

News and Articles

Partial text of a speech to the AGM of the Young Unionist Association in Lisburn on Tuesday, March 11th at 8.00pm

E-mail to a friend *March 12th, 2008 Alex Benjamin*



Sir Reg Empey:

Making a mess of the Maze

‘There are ongoing reports that some DUP Ministers have already decided to ‘dump’ the Maze Stadium project. I cannot confirm this. I do know, however, that the issue has been a source of internal dispute within the DUP since at least June 23 last year: when Edwin Poots and Ian Paisley both voiced public support for the idea, while Nigel Dodds, Sammy Wilson and Gregory Campbell voiced public opposition. A very early sign, as it turns out, that the internal discipline exercised by the DUP during the opposition years, wasn’t going to hold when they became a party of government.

What I can also confirm is that the Executive has not deliberated on this in detail and has not had the benefit of a view on the Business Plan from the Dept of Finance. I will try, however, to set out the position of the Ulster Unionist Party on this issue.

‘I am speaking now in my capacity as Party Leader and not as a Member of the Executive.’

UUP led the way

‘It was as a result of negotiations between the former First Minister David Trimble, his then Chief of Staff, now UUP Chairman David Campbell, and Prime Minister Tony Blair, that the 360 acre site at the Maze was handed over to the Office of First and deputy First Minister at no charge. Other military sites were also transferred to the Executive for free, something that the existing team in OFMDFM have failed to achieve with the latest closure of bases.

‘This was a tremendous achievement, and something that the Ulster Unionist Party can be proud of. ‘

‘It was decided shortly after the transfer to explore options for the use of the site, and an initial proposal was put forward to erect a multi-sport Stadium at the Maze as part of the overall development. Shortly thereafter the decision was taken to list part of the prison site for a ‘conflict transformation centre’ which would be open to members of the public.’

‘These were the original ideas, and both have progressed. The GAA, Rugby and Football authorities have committed to use the proposed stadium and guaranteed a number of seats filled per annum. Other events are planned alongside; a hotel, shops, offices etc. The listed ‘prison’ site will be upgraded and opened to the public. This will occur even if the stadium is not erected.’

The present situation

‘At the Assembly the state of play is as follows;

1) The Dept of Culture Arts and Leisure Committee has taken a lot of evidence and has received the business case. It has made no decision and the business case is away to the Dept of Finance for consideration. The Committee will make no further decision on the matter until DFP responds

2) The Executive has not yet taken a view and no date has been fixed for it to do so.

3) The Ulster Unionist Group in the Assembly discussed the issue last week and retains an open mind, pending the report from DFP and other matters.

‘Much has been made of the Belfast vs Lisburn argument over the siting of a stadium. So far there is no formal proposal on the table from Belfast.’

‘I take the view that this argument has always been the wrong one. The issue is whether or not we have a national stadium rather than where it is located.’

The UUP’s present position

‘I met with UUP Members of Lisburn City Council last week to discuss the Maze. As you know some of them are none too happy with the Party’s approach to this matter in the Assembly. I pointed out some misunderstandings that I believe they were operating under, and we agreed a plan of action over the next couple of months.’

‘It was suggested that there should be a development corporation formed to oversee the regeneration of the entire Maze site, not just the stadium part of it. This would be modelled on the former Laganside Corporation, and could have full planning powers. People forget at times that the stadium is only one element of what will be a site that could take 30 years to fully develop. We envisage that as in the Belfast example, Lisburn Council should have formal representation on the Development Corporation. Laganside was a tremendous success, and I see no reason why a ‘Maze Corporation’ shouldn’t be also.

‘We also discussed the conflict transformation centre, what has become known as the ‘shrine’ to Bobby Sands and other hunger strikers. There is no doubt that this has damaged the proposal in the mind of parts of the general public. Sadly Sinn Fein has exploited this with stunts in 2006 and what they tell their supporters on web sites etc.’

‘The proposed stadium and the transformation centre should not be linked. They should be free standing developments. I understand that colleagues on Lisburn Council will shortly be bringing forward proposals for separating out the handling of these two sites.’

‘Finally, we agreed that we would discuss the matter further, including between Lisburn UUP Councillors and our MLAs, before any decision would be taken.

‘My colleagues on Lisburn City Council are passionate about the Maze site and its potential for this City. I recognise and respect that. The suggestions that have flowed from our discussions will, I believe, provide a road map for the way ahead, whatever happens to the stadium proposal.

‘And just as the UUP obtained the site free of charge for the benefit of the local community here in Lisburn in the first place; so, as in so many other areas, it will be left to the UUP to provide the solutions for the long-term exploitation of this site.

DUP’s inability to make difficult decisions

‘When the going gets tough and hard decisions have to be made, the DUP seems keen to cut and run. But Government isn’t about avoiding the hard decisions and sidestepping potential difficulties. The very worst thing that the DUP could do at this stage would be to reshuffle Edwin Poots out of his post and then replace him with someone who will consign any decision to the furthest reaches of the back burner. The DUP was very eager to get into government. Sadly, that eagerness doesn’t seem to extend to decision making. They really do have to learn how to put the interests of Northern Ireland above the internal interests of the DUP. But given what has been happening

recently, that doesn't seem a very likely prospect.

Peter Robinson and Year Zero

'The present campaign to undermine and probably remove Edwin Poots typifies what has been happening in the DUP since last May. As soon as it became clear that the Chuckle Brothers imagery was playing badly with the grassroots it was decided that the party would have to reinvent itself for the post-Paisley era.

'The DUP's Assembly group (the 'Payroll voters' who will choose Ian Paisley's successor), most of whom owe their political careers to the personal popularity of their Leader, were briefed that the party would have to distance itself from "the old man" and present itself in a new light.

'And ironically enough the activities of Jim Allister have actually helped the anti-Paisley wing of the DUP. They pointed to his relative success in Dromore as an electoral consequence of the Paisley/McGuinness double-act. They used the TUV as a bogymen to scare their MLAs into doing the previously unthinkable—attacking, undermining and finally displacing the Paisley leadership.

'Don't kid yourselves that the campaign against Paisley Jnr was simply the work of a couple of journalists. It was part of a much wider campaign, orchestrated from within the DUP, in which the media were being briefed on a regular basis by those who wanted to re-brand the old party as DUP-lite; or New DUP.

'And Peter Robinson, in particular, would have us believe that his personal elevation from perpetual bridesmaid to blushing bride would represent an entirely new broom for the DUP; a Year Zero, if you like. Nothing could be further from the truth.

'What we have witnessed is a putsch based on pure panic. It's a sacrifice of the Leader to save the careers of those whose MLA positions are almost entirely dependent on the popularity of that Leader. It's a rebellion by those same small fry who had applauded Ian to the rafters last May when his decision to cut the deal with Sinn Fein guaranteed their jobs and salaries for the next four years.

'Yes, I am very critical of Ian Paisley's contributions over the last forty years. But even I—along with others in my party—was shocked by the brutality of his removal and the sheer selfishness of those who orchestrated it. That his replacement will be installed by those same people, without any reference to ordinary party members, is also very telling.

'What we have seen in the past few months has been the DUP at its very worst. Last May the DUP sacrificed every previous pledge and policy for the sake of office. In the last few weeks the DUP has sacrificed Paisley Jnr and then Paisley Snr for the sake of clinging on to that office against the attacks of the TUV and the success of the UUP in Dromore.

The same-old same-old

'Peter Robinson cannot represent a new direction or departure for the DUP. He represents the same old DUP; with the same old desperate need for power and publicity at all costs. He will try to present himself to the DUP and to the wider world as a new leader starting with a clean slate. That can never be the case. He has been the effective hands-on leader of the DUP for almost a decade. There isn't one jot, dot or tittle of DUP policy or strategy which doesn't have his fingerprints all over it.

And, of course, when all else fails, Mr Robinson will resort to what he has been doing so enthusiastically for the past thirty years; putting the boot into his fellow unionists in the UUP!

'Ian Paisley hasn't been removed just because the DUP needed a new leader and a new direction. He has been removed because certain people were desperate for promotion. He has been removed because the DUP MLAs were getting frightened by the downturn in electoral fortunes. He has been removed because the DUP wants an exit strategy from some very difficult decisions. He has been removed because preservation of the DUP takes precedence over everything else.

The UUP's role

'There is a core vote within unionism and a presently untapped vote within the wider pro-Union community which would never feel comfortable voting for or supporting a political party like the DUP. It is to that core vote and untapped vote that the Ulster Unionist Party will be directing its efforts over the next few years.

“There may well be occasions when the UUP and DUP can cooperate under particular and very specific circumstances. And I will not rule out such cooperation. But I also believe that there is a very specific need and a very particular role for the Ulster Unionist Party in Northern Ireland. That’s why we have just completed an overhaul of our structures and reviewed every aspect of how we do our business.

“The Ulster Unionist Party will continue to put the interests of Northern Ireland and the Union itself above all other interests. I believe that the electorate has begun to reassess this party and to re-examine their opinion of us. They are beginning to appreciate the fact that we really did lead Northern Ireland in the right direction. There is still much work to be done and I believe that it won’t be long before the electorate once again endorses and then returns this party as the majority voice of Unionism.”

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