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Latest News - Ulster Unionist Party

16-20 minutes

Speech by the Party Leader Robin Swann MLA, at the Ulster Unionist Party's 2018 AGM/Spring Conference at the Slieve Donard Hotel, Newcastle.

My Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen, fellow Unionists.

I have had the privilege and honour to serve as Leader of this Party for the past year, and whilst it has not been one of the best years for us or unionism overall, I stand here today ever more resolute, ever more determined, ever more assured, of the need for this Party, and the need for our voice to be heard.

We carry a great responsibility, a responsibility that has been entrusted to us by our predecessors.

And that is a responsibility to strengthen the Union, a responsibility to deliver for everyone no matter who they are and a responsibility to promote the most successful union in history – the union of the United Kingdom.

So that is why we need to take care because when our head goes down, unionism's head goes down, as no one else supplies the vision for Northern Ireland as a vibrant part of the Union that we do, no other Unionist Party can sell its benefits or reach out in the way that we can.

Ladies and Gentlemen, be assured, that I believe - we believe - that the Union is secure and will grow stronger under the right leadership – a leadership that will be staying put.

As I am sure you have come to expect, I will repeat the words of Terence O'Neill from 1965, outlining his vision of Northern Ireland's future within the Union:

“But it is not enough, I would suggest to you, just to be part of the United Kingdom. We want to be a progressive part of that Kingdom. We want to secure for our people the full fruits of this great nations prosperity. It must be our aim to demonstrate at all times, and beyond any possible doubt, that loyalty to Britain carries its reward in the form of a fuller, richer life.”

These are words that are as relevant today as they were then.

I have been reflecting on progress, particularly in the year of the centenary of suffrage beginning to be extended to women.

At that time opinion was split within the party – imagine! But in looking back recently, I was struck by the contribution to the campaign for suffrage and to progression in society of Lady Edith Londonderry. A radical moderate of her time she broke new ground as she wasn't content to accept that a woman's place was solely in the home. She was Colonel in Chief of the Women's Volunteer Reserve in the First World War which saw women taking up what had traditionally been men's roles for the first time.

As women began to take up their rightful place in the workplace that too saw women advancing within politics like our own Lady Fisher and Dame Dehra Parker, who were the first women to represent Northern Ireland in the House of Commons and to serve in the Northern Ireland cabinet respectively.

But as the leader of the Party in 2018 I can't simply be content to reflect on past progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen, when the letters went out to the membership announcing that the Party was seeking candidates for the 2019 Local Government elections, it was leaked to the media that female and younger members were particularly encouraged.

Of course we want to see women – who make up more than half the population – better represented within our ranks and of course we want to see our experienced elected representatives being supported by the next generation.

For me, it is very simple. As a political party we must reflect society. If the public look at us and do not see people who look like them, talk like them, articulate their concerns and represent their values, then they will look elsewhere.

My unionism is built on a belief in the United Kingdom as a family that includes different communities and groups. Embracing the United Kingdom that is rich due to its diversity.

As a pro-union party I want to reflect the diversity of our nation.

We must ask ourselves the question; when the pro-union population and those yet to be convinced look at us do they see themselves reflected back in our membership, elected representatives, in our language and in our policies?

If the answer is no, then we must ask ourselves why not and what we can do about it.

Because core to our ideology is our belief in the Union and anyone who looks to the Ulster Unionist Party, will know that is where we stand and where our ideas emanate from.

And I am happy to restate those ideas, ideas that are in our current manifestoes –

An ongoing desire for a single education system, where children of all faiths and none are educated together, with one single sectoral body instead of the current five, and in which school teachers are no longer openly discriminated against on grounds of religion in their recruitment.

The will to tackle the over governance and duplication within our key public services and that is why we see the need to merge the current five Health and Social Care Trusts and place them under the day to day accountability of a new chief executive for the NHS in Northern Ireland – just like England.

Recent media commentary stated how well Northern Ireland was doing despite its politicians. Imagine where our employment levels could be if a functioning Northern Ireland Executive adopted a manufacturing strategy, with an emphasis on addressing the competitive disadvantages of doing business in Northern Ireland?

And all this, as well as our community and voluntary sector, and our agricultural and agri-food sector supported and reassured by multi-year budgets and the establishment of the Northern Ireland Independent Fiscal Council, to try to get some much needed control of Northern Ireland's spending trajectory, not the current hand to mouth existence we currently have.

And an end to the inhumane treatment that the survivors and victims of historical institutional abuse have suffered, where they suffer again, waiting on the introduction of the recommendations of the Hart report. I once again call on Her Majesty's Government, while this political purgatory continues in Northern Ireland, to go

ahead and introduce the Redress for victims of historical institutional abuse that has been recommended. They have already waited too long.

Conference I will also shortly be releasing the date for a policy focused conference, which will see the party take a collaborative approach across the membership to policy development. And I am going to make sure those meetings are minuted!

At our last Conference I spoke about the need for a new Unionism, and the need to promote the values and benefits of the Union. I still believe that we are the only Party that can reach out and win over converts, and convince others that our Union is a Union worth having.

The union of the United Kingdom supports the rights of free expression, political freedom and the belief that we all have a role to play in building and sustaining civic society. We must make the case for self-assurance and greater confidence in our values and call for renewed efforts to maintain and grow the pro-union perspective that promotes a better and fairer understanding of how we make Northern Ireland work for all.

I have often been asked why is there not just one unionist Party? Unionism needs the option of an alternative voice, because unionism is not a single homogenous grouping that fits neatly into a box and Unionism needs a conscience – and currently we are that conscience. Indeed, we have always been and will continue to be that conscience and that alternative voice.

That ties in with my theme of radical moderates – it is up to us to say when others have gone too far or when others are abusing the positions they hold, or when others are being economical with the

truth. It is a great responsibility to carry but it is one that this Party is well used to.

We did so this week when members of the DUP were caught out retweeting anti-muslim tweets and when racist leaflets were distributed in East Belfast.

Because neither I, nor this Party will stand by and allow unionism to become a byword for intolerance.

I was also absolutely sickened to learn that a death threat had been issued by the UDA against a journalist.

This Party has said time and again that for those who have abandoned violence and want to make our society better, we will work with you.

But for those who continue to threaten and exert control over communities in Northern Ireland it is long past time you were gone. You should pack up and get off the backs of our people, or face the inside of a jail cell.

The same goes for those cowards in the Creggan last weekend. Whipping up young people into a frenzy and sending a new generation into the justice system while they retreat into the shadows.

Members – twenty years ago this Party took a significant step for the sake of people in Northern Ireland, in the Belfast Agreement, in our belief that things needed to change. For those of us who were around at that time, who may not have been on the same page then, I can assure you that I believe we are on the same page now. In holding a belief of what this Party stands for.

Twenty years on we continue to respect and promote the values of

reconciliation, tolerance, partnership, respect and mutual trust that our country needs to progress.

This coming week we should be remembering our contribution to the Belfast Agreement, an Agreement that has been used as the foundation for peace deals in many other countries and conflicts around the world such as Sudan and Colombia, as a blueprint for how power sharing could work between two communities. We should also be recognising those individuals who took the risks for the greater good of our society, like our Party Chairman Lord Empey, David Trimble, Michael McGimpsey and many others.

Sadly, the Belfast Agreement was not allowed to evolve and grow with society in the way it was envisaged because there were those who had much to fear from the normalisation of politics here.

Twenty years on from 1998 there is little to celebrate when the DUP and Sinn Fein haven't been able to form a Government in the last 14 months, with one of them putting down a seemingly immovable red line of an Irish Language Act.

Members, in 1998 the protections and support put in place in the Agreement for the Irish Language were meant to take politics out of the language – twenty years on we can see why that was the right approach.

We are a devolutionist Party; we believe that the best delivery for the people of Northern Ireland is by the direction of locally elected Northern Ireland politicians. When the Assembly started to unravel, our party Chairman, Lord Empey warned others of how easy it was to walk down the steps, but not to under estimate how difficult it would be to get back up them. The current political impasse serves no one.

In fact, the absence of a local Executive and Ministers is beginning to have a seriously damaging impact. Key decisions are going untaken, reforms are being delayed, money is being wasted, budgets are barely fit for purpose, major pieces of legislation are being steamrolled through Westminster and now civil servants are beginning to take major decisions in the total absence of any accountability.

We've already heard about as of yet unexplained major plans to close several Special Educational Needs schools in Belfast, and now in a few days' time the next Area Action Plan for schools will be published. Are we really comfortable that Civil Servants are taking decisions on which schools to keep open and which are to close, probably with no consideration but the bottom line, regardless of the impact it will have on the children involved? I'm not. And that's just one example. Very soon I expect we will be presented with decisions on the closure and relocation of key hospital services and which roads will or won't be built. All completely democratically unaccountable. That's not what I got involved in politics for.

We have put forward suggestions that the Assembly could be reformed without Ministers, and operate as a grand Council for Northern Ireland or that the Government take the next step in devolution and legislate for a voluntary coalition.

And if Sinn Fein do not want to be part of it, then that is up to them. They choose not to take their seats in Westminster but it doesn't stop the Conservatives, Labour, Lib Dems, Scots Nats or any other MP from taking their seats – so why should Sinn Fein be allowed to block the restoration of the assembly any longer? There are decisions that need to be taken by elected politicians, and while we

have neither an Executive nor Direct Rule, we are in an unacceptable limbo.

When Jim Nicholson and I met Michel Barnier and Guy Verhofstat last month our message was clear. Do not, no matter what others tell you, believe that all those Unionists who voted to remain in the EU, would vote to leave the United Kingdom in order to remain in the European Union; because they wouldn't.

My trip to Strasbourg was very useful. It told me that unionism needs to be doing more to ensure that our message is being communicated fully and effectively across the European Union. There has been no one as dogged as Jim Nicholson in making sure our message is heard loud and clear, and it is now time that everyone who cherishes the union joins him in amplifying it. There must be no doubt in the corridors of Brussels that Northern Ireland cannot be annexed from the rest of the United Kingdom.

I have been clear that the outlined “backstop” is unacceptable to unionists. And if they are serious, it should also be unacceptable to those who say they want to defend the integrity of the Belfast Agreement throughout Brexit negotiations – because such an arrangement would totally undermine the principle of consent.

In the aftermath of the referendum this Party co-ordinated a Brexit advisory panel and produced a policy paper with constructive proposals on the way ahead. We did this because we know that an “it'll be alright on the night” attitude will not do. We know that Northern Ireland stands to be most adversely affected should the UK's negotiations with the other EU Member States not conclude positively.

If the Irish Government are serious about not harming the interests

of the people of Northern Ireland, then it is up to them to work with – not against – the UK Government in finding solutions that ensure a frictionless border on the island after the United Kingdom exits the EU.

For those who think that they can exploit Brexit to pursue a united Ireland – you are not helping the people of Northern Ireland through such a selfish pursuit of your own agenda.

Members, we are only a few weeks away from a by-election in west Tyrone, and you will be well aware that I had been clear from the outset that we had hoped a non-partisan cross community candidate could emerge and parties could coalesce around them to demonstrate that the disrespect shown to victims of terrorism will not be tolerated.

We have worked extensively with others who speak for and represent the victims sector in trying to find such a candidate. However, with nominations closing on Tuesday and candidates having already been announced for a number of other parties it seems that it is not to be, despite the efforts of ourselves and others.

This is hugely disappointing - and equally disappointing was the lack of engagement by others - but we have our own strong team in West Tyrone who I know can provide an able voice for victims and the constituency in the House of Commons.

I want to thank associations for pushing on with the selection of Candidates for the next Local Government elections. As we stand today we have nearly 80% of our potential candidates in place, so let us not waste the opportunity that we have given ourselves, let's not waste a day, let's not waste a minute.

The campaign starts now. I say to those potential candidates, get to work now, whether sitting Councillor or not, get out on the doors, get involved, be seen and be heard. From today you have only 397 days to polling day, so all each of you need to do is convince 2 or 3 people every day to vote for you.

But I say to you our members, now is not the time to sit back, now is the time to get active, and be activists, win votes, win minds, win hearts – to convince people that this Party can get things done and that we will work for a Union that is worth having!

Ladies and gentlemen, we live in interesting times politically, here at home, in the UK and on a world stage and we have an important part to play, now more than ever.

It is up to each and every one of us to carry the banner for this party, it is up to each of us to promote the Union and it is up to each of us to sell the message that this Party is the Party that is unashamedly, unapologetically and unrelentingly for the Union.