

Full text of speech by Sir Reg Empey MLA, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, to the party conference

Ladies and Gentlemen: Thank you for coming.

I am delighted that so many of you are here today, demonstrating your commitment to the Party and the Union. As I have said on other occasions the grassroots of the UUP are the backbone of the party.

I'm also very pleased that William Hague agreed to be our guest speaker and I am grateful to him for taking time out of a very busy schedule to fly over for this conference.

And can I also welcome Owen Paterson and other members from the Conservative Party locally.

Thank you, too, to our Conference Committee, chaired by Terry Wright.

And especially to Hazel Legge, our staff at HQ, our public relations and research teams who did so much of the background preparation.

I wish to thank also all our public representatives; Lady Hermon MP and her colleagues in the Upper House who keep the Ulster Unionist flag flying in Parliament; our MLAs and Councillors, who represent this Party so well across the Province.

I cannot let the occasion pass without paying tribute to our esteemed colleague Councillor Liz Johnston who passed away this week; she was an excellent president of our Councillors Association and an excellent and loyal Ulster Unionist; she will be sadly missed.

My Executive colleague Michael McGimpsey, has proved himself to be a first-class Minister and tireless fighter for the National Health Service.

And even though he has had to constantly battle for extra funding and endure the orchestrated hostility of political opponents, he has ensured that our Health Service meets the huge demands placed upon it.

Finally, everyone in this Party has cause to be grateful to Jim Nicholson.

Jim, who was our first Conservatives and Unionists candidate, fought an excellent campaign and delivered the goods!

Credit crunch and recession

2009 has been a good year for our party. But I know as Employment Minister, that it has not been a good year for many in Northern Ireland. People have lost their jobs, and others face the threat of redundancy.

We also know, and David McNarry has done an excellent job highlighting the fact, that the Executive has huge financial problems to deal with.

Sadly, Sammy Wilson refused to recognise this black hole — until David pointed out that Sammy was actually at the bottom of it.

Savers in the PMS have endured a year of uncertainty as the government has not come forward yet with a plan to resolve their plight.

Gordon Brown said last month that no saver in the UK had lost out as a result of the banking crisis.

Wrong Prime Minister.

There are 20,000 savers in Northern Ireland, mostly small savers, who have been deprived of their savings. If the Prime Minister's word is his bond, then this government must help the only savers in the UK to have lost out.

If he can bail out greedy bankers and off shore speculators, he can jolly well give justice to the savers of the Presbyterian Mutual Society!

Dissident terrorism

The past year also has witnessed the murders of Constable Stephen Carroll and Sappers Quinsy and Azimkar.

Our thoughts, prayers, and gratitude go to their families and loved ones. We also pay tribute to those police officers and their families who have been targeted and attacked in recent months, including in my own constituency. To those still wedded to the ways of violence and sectarian hatred, I say this — Northern Ireland has come too far for you to drive us back into the past.

And I urge the Government to ensure that the Chief Constable has every resource possible to protect our society against the terrorists.

Euro Poll

Returning to the Euro Elections, I want to say a few words about their implications for our politics. The June poll brought to an abrupt end Peter Robinson's assertion that the 'DUP is the voice of unionism.' They have paid the electoral price for promising one thing and then doing the complete opposite. The blunt reality for the DUP is that barely two and a half years after their self-serving 'Themselves Alone' deal with Sinn Fein, they have ceased to be the voice of unionism. So again, congratulations to Jim Nicholson MEP. And congratulations to the campaign team behind him, both Ulster Unionists and Conservatives who did so much work to ensure Jim's re-election.

This was an important election for us and for our relationship with the Conservative Party. But the fact remains that at the first test of the Ulster Unionist/Conservative Party electoral alliance Jim Nicholson was the first unionist to be elected.

Ladies and Gentlemen - in my book that's a good result!

Policing and Justice

Since last November, when the DUP and Sinn Fein cobbled together yet another side deal, the issue of Policing and Justice has never been far from the headlines although I suspect it is not the number one priority for many people on the ground. Let me make one point crystal clear. The Ulster Unionist Party is the party of law and order. After all we administered it here for over fifty years at Stormont. We have no objection to these powers coming back to Stormont if the terms are right.

But I do not believe - and the UUP does not believe - that a deal concocted privately between the DUP and Sinn Fein a deal dependent on the appointment of a puppet minister and subject to a 'sunset clause' is the right way to transfer policing and justice powers. There is a better way to do this.

As a party of stability, we want policing and justice powers devolved securely and on the basis of a stable foundation. For any government, the exercise of policing and justice powers is probably the most important role it has.

These powers are fundamental to our society's freedom and safety.

Yet in Northern Ireland these very powers have been the subject of ongoing division and controversy.

The Executive must sit down to discuss what we might do with policing and justice powers to meet the inevitable challenge we will face if there is no agreed vision in place beforehand. I have told the Prime Minister this as clearly as I can. I believe that the transfer of these powers is much too important to get wrong.

In the weeks ahead, the Ulster Unionist Party will not be found wanting on this issue.

We will also have to address how we treat the past — we have seen the pain caused by the Eames-Bradley report. The day the report was released brought back to the people all the hurt of the past. We must talk about these things, there is no single action we can take to isolate it. Opposition to republican demands for a one-sided inquisition into state forces.

The issue of parades needs to be discussed and a resolution found.

I want to expose the lie at the heart of the Executive - the belief that the DUP and Sinn Fein can go it alone and hope to build confidence.

They can't and they won't.

It is now over to the First and deputy First Ministers to do their jobs properly.

While Peter Robinson said this week that he will not do this policing deal without this party, I must tell him that there will be no support from us for any backroom deal; we have set out our terms for this devolution, so Peter there will be a price.

There must be an open and transparent process to reconstruct the Executive and make it work as a proper, full four party coalition. No more dysfunctional meetings; and we must resolve the policy stalemates that are still there. We simply won't allow things to continue as they are.

Change is coming Peter — whether you like it or not!

Education

And talking about transfer! Here is another area where we are prepared to lead.

Yesterday Margaret Ritchie and I called on the Executive to show leadership; we want a special meeting of the Executive next month to deal with the mess in our schools. We want to see a temporary statutory transfer process in place next year, pending lasting agreement.

And, just in case the Minister of Education happens to be listening in, schools are not meant to be a battleground for class war and narrow ideological prejudices.

We are offering a practical way forward.

To this year's P7 children, their parents and teachers, I say this — you expected better and you deserved better.

We will work in partnership to deliver a solution to this unnecessary mess.

I look forward to hearing from our Education Spokesperson Basil McCrea in the debate later today.

Conservatives and Ulster Unionists

The theme of this Conference is "At The Heart Of The Union."

And that's where I believe Northern Ireland should be - not only in constitutional terms, but in party political and policy terms as well.

My own view remains that the best way of securing that goal is by co-operation, politically and electorally, with a national party. The Union is a two-way process and it needs promotion both in Westminster and in Stormont.

David Cameron's presence at last year's conference, and William Hague's today along with their on-the-ground support during the European election is the hard evidence we need that the Conservative Party is committed to the Union and to Northern Ireland.

Neither David Cameron nor William Hague needed to be here. They chose to be here and I welcome the choice they have made.

At the heart of the Union

We are doing this to strengthen the Union and to provide a policy agenda and a policy commitment that no other party in Northern Ireland can provide.

But, with our Conservative colleagues, we have a vision of Northern Ireland being a partner in the Union and the very fact that people now talk about the Ulster Unionists and the Conservatives in the same breath also sends out a very clear and very important message.

So no, I'm not going to lose any sleep over DUP or Sinn Fein criticisms. How can the DUP talk of "Tory baggage" when they are joined at the hip to Sinn Fein?

The Union is not going to be secured and Northern Ireland is not going to be improved if the Ulster Unionist Party just twiddles its thumbs and whistles on the sidelines. I believe our strategy of building this alliance with the Conservatives cements, secures and safeguards the Union. David Cameron's strong commitment to the Union, made at our conference last year, explains why this relationship is worth it.

Earlier this week, Gerry Adams said that the British Government had a moral responsibility to bring about a United Ireland. Well, I have it on good authority that the next Government of the United Kingdom has a very different view of its responsibilities!

Mr Adams has been touring America trying to drum up support for his policy, which is designed to bring Irish American pressure on London and Dublin to be so-called persuaders for a united Ireland. He is hoping that a point may come when he can have influence on Irish America to put pressure on the US administration to put pressure on the British and Irish governments. You can see the picture before you.

In many respects, Gerry Adams makes my case for me.

Picture the scene, when he and Sinn Fein sit down with a future British Government to try to discuss his plans for Irish Unity, and staring across the table from him is, potentially, a member of this party.

See where I am coming from?

I can think of no other action this party can take to better protect this part of the UK.

Real politics

But it doesn't stop there — it cannot stop there.

We also need to steer our politics more towards the social and economic issues which households right across Northern Ireland are concerned about.

The people of Northern Ireland want to know what their politicians are doing about the economy, public spending, taxes, pensions, Europe, and the brave men and women of our armed forces. This can best be achieved by working with a national party.

We are saying — Northern Ireland politics can be different.

With the Conservatives we are offering a political and electoral force which can actually deliver the difference which others can only dream about.

So our relationship with the Conservatives is about much more than constitutional politics; it's about making politics connect with the real issues affecting the people of Northern Ireland. This is real politics — the mainstream UK politics that Northern Ireland needs and deserves. This is what it means to be at the heart of the Union.

Conclusion — changing politics in Northern Ireland

By next May the people of Northern Ireland will have had the chance to vote in a General Election. The UUP, along with our jointly endorsed candidates from the Conservative Party, will be asking the electorate to support our vision our vision of real politics our vision of Northern Ireland at the heart of the Union.

I want to see our Party shape events here in Northern Ireland but not only in Northern Ireland.

We are, after all, the Unionist party.

I want to see real Northern Ireland input into policies on the war in Afghanistan a conflict in which men and women from our Province, sons and daughters of our Party members, are bravely serving.

If Northern Ireland's young men and women go to fight and defend our country why shouldn't our MPs be in a position to form or implement the policies that hold their lives in their hands?

These are the sorts of real issues that I want to see this party involved in.

NOW we have a real opportunity to do so.

We have electoral and political opportunities NOW

We have an opportunity to make a significant breakthrough NOW

We NOW have the opportunity to really change the nature of politics in Northern Ireland.

We are NOW facing the forthcoming General Election with confidence.

Not just because we are confident of gaining seats but because we know we can NOW change politics in Northern Ireland for all of us.