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With just over two months until the Euro and council elections, the battle lines have been drawn and the campaign strategies are mostly in place.

To be honest I'm not sure many people are paying attention, so it's a pretty safe bet turnout will continue to fall. That's hardly surprising. The elections have almost nothing to do with the everyday realities and issues that keep people awake at night; and nor do people (including most candidates) have any expectation of anything changing even if they did vote.

The Sinn Fein/DUP battle will be thoroughly predictable. Peter Robinson will warn that a shredding of the unionist vote will make it easier for Sinn Fein to sneak into the First Minister's office (sugging, for good measure, that it would be Gerry Kelly); while Martin McGuinness will argue that the disarray in the unionist ranks means Sinn Fein is on course to push the DUP into second place. Neither of them will be talking up their achievements in government, let alone setting

out a common agenda or vision. This is blood-on-blood top dog stuff; nothing to do with good government or a shared future. It suits both parties very nicely.

For the SDLP and UUP the 2014-16 electoral cycle is about credibility and survival. Neither will have disappeared by 2016 (although they won't be happy with the prospect of the DUP/Sinn Fein using the new NI Act to reduce MLA numbers from 108 to 90) but they will, almost certainly, be much weaker. There seems to be no sense of mission, nor a clear sense of role, relevance, purpose and direction. Crucially, there is no sense of them being able to exploit the toxic nature of the relationship between the DUP and Sinn Fein. The UUP's latest policy document—a sort of post-Haass response—will probably shore up their core base west of the Bann, but do nothing to win back votes that may wander to Alliance or NI21. That's a high-risk strategy for a party that's almost been decimated in the greater Belfast electoral doughnut. Indeed, it reads like an appeal to PUP/TUV voters who may have nowhere to go if those parties don't field a candidate

for the Euro election. While I think Jim Nicholson will hold his seat, the UUP still needs a sizeable vote to trickle down to their council candidates—many of whom are new. Meanwhile, the SDLP still acts like a blind poker player with a non-Braille deck of cards. John Hume has come and gone. The SDLP needs to move on, too.

There's going to be quite a tussle between Alliance and NI21 for the so-called 'middle ground'. It hasn't been a good couple of weeks for NI21, with evidence of internal tensions and dissent and criticism about McCrea's 'very personal' style of leadership. Anyway, that was always going to be the case for a party just getting itself off the ground. But they need momentum, and if they are adopting 'drawing a line' as policy they need a very clear, easily-understood strategy for delivering an agreed future. I see no sign of that yet and it may be a real problem for untested candidates in the heat of battle. They're also leaving it very late to declare their Euro candidate. Alliance is offering what they've always offered: but in Anna Lo they have probably the best Euro candidate they've ever had.

They have no mission of winning the seat—and they know it. Their task is simply to maximize the trickle-down vote from Euro to council candidates and, more importantly, to stop NI21 in their tracks. Alliance and NI21 don't like each other and in my experience the electoral battles between self-styled moderates are usually the nastiest and most personally brutal.

It'll be fun to watch, though! No disrespect to the Greens, UKIP, Conservatives or Jamie Bryson (who is raising funds online), but I can't see any of them making any impression on the day. It's always hard for the smaller names and parties to get traction, particularly without big hitting, charismatic candidates. David Cameron and Nigel Farage will probably drop by for a photo-opportunity, but it will be a call-of-duty visit rather than an occasion for a pre-victory rally. The PUP has still to confirm a candidate, but again, I can't see him/her making much of a difference. And what of the TUV—will Jim Allister throw his hat into the ring? If he does, he will have an impact on the DUP (although not enough, I think, to deprive Dodds of her seat). But he will also have a bigger

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impact on the UUP (enough, perhaps, to cost them council seats). If he stands and underperforms the DUP will mock him. If he doesn't stand the DUP will mock him. Most of his council candidates are low-key, unknown figures and they would benefit from his trickle-down vote to them. It is a difficult decision for him, but refusing to step up to the plate at this point will damage him and his candidates.

Finally—and most crucially—what about the non-voters and the increasing numbers who have disengaged from the political/electoral process: is there any indication they may be tempted back to the ballot box on May 22? I don't think so.

Ok, we're still waiting for manifestoes and campaign focal points (as well as the final list of candidates), but at this stage—only 10 weeks away—nothing is jumping up and shouting out "look at me, look at me" to the disinterested. All in all it looks like more of the same-old, same-old, with the odds in favour of the DUP and Sinn Fein shoring up their positions and continuing the seemingly-unstoppable process of polarization and carve-up. Richard Haass got it about right in his comments to the Congressional Committee last week. Worryingly, he was even more pessimistic than I am!