



CNI

PRESS WATCH - Election deals come at a cost

A show of sorts might continue, but Theresa May's snap election has effectively wrecked talks about putting Stormont back together, Writes Fionnuala O'Connor in The Irish News

Unionists have already set about different talks with far more energy - to fix who stands where, to keep the total result for unionism ahead of the combined nationalist vote.

Unionists talk pacts with not the least embarrassment. Fixing it so a single candidate has a free run in a constituency where a second would 'split the vote' and a nationalist would therefore win is just

defending the union, not at all sectarian. 'Pan-nationalist fronts' by contrast in unionist minds are of course a scary and entirely illegitimate business. Why the distinction? Because their goal is to change the nature of the state.

Right on cue, the two nationalist parties want everyone to know that they have a higher motivation than the battle between orange and green. Michelle O'Neill spells it out: the election is 'not about orange and green' but about 'Brexit and opposition to the Tory party's policies'. Colum Eastwood says the SDLP will talk to anyone 'about how we can protect against a hard Brexit.' But the party does not 'do sectarian pacts between two parties to keep out one community'. Although the Irish News did report yesterday that Eastwood and O'Neill have talked. Early days, best not to speculate, since it is clear that on pacts the SDLP has already spoken with more than one voice.

Unionists meanwhile just get on with it. They may agree a general pact, they might keep it to a select few constituencies but either way there is no pretence. Where Margaret Ritchie delivered a little lecture on the SDLP's principled objections to pacts, and Eastwood produced a nimble alternative envisaging alliances with other groups, the DUP and Ulster Unionists had already settled down to business.

No matter how blithe the approach, there are costs to election deals. DUP urges cohesion now to defend the union but came into being as would-be destroyer of then dominant Ulster Unionism. That job is three-quarters done. The two unionist parties (if the older one survives) will always loathe each other, much as the SDLP and Sinn Féin do.

Bigger parties everywhere primarily want to gobble up smaller rivals, or put them out of business. The party that sacrifices a candidate or hobbles a campaign in any

deal is always hurt on the ground, activists resentful, voters frustrated. Individual ambition bubbles away regardless of party, cause, leadership persuasiveness. When you've told your partner and your mother that you're standing for election, perhaps your children and workmates, standing aside can be unthinkable. Leaderships have to force the deal through. But what if the leadership is in a bad way, damaged, or still untried?

For Ritchie to rule out any deal is a mite tongue-in-cheek. Like Mark Durkan in Foyle, she has been able to rely on unionist voters seeing her as much preferable to an SF candidate, as an example of what the Lord Kilclooney, formerly John Taylor, called lately 'a more acceptable nationalist'. This time Ritchie may need more help, again like Durkan, as the increased SF vote begins to menace their once-secure seats.

Predicting outcomes feels more than ever risky given the overall surprise last time. Mood and readiness is easier to measure, at least in the DUP, heading into this election with a damaged leader, and with what must be considerable internal unhappiness.

MLAs elected such a short time ago have not been able to enjoy their victory, and cannot know when, or if, they will ever take possession of Stormont's marbled halls. Now it seems that the party's MPs have lost their potential importance as Theresa May begins to sail towards a much more decisive majority.

That amounts to a sizeable reservoir of disappointment. It would be unlike human nature if some in both the Westminster and Stormont contingents, perhaps many, had not already begun blaming the leader for endangering or losing their cosy careers by grossly mishandling her role. It may not extend to reflection on what else is amiss

in the organisation's top layer, in particular what was surely over-reliance on unelected special advisers. There was no sign of awareness in the wider DUP that behaving with old-style majoritarian arrogance was bound to stir up a resentment nationalists of all stripes had battened down in the name of power-sharing.

There will surely be a reckoning. But two election campaigns in quick succession are more likely to produce panicky huddling than clear thinking.

++++++

First published in The Irish News, April 21, 2017