



Speech
by
UUP Chairman

Mr James Cooper

to the
UUP Conference

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EMBARGO: 3.00pm
Check against delivery

It's been a tough year for this Party and for the Political Process in Northern Ireland.

We have survived a General Election battered and bruised, some like myself more than others, but we defiantly remain the largest Political Party in Northern Ireland and the Party in which a clear majority of Unionists place their trust.

I immediately want to thank those hundreds of workers who gave of their time and energy to support our candidates.

I want to congratulate our new and returning elected representatives and commiserate with those who were defeated.

The sheer pace of political events and changes has been so intense that we have barely had time to reflect on the election results and the lessons which must be learned.

I had hoped to be addressing you today as the M.P for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. So I think I am well positioned to highlight a number of critical lessons from the Election which we ignore at our peril.

- 1 We must stop kidding ourselves that we have a superior election machine to that of other parties. Sinn Fein and the DUP are at least our equal.
2. We must never again face an election with gaping division in our party. *We are the Party that the vast majority of Unionists looks toward for leadership and representation – our supporters despair when they see public division.*
3. We must insist that every elected representative of this party helps in the campaign, whether they be a candidate or not.
4. We must attack our opponents from the outset rather than simply react to matters as they arise. Sometimes we are too polite - we want to play by the rules. I ask you what did Peter Robinson care about rules when he deliberately set out to destroy this party in Fermanagh and South Tyrone by handing the seat to Sinn Fein?
- 5 and finally we must analyse recent results in every constituency with a view to start working now for the next election.

The fighting of elections may be meat and drink to the members of this party and to many of you here today, but we must realise Ladies and Gentlemen, that for the majority of the Northern Ireland population politics has become a huge bore.

The truth is that most of us are so immersed in the details and nuances of daily political developments, that we fail to see how the process is viewed by the average man in the street. But we should not be surprised that large sections of our community are sick to death of politics.

I believe we face a huge task to restore and improve public confidence in our relatively new institutions. We need the next 18 months to do it.

Our target must be the Assembly elections – which present a major challenge to this Party and to Unionism. We must win more than 33 seats and push hard to take a fourth Ministerial portfolio. This would place Unionism in a majority on the Executive.

That must be our goal. Our divisions must be put behind us. We must resolve our differences behind closed doors and move forward with the strongest possible unity of purpose.

Every day from now until the next election we Ulster Unionists must work to maximise our support.

At the moment, the public are right to be sceptical as we have lunged from one crisis to another. They are right to be outraged by the disgraceful scenes orchestrated by the DUP when David Trimble was re-elected First Minister.

When will they realise that each time they repeat the political thuggery of Fivemiletown and Banbridge, they strike a mortal blow to image of Unionism throughout the world.

In contrast it has been our party and our leader who have fought at times almost single handed, to bring certainty and stability to the political process.

It has only been our party that was determined and remains determined to remove the leverage of violence from Government.

I am proud of the fact that the leadership of this party has never waived from its determination to push forward our twin policies of devolution and decommissioning.

David Trimble has had to endure almost intolerable criticism from armchair critics, too many of whom rush to simplistic judgment without any real knowledge of facts and realities of political decision making.

If some of those critics spent a week with David Trimble or Reg Empey and witnessed the endless meetings, the 18 hour days, the constant telephone interruptions and exposure to the media, they might think twice before rushing to the Belfast Telegraph with a daily dose of anonymous disclosures.

I am fed up, as I believe you are, with those who shelter behind the description of "Senior Party Sources" in order to damage the Party.

Ladies & Gentlemen we have seen our leader pursue a carefully constructed strategy to pressurise Sinn Fein IRA to disarm at the request of its enemies.

We now hear Martin McGuinness acknowledge the hurt that the IRA have inflicted on Unionism. Last weekend he called for Remembrance day to be respected in his community.

And we must recognise the fundamental symbolic importance of the beginning of IRA decommissioning.

These are significant gestures which should be "banked" by this party.

The fact is that the pressure David Trimble has exerted is delivering results. Sinn Fein/IRA are in locked into a partitionist settlement that provides Unionism with the tools to secure our future within the United Kingdom.

This is a huge achievement which every honourable member of this party should applaud rather than denigrate

Everyone in this Party should recognise a victory when it stares us in the face instead of playing into the hands of our opponents by promoting internal disagreements.

Ladies and Gentlemen our Leader is again the First Minister/Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

With him to the fore we must use the next 18 months, to prove to this country that we are the natural party of Government.

To prove also Northern Ireland can and will not only survive but prosper as an integral part of the United Kingdom.

But we must also use this window of opportunity to carry out internal and badly needed changes to our Party. We must reform the Party.

Our constitution and rules were designed over 80 years ago. They are outmoded and archaic- they do not meet the needs of a party that espouses to lead Northern Ireland for the 21st Century.

Ladies and Gentlemen it was our late lamented President Sir Joe Cunningham who embarked on a scheme in the early 1990's to modernise our party structure.

He did so, not from any desire to exclude or marginalize, but from a deeply held belief that his party should be based on one man one vote.

He believed we must be prepared to embrace change rather than be frightened of it.

I am convinced that it is our responsibility to put Sir Joe's vision of a progressive inclusive party into effect.

We have a number of proposals. Firstly to set up a membership committee at Glengall Street that will aim to widen our membership on an open and transparent basis.

The Committee will have no hidden agenda - it will use as its template the high standards of honour and integrity that epitomised Joe Cunningham.

But we should remind ourselves - membership of a political party is a two way process. If this party is to be able to deliver policies, decisions and political advantage to its members in return it is entitled to expect loyalty and support from those same members in good times and bad.

Membership never can be simply a marriage of convenience. It must be a real partnership that cannot be switched on and off on the basis of personal ambition and expediency.

Ladies and Gentleman we are well justified in labelling the DUP as a party of cynical hypocrites and political opportunists as they work and prosper in the institution they profess to find abhorrent. They blatantly milk the system they say they want to tear down.

But just as we have no time for their hypocrisy we should not tolerate it in our own party.

No one, regardless of political position or prominence, should be entitled to luxuriate in membership of this party, sign up to election undertakings and manifestoes, and then either surreptitiously or overtly set out to destroy both the leadership and the party, for their own selfish political ends.

This is a democratic Party. Membership carries with it an obligation to respect and support the decisions and policies of the majority.

The new rules will also be aimed to create a "joined up party" rather than the loose amalgamation of affiliated bodies we have at the moment.

Such changes do not mean, as some of our members continue to insist, that we are out "to break the link" with the Orange.

We have never used that terminology yet it is continually thrown up at us. I am however convinced, as was Sir Joe, that we must redesign our relationship with the affiliated bodies to create a modern democratic party based on the one member one vote principle.

I look forward to further meetings with the Orange Order and the Young Unionists, which I am sure with goodwill and good faith can lead to an agreed resolution for this issue.

Ladies and Gentlemen there will be numerous other changes in the rules, which will be put in due course to an Extraordinary Meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council - I urge you to think carefully about these changes.

They are absolutely essential to make our party attractive to new members, especially the younger generation of Northern Ireland, which is so sparsely represented here today. As well as new rules we are also, at long last many of you will say, rapidly expanding our staff.

You may have noticed we have recently advertised for a Director of Research and Development as well as 3 other support staff.

They will be based in Glengall Street, if the building is big enough to house them.

In recent years we have been running the Ulster Unionist Party on a shoe-string but I hope that fresh new proposals of additional government funding for political parties will now help us to significantly upgrade both our public relations efforts and our policy development team.

In addition to this I am also proposing today to establish a fund-raising committee for the Party which will aim to raise money centrally to assist in the development of our Headquarters staff and our public relations machine. There is money out there for Unionism. We just have to organise ourselves properly to get it. We must remember that to stay in front of the opposition in the coming years is going to require substantial resources and expertise.

I want to see the fund-raising committee in place by the New Year. The forthcoming election campaigns will be more expensive than ever.

In all of this I want to see the party Headquarters return to its dominant position as the focal point of party activities.

Our Headquarters must be alive and vibrant.

It must be a place where the membership can obtain advice; can communicate and deal with constituency problems. Crucially it must become the focus for strategic policy development and act as the base to develop our policies.

To this end we need to urgently reinvigorate the UUP Policy committees. With devolution and real political issues set to play a major role in the future, fresh, relevant and innovative policies in the bread and butter areas of health, the economy, agriculture, education and the environment will be the life-blood of our Parties' future.

To shape these Policies we must find new ways of tapping the vast wealth of latent knowledge and talent that resides in our membership.

Our party has to be dynamic and up to date in tackling and delivering solutions which can impact on our everyday living.

New rules, new policies, new staffing, even new buildings, - these are all part of bringing this party into the 21st century and making it attractive to new members.

But Ladies and Gentlemen - look around you - what is the average age of the people at this conference - how many of us are under 50?

The truth is our party cannot survive as a dominant force if we do not attract young people to it. And I warn you - all the changes I have already outlined will not be enough in themselves.

The young people of today will not be satisfied by some gloss over or make up for this party. We cannot take them for granted.

Our much admired education system, which this party is committed to protect, has trained them to question the very fundamentals of every political message.

So it is no longer good enough to parrot the old truisms of Unionism, to repeat that we should be proud of our British identity, - that we are economically better off as part of the United Kingdom, - that we don't want to be part of a united Ireland.

Our young people want to know why. They require us to intellectually and emotionally justify our unionism like never before.

That is why Ladies and Gentlemen I say to you *the biggest task facing the party is to give primacy to the vision and purpose of unionism.*

That vision and message must convince the new generations of this new century that they and their children will remain better off, economically and socially as part of the United Kingdom.

The task must go further. Our new improved model of unionism needs to cut across religious, social and community differences in this province.

Aiming to establish an inclusive and peaceful society, with unionism in the lead.

Aiming to attract members of other religions and other parties, who previously would never have contemplated voting unionist.

Ladies and Gentlemen it is now time for this party to embrace change, to move forward with confidence, to find unity in our conviction and purpose.

We can't continue to look backwards. Instead in the next 18 months we must grasp the huge opportunity to arrive at the next Assembly election as the true party of Government, which all other unionists will be forced to follow.

Ladies and Gentlemen this party must from here on move forward. It must advance unionism in every corner of the province, and importantly it desperately needs to reassert Unionism West of the Bann.

I here today set you a target and a challenge. Next November we intend to make this Conference a showcase for new unionism. Our target is to bring 1000 unionists to the new Londonderry Millennium Conference Hall on the West of the Foyle.

Let that be an example of our newly invigorated party challenging and beating our political opponents in every corner of Northern Ireland. [ENDS]