



Traditional but not DEMOCRATIC

After autumn

The DUP will see off the TUV and be back in the Executive before the end of the year

By Anton McCabe

The Northern local elections of 16 May will be another step towards the return of the Assembly and Executive. Unionists are increasingly confident of seeing off the potential challenge from the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV).

The TUV has slipped to 5% in the polls. There is no sign of the party making a significant breakthrough. Leader Jim Allister is extremely able. However, he has not built a team and that reduces his party's electoral force.

The DUP is tactically adept enough not to return immediately to the Executive after the local elections, because it would be perceived to have tricked the electorate by not announcing its intention during the local election campaign and that is precisely the sort of quasi-ethical issue on which Allister would go to town.

However, the election will free up the DUP. The party knows there will be no significant changes to the Protocol, beyond the Windsor Framework. However, there may well be changes to domestic British legislation which it can present as an acceptable concession. On the one hand, Rishi Sunak has no real commitment to the North. On the other, the British Government knows the collapse of the Northern political process would strike a blow to its image, and its image is very fragile.

The DUP itself is still under contradictory pressures. Its core support is against the Protocol and the Windsor Framework. In the background

there is resistance to a Sinn Féin First Minister.

Polls, though, say only 35% of the Unionist electorate holds Unionists should stay out of the institutions until the Protocol and Framework are scrapped.

That is because there is an understanding international agreements cannot be renegotiated. There is an equal understanding in the DUP that it cannot ignore the section of the electorate which votes Sinn Féin. More, staying out of the Assembly and Executive until another Assembly election would strengthen Sinn Féin and implicate the DUP in allegations of extreme political bad faith and impropriety.

It does not mean the Unionist electorate accepts the Protocol and Framework. In a Lucid Talk poll, 35% think the Framework poses a threat to the North's position in the United Kingdom. That represents more than two thirds of Unionists.

The DUP has invested its soul in the political process. Importantly, saying 'no' permanently is not a viable strategy. The Unionist electorate favours devolution. They do not trust the British Government and know Direct Rule would put them in a weak position.

Yet another significant factor is that the DUP

sees itself as the main party of business. (It is less certain whether business sees that.) Importantly, business wants the Assembly and Executive back. Business also wants the Windsor Framework.


The statements of DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson indicate an edging back towards return to the Assembly. His statement on the Windsor Framework was no ringing endorsement. He was, though, far further from a damning repudiation: "The Windsor Framework while undoubtedly representing significant progress across a number of areas does not deal with some of the fundamental problems at the heart of our current difficulties. It is my current assessment that there remain key areas of concern which require further clarification, re-working and change as well as seeing further legal text".

Belfast Telegraph commentator Alex Kane is, overall, the sharpest analyst of Northern politics. Kane believes the DUP will return to Stormont. He has written: "I think it's likely the DUP will bank the gains from the Framework, point out that the UK and EU will not be returning to the negotiating table anytime soon, and stress the benefits of a return to devolution over a return to some form of direct rule. That will mean facing down some internal opponents, external critics and an electoral challenge from the TUV".

Jeffrey Donaldson has set up a consultation panel to formulate his Party's view on the Framework. The answer he hopes for is obvious. All eight members are DUP pragmatists. They include a businessman who supported a Remain vote in the Brexit referendum.

Too much should not be read into the DUP at Westminster voting against the Framework. They had the luxury of doing so without consequences albeit without much credibility. They knew the legislation would pass comfortably. Their vote kept the support base happy.

To continue pressure on the DUP, Secretary of State Chris Heaton-Harris is threatening a budget which would mean severe cuts in the North. The most likely outcome would be to increase pressure on the DUP. However, threats and cuts are both dangerous strategies, and could backfire.

All in all, though, the question is not if the Assembly and Executive are re-established. It is when. Wise money is on some time after the trees again begin to shed their leaves. 



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