who also walked out of the meeting has made it clear

that she intends to leave the DUP. On her final day as leader, she said of the leadership under Edwin Poots: “I think we are regressing and becoming narrower. It’s quite nasty, frankly.”

Perhaps one of the most astonishing remarks came from Ian Paisley Junior who claimed that the ousting of Ian Paisley as DUP leader “killed him.” His father helped to form the DUP in 1971, and held the leadership of the organisation until 2008, some 37 years. You would think that a change in leadership by that stage was somewhat overdue.

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In 2007, Ian Paisley under the Good Friday Agreement, became First Minister in the Stormont Assembly. Four years earlier Arlene Foster left the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and joined the DUP together with Jeffrey Donaldson. Arlene was part of what was described as a ‘right-wing cabal within the Ulster Unionist Party’ known as the ‘baby barristers’. They actively opposed David Trimble, the UUP leader at the time, and were a thorn in his side because he supported the Good Friday Agreement.

The DUP is known as a party that has opposed the enactment of civil rights, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Good Friday Agreement, power sharing, abortion rights, change in homosexuality laws and Equal Marriage. It is said that much of their values are based on creationist ideas. Poots for example, is a

young earth creationist and rejects the theory of evolution.

When it comes to politics, they follow the right-wing conservative route. Under the leadership of Ian Paisley Snr, the DUP helped form the Third Force, an Ulster loyalist defensive militia. In 1981 Paisley said that it had between 15,000 and 20,000 members. The DUP is largely a middle (and upper) class organisation at the top, and they are ace at using the working-class loyalists to back their policies. All in all, it’s quite nasty, frankly.

Some of us have thought that about the DUP for a long time. But the DUP of 50 years in the making is in disarray and, as someone once said, “never interfere with the enemy when he is in the process of destroying himself”. It is difficult to have any empathy with any of these players who have opposed everything from women’s rights to Irish language rights and have done little if anything to protect the NHS.

There are, of course, many dangers in the developing situation, not least in the threat from working class loyalists of a violent reaction, when they see their sense of identity being eroded. The problem is “who do they fight”? It’s not Sinn Fein who has got them in this situation. The DUP supported Brexit, which was driven by English nationalism, and it was so obvious this would result in a border down the Irish sea and the almost certain election of Michelle O’Neil as first minister at the next Assembly elections – thus further eroding the confidence of loyalism.

Unionism has led its supporters into cul de sacs before and managed to extract themselves. Can they do it again? Doubtful. □