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2017 DUP Conference - Deputy Leader's Speech



25 November 2017

Speech by DUP Deputy Leader Nigel Dodds MP to the 2017 Conference

Nigel Dodds MP

DUP Deputy Leader, Leader of the DUP Parliamentary Party, Spokesman on Reform and Constitutional issues and Foreign Affairs

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Mr Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Conference,

Thank you for the welcome.

What a year this has been for Northern Ireland!

A small team.... with none of the resources of the big boys.....but with a great manager and a great team spiritdelivering success and achievements unimagined only a few years ago.

But enough about the DUP.....what about our fantastic Northern Ireland football team and the Green and White Army!

We are so proud of them and all our sports stars who bring so much credit to Northern Ireland around the world.

And what a year it has been for the Democratic Unionist Party.

The entire history of the DUP has been one of advance, but also of struggle and adversity.

From the earliest days of Dr Paisley, through the dark days of the Troubles, to Peter Robinson leading us into this new era, we have had to fight for everything we have achieved.

It has been a history of defying the odds, of standing up for what we believe in and of facing down those who oppose us.

The fact that this party was even created at all was an achievement, the fact it survived its first twenty-

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five years came as a surprise to some, and the fact we took on and have held the mantle of leadership of unionism and of Northern Ireland for well over a decade has defied our critics and our opponents.

But what we have achieved in the face of such intense adversity these last twelve months is truly remarkable.

And I want to take this opportunity to thank our party leader Arlene Foster.

The test of any leader's mettle is not how they perform when the sun is on their face... it is during the darkest of times that their true worth shines through.

There's a lot of talk about fake news, but if anyone wanted to see such a phenomenon in action they could do worse than review how Arlene has been treated in 2017.

Arlene, the truth is these people did not come for you because you are weak. They came for you because you are strong!

And though it has been testing and trying at times - both for you and your family - you have come through this stronger and better than ever.

Those who thought you could be browbeaten, hounded or harassed out of politics didn't reckon on the will and the resolve of a unionist woman from Fermanagh.

At a time when other political leaders are heading for the Exit - Stage Left.

Arlene isn't going away.

Conference, little under twelve months ago, there were those who thought they could exploit political events to their advantage, to resurrect old causes and to refight battles they had lost.

They complained, privately and publicly, that the DUP were too strong in government, that we wouldn't do what they demanded and they wanted to force us out of power.

When the republican leadership decreed that Martin McGuinness would have to resign his post as deputy First Minister, their real goal was to rob the DUP of power and influence.

Well, conference, that strategy has hit a few bumps along the way.

Little did our critics think that within six months the very existence of the Government of the United Kingdom would depend on the DUP and that Sinn Fein MPs and MLAs would be reduced to carping critics of everything and of everyone.

Today, it is the DUP that stands in the heart of government, not in Northern Ireland, but across the United Kingdom.

And don't be fooled when Sinn Fein talk about unfulfilled agreements.

They go very quiet when you ask them about the details.

It is all a convenient smoke-screen to conceal reality and hide the truth, a rewriting of history in real time.

Make no mistake. This was a manufactured crisis to cover their own blushes.

And we would do well not to miss the bigger picture.

Sinn Fein brought down the institutions at Stormont not because republicanism was winning, but because the Assembly hadn't become the conveyor belt to a united Ireland they had promised their people.

Even now they are afraid to return to the Assembly to make their case and to fight their corner without the outcome of key issues being pre cooked in advance.

They are the ones who are running from the political battlefield pleading for others to help them out.

That is not the sign of a strong movement, but of one that lacks the confidence of its convictions ... and as we all know, they have plenty of convictions.

In the early months of the year they thought they could cultivate chaos - to destabilise this Province and replace the DUP as Northern Ireland's largest party.

And because of a concerted and relentless campaign they very nearly did ... but that merely served as a

wake up call to the people of Northern Ireland.

What Sinn Fein did not reckon on was the resolve of the Ulster people and, the determination of unionism to stand up to the Sinn Fein threat.

Under estimate the DUP at your peril!

As providence would have it, an early opportunity for unionists to set the record straight at the polls.

Today, as leader of the party at Westminster I want to report on where things stand and what we have achieved.

But first of all let me say a word about the Westminster election.

I am sure you will agree it was a truly remarkable result.

I think, from the reaction on the doors, most of us knew that things were going well but I doubt any of us foresaw the scale of what was to come.

Let us just reflect on and remember what was achieved.

292,316 votes or 36% of the votes cast - the most this party has ever achieved in over 30 years.

10 Members of Parliament - that's a majority of all the Northern Ireland MPs and the most in our history.

Three out of four of the seats in Belfast with South Belfast returning to unionist hands for the first time in over a decade.

Well done Emma! And well done Paul for retaking South Antrim from the UUP!

And for some of our other MPs it wasn't a case of counting their votes but of weighing them.

With the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP losing all of their seats the DUP is now no longer just Northern Ireland's largest party at Westminster, we are its only party in the House of Commons.

There were landslide victories all across the Province with DUP candidates recording enormous votes and huge majorities.

And even in the North Down seat our Alex came within 1200 votes of that constituency falling into DUP hands.

It's always good to have some new targets for the next election!

How quickly things have changed!

After the March election, there were those in Sinn Fein who were calling for another Assembly election... I don't hear too many asking for one now!

The election result in June wasn't just a record for the DUP but it was a win for all of unionism.

We put up the candidates but it was the votes of the people that ensured they were elected.

It is important to state that our victory is your victory. When we win, you win!

I know that there are some in the Conservative Party who now regret the Prime Minister's decision to hold an early election, but it has helped transform the position of unionism at home and across the UK.

It gave an enormous boost to the unionist people when we needed it and it helped reset and reshape the political map.

And I want to thank all of you in the hall today and across the party for all you did not just in the Westminster election but the Assembly election as well.

It is no exaggeration to say that none of us would hold elected office if it was not for the work that you all do.

It may be our names on the ballot paper, but the success is as much yours as it is ours.

For all of our success at the polls, what matters isn't just how many votes and how many seats we win but what we do with our mandate.

If I'm honest, I did not believe that in 2017 we were heading for a hung Parliament where the DUP would hold the balance of power, but looking back I don't think it was an accident how things turned out.

On reflection, it's hard to imagine how the results could have done more to maximise our influence.

A few more seats for the Conservatives and they could have ploughed on alone...had they won a fewer number of seats, even with our help they could not have secured a majority.

We entered the negotiations with the guiding star of doing what was right not for the DUP, but for Northern Ireland in particular and the United Kingdom as a whole.

And when the time came this party was not found wanting.

For us the choice between a Conservative Party led by Theresa May and a Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn was not a difficult one though that was not the decision for us to take.

Though I have many good friends in the Labour Party the prospect of a Corbyn government was not one that any unionist could have countenanced.

The real issue was whether we would support the government on a vote by vote basis or whether we would enter into a more comprehensive agreement.

We always believed it was in the national interest to provide an element of stability for the Brexit negotiations and for this Parliament and the Conservative Party concluded the same.

Though most of the attention has focussed on the £1 billion of new money to Northern Ireland, what we achieved for people across the UK is arguably even more significant.

And conference, let me remind you what we did achieve for ALL of the people living in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK because, given the seemingly selective memory of our detractors, it would be easy to forget!

Because it was right for the UK as a whole we insisted we would protect pensioners and there would be no change to the pensions triple lock or to the universal nature of the winter fuel allowance.

And because our place in the world matters we also ensured the government agreed to the NATO commitment of spending 2% of GDP on the armed services.

And because our farmers and rural communities matter so much we secured farm support right through to the end of the Parliament.

Through the Co-ordination Committee we will continue to make sure that the government does the right thing not just for Northern Ireland but for the whole of the UK.

That is why, though we won't always trumpet it from the roof tops, we will make sure that the economic benefits of the United Kingdom extend to all parts of the nation and to all people regardless of their class or background.

There are even some who say that if the DUP had written the Conservative Party's election manifesto, they wouldn't have needed our votes at all!

Our interests in the negotiations were not in seats for ourselves at the Cabinet table but in jobs and investment for our people.

That is why we put infrastructure investment right at the top of our priorities.

And because in an ever-changing world, broadband is not just a luxury but an economic necessity we made sure Northern Ireland would lead, not just the UK but Europe as a whole, in terms of ultra-fast broadband with a government investment of £150 million. We did this to ensure, once again, that every part of the Province will benefit.

Every part - and every one.

And in the Budget this week there was more delivery for Northern Ireland. More good news and more investment across the board for all sections of our community. From money for infrastructure to the City Deal and from the review of VAT and APD to more help for victims.

Our goal is not to push some narrow DUP agenda but to deliver for the whole community in Northern Ireland.

I was pleased that the Secretary of State was able to announce that the first allocations from the

confidence and supply arrangement will be released shortly for our health and education services and we look forward to the early release of the other aspects of the deal.

Though, I also say to the Secretary of State, that while we understand because of the talks process and the absence of Ministers, things have been more difficult, within a very short space of time that will not be a tenable excuse for not taking action.

None of us want to see Direct Rule introduced but we are fast approaching the moment when it will be the lesser of two evils.

I know there are many in other parties and across the UK who think that Northern Ireland got too good a deal from the Conservatives, but you know when I see how critical our votes have been over the last few weeks I do begin to wonder did we settle too easily!

There are some who say each DUP MP is now worth as much as a Cristiano Ronaldo or a Lionel Messi....I'm insulted by that....it should be Steve Davies and Kyle Lafferty!

Conference, there are those who still wonder if this arrangement can last, but for the DUP let me make it absolutely clear that we will honour our side of the bargain and we expect the Conservative Party will too.

I am delighted that one of the senior members of the Government team who works closely with us in Parliament has joined us at the conference this morning.

I want to put on record publicly my appreciation to Julian Smith MP who is the Government Chief Whip. He of course recently succeeded Gavin Williamson, now Secretary of State for Defence, and we should record our appreciation to Gavin also for the assistance that he has given to us and to Northern Ireland, not just in the last six months but long before it was fashionable or politically helpful for him to do so.

2017 was certainly an historic year for the DUP at Westminster but we must always look to the future and we will do so around five key objectives.

First, we will deliver on - and honour - the agreement that we entered into with the Conservative Party.

As a party we will be as good as our word.

Over the last five months through the Co-ordination Committee at Westminster we have worked through the issues and delivered on our side of the bargain.

Despite what some predicted, the DUP has not been a threat to stability at Westminster. In fact, we have proven to be the stability at Westminster.

Secondly, we will ensure all the promises that were made by the Conservative Party are delivered in a timely manner.

That means all of the allocations for the first two years being made available to Northern Ireland in a manner consistent with the agreed timescale or in a manner satisfactory to us.

We will make sure the £1 billion worth of new money and the £500 million in increased spending flexibility are invested in the Northern Ireland economy.

And this is not money for the DUP. It is money for investment in the future and for public services in Northern Ireland.

Isn't it ironic that some of the people who most object to hundreds million pounds extra being spent on the health service in Northern Ireland are the same people who seem quite happy to hand tens of billions of pounds over to Brussels!

Thirdly, we will work to ensure that the will of the British people on Brexit is delivered, while ensuring that nothing is done which undermines the integrity of the United Kingdom.

Our votes in recent weeks have made the difference in ensuring progress through Parliament of the great EU Withdrawal Bill.

But make no mistake... for us the integrity of the United Kingdom is non negotiable.

If the EU wants to insist on border check points on the island of Ireland that is a matter for them. There will be no internal UK border in the Irish Sea.

Fourthly, we will lay the groundwork for future delivery for Northern Ireland which takes us right through to the next general election.

Our deal with the Conservatives is for the entire Parliament and we have started the process of determining what will bring success, security and prosperity to the UK and Northern Ireland in the second half of the Parliament.

And fifthly, we will embed our work at Westminster to ensure that unionism continues to play a key role even after this Parliament is over.

Our new found influence at Westminster cannot wither on the vine after this term. Instead we must work to ensure that we build a network of relationships and contacts so that the Union, our precious Union, is strengthened and deepened.

Conference, with our new position comes great responsibility.

This is the chance of a lifetime and the opportunity of a generation for unionism.

We will want to use our influence wisely and in the national interest

We will want to make sure that we do so for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland and we will leave a real and abiding legacy for future generations.

While today we celebrate what has been achieved we should be wary about complacency.

There is danger that we fall foul of a simple but flawed analysis.

Our position at Westminster has never been stronger, our support in the country has never been greater. Our political opponents have either been defeated or have walked off the pitch altogether.

Some might say that we have never been in a better position, free and unfettered, to shape the future as we would wish.

They might point to the unreasonableness of Sinn Fein and their present irrelevance in the absence of a functioning Assembly.

They might even say that Sinn Fein has nothing to show for the last twenty years except electoral gains they can not translate into power or influence.

Such an analysis would suggest we sit back in our present situation and that we do not need to stretch to make progress.

That would be a mistake.

Of course there is no pressure on us to do a deal and any agreement will have to be politically balanced, but it is in Northern Ireland's long term interests to have a functioning Executive.

That doesn't mean we rush into a deal that is not right and it doesn't mean we need to do a deal overnight but our goal should be to see Stormont up and running again.

That will inevitably mean taking difficult decisions but I believe that this party has always shown that the

deals we have made in the past have been to Northern Ireland's long term advantage.

As the only meaningful unionist party left, we need to take decisions not just for the next few months but for the next few decades.

It means we need to take decisions which can command the support not just of our core DUP vote, but support right across unionism and right across Northern Ireland.

Because of our privileged position and our unique position within unionism, it is also incumbent upon us to take a longer and a broader view than ever before.

We need to be alive to changes in demography and shifts in society and to make sure we are able to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Gerry Adams' dream of a united Ireland by 2016 has gone but after a turbulent and transformative 2017 we stand at another critical moment in our history.

In 1985 we were powerless to stop the Anglo Irish Agreement, in 1998 we were powerless to block the Belfast Agreement, but today our future lies in our own hands.

At the ballot box we have never been stronger, at Westminster we have never had more influence.

Together let us make sure that we use this opportunity to create not just a legacy for Northern Ireland but for unionism as well.

We go forward with confidence, in the knowledge that we have been tried and tested like never before.

Stronger because of the adversity we have faced and more determined than ever to succeed.

We cannot predict what will happen in the next twelve months but the future is ours to shape.

Today, having endured the attacks of the last twelve months, we can enjoy our success even more.

Come Monday the next phase of this party and this country's great adventure will begin and with your continued help and your support we are more ready for it than ever before.

Whether there is devolution or direct rule, whether we hold the balance of power at Westminster or lead the way at Stormont, our vision and our values will remain the same.

Let us continue to serve the people in the spirit of those great Ulstermen and women who have gone before.

Let us stand strong for the Kingdom, the Province and the people we love so much.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of Northern Ireland, let us do all that we can to make sure the best is yet to come.

Thank you.

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DUP Headquarters

- 91 Dundela Avenue
- Belfast
- BT4 3BU
- United Kingdom
- T (028) 9047 1155
- F (028) 9052 1289
- E

