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Peter Robinson: Some refuse to talk about the elephant in the room... but it is positioning itself to squat upon their laps

11-13 minutes

I have listened and read much in the Press and social media of the often hysterical commentary and misleading reports about what I was either purported to have said or what I meant by it, when speaking on the subject of a border poll. I am at a stage of my life that I care little about all of that, so I shall simply set out my case, step by step, so that you can judge for yourself without the distraction of political hype and spin or the confusion that comes from selective and distorted reporting.

At the heart of politics, as in business, is the concept of forward planning. Strategic planning is carried out for what you want to happen and contingency planning is prepared for that which might occur and disrupt your plans.

Strategic planning requires "time-frame proposals" setting goals of what you want your organisation to achieve, usually within stipulated yearly intervals. You then determine all subsequent significant actions upon whether they advance or cause violence to your strategy.

Without such a plan, impulsive, day to day spontaneous decisions may knock you off course. Contingency planning, on the other hand, is devised for potential outcomes other than those which are set out in your strategic plan.

It is often used for risk management when there is an exceptional threat that, though perhaps unlikely, would have catastrophic consequences.

Contingency planning requires the prudent organisation to carefully make risk assessments from time to time and even compile a 'risk register' which deals with all the potential weaknesses and conceivable threats that might impact upon what's best for their organisation. In short, it allows for the management of issues that could derail an organisation's intended outcomes.

The businessperson or politician who ignores these basic planning requirements is irresponsible and endangers the interests of those who depend on that person's judgment for their future. No matter how strongly anyone may hope or believe that the threat will not materialise, if it is on the radar as a risk, whether it might occur in the short, medium or long term - or not at all - it should be included on the risk register and a contingency plan developed to handle that eventuality. How many times in our lives have we been surprised by an occurrence or outcome? How often have we had to revise our plans because events took a course other than the one we predicted? Why do we take out insurance policies?

Contingency planning is a judicious safety-net. Better by far to plan for adverse possibilities, no matter how remote, than be left clueless and unprepared if our hopes and evaluations are wrong.

And so to the particular subject I suggested needed to be scoped out and made the subject of a contingency plan - the circumstances surrounding a border poll. Some people have suggested that such matters should not even be discussed as it may provide momentum towards the very outcome we seek to avoid. Such claptrap. Where are they living? This battle started long ago.

Let us be very clear, contrary to what these shrill voices are saying - whether a border poll is called or not isn't in their gift. Yet, to listen to their dismissive and contemptuous rhetoric you would think they were in a position to control the timing, rules and procedures surrounding a border poll or stop it from happening altogether. They cannot.

Amazingly, included in those voices are some UUP members. Amazing, because it was they who in 1998 not only talked about the issue but negotiated upon it. Moreover, they then signed an

agreement which included a most unsatisfactory process that, among other things, placed the power to call the referendum in the hands of any future Secretary of State exercising their own judgment on what might be the possible outcome. Worse, the UUP agreed to exclude any of Northern Ireland's elected representatives from a role in shaping what happens if there was a negative outcome.

In such circumstances the proposals for the future governance of Northern Ireland, under the deal the UUP negotiated, are to be agreed by London and Dublin alone, with no rights provided to our elected representatives to be involved, nor is there any requirement for protections to be put in place for our community. So, don't tell me not to talk about these matters - the UUP have already done so and left us with a mess to sort out.

In my view there are a range of matters thrown into stark relief by the experience of the Brexit referendum and its aftermath that add to the need for change - by the way, Brexit is an obvious example of where contingency planning should have been carried out but clearly was not.

So, what are the issues that should be addressed in a border poll contingency plan?

At the outset let me stress that I have never advocated, as some reports have suggested, that we should be negotiating the details of what a future united Ireland might look like if the unthinkable were to happen.

What I said was: "In this I am not, of course, talking about the nature and shape of the new state that would emerge if there ever was a vote to exit the UK. I am alluding to the need to agree a process for negotiations, time scales and not only the means of reaching agreement on all the particulars but also who would be involved in negotiating such an agreement."

In addition, I cautioned against holding a border poll which seeks a "yes" or "no" answer to a simple single choice question when we are dealing with such a significant and extremely complex issue, and I warned against adopting the existing simplistic, majority of

one mechanism to deal with colossal constitutional change.

I also suggested rather than maintaining the seven-year cycle for border polls, when the process begins, as agreed by the UUP, that a longer generational gap would be less divisive and disruptive of our local political process.

I have consistently said that I do not believe the people of Northern Ireland would vote to leave the UK. It would not be in anyone's best interests. As a unionist, I firmly advocate maintaining the Union and will always do so. Yet any thinking unionist living here will want to know that those they have entrusted with the responsibility of protecting their interests have contingency plans to deal with every threat and eventuality. Let's be honest, it is unlikely that a Conservative Government, in the present circumstances, would call such a border poll, but a Conservative Government that is not depending on DUP support might, and a Corbyn-led Labour Government certainly would.

I do not believe calling a referendum would be justified and I have never called for it - indeed I have argued how distracting and destabilising it would be - but no amount of grandstanding changes the fact that unionists cannot stop it happening. What I have sought is that unionists should be actively getting the rules and procedures concerning the conducting of a border poll and its aftermath sorted out to their satisfaction - now.

There is a slogan in Australian politics: "You can't fatten a pig on market day." It simply advocates the obvious; don't delay until it's too late.

It means you don't give your opponents a 10-mile start. It means you get your preparations done early and done right. Do not listen to those who tell you "it will never happen" or "don't talk about it and it won't materialise" or "don't worry, we will just wing it on the day". Such crass folly. These people have not just buried their heads in the sand - only the soles of their feet are visible above the surface.

Not only are they advising us not to talk about a border poll, but they don't want us to even talk about the subject matter at the heart of such a poll. Do they not realise that the battle is raging? We live

in a society divided by identity, so, to some extent the Union is always under fire. But, surely, nobody could be so chloroformed that they don't recognise that the opponents of the Union are charging our lines like seldom before. The battle for the Union is on.

Just as unionists cannot stop a border poll from happening neither can they control when our opponents launch their assault on our constitutional status. Pulling a paper bag over our heads and thinking that we can, thereby, close out the impending danger is crazy. They seem to believe that a battle does not start until they want it to commence. They argue that talking about these matters "aids the enemy". Rubbish! It is inertia that "aids the enemy".

Too many unionists take the longevity of the Union for granted. In recent months while nationalists and republicans have been pouring out united Ireland propaganda and even deliberately slipping what they see as arguments in its favour into tangential matters, few unionists have delivered anything close to a well-argued case for the Union other than Arlene Foster in a forceful and persuasive speech at the Policy Exchange. She should be given full support. Setting out the advantages of UK membership, in all its aspects, must be carried out constantly, thoroughly and exhaustively. It deserves more than a scattergun approach or, worse, being ignored.

The case must be developed, not just for the party faithful and the natural support base, it particularly needs to resonate for the less convinced in our society as well.

Incidentally, the periods when support for the Union has been at its highest were those when we had a functioning Assembly and Executive. The logic is simple - who would want to upset the status quo when there is a settled political environment with attendant peace, stability and prosperity; but that is a subject for another time.

While those who are still in denial and refusing to talk about the elephant in the room, it is positioning itself to squat upon their laps.

If elements of unionism follow the path of indolence they invite disaster - I hope they awaken to the danger - but, if not, perhaps those who follow them will think less unkindly of one who warned

them to act when they had the strength to do so and before others who do not share their desire to maintain the integrity of the United Kingdom exploit the existing precarious rules and procedures to the disadvantage of unionism.

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