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**DUP/UUP - It's now time for us all to face up to the pacts of life**

**We can decry them all we want, but as long as most people's position on the constitutional question dictates how they vote, electoral pacts are here to stay**

Those who don't like the sort of pact that the DUP and UUP have just announced say that it reduces elections to little more than a sectarian headcount. Yet the reality is that, of those who vote, almost 90% vote for clearly defined us-and-them parties anyway: the us-and-them being the respective unionist and nationalist camps.

Generally speaking, all elections are about maximising the votes and seats for each camp and, when the results are in, the number-crunchers from each side will tell us what it means for the constitutional question.

Both camps have their eye on a border poll - which will come at some point - so it's not surprising that the fixed point of politics and elections remains the gap between their respective strengths.

And nor is it surprising that both sides will do what they can to strengthen their own positions. At the moment, unionists have nine of the 18 parliamentary seats, only one of which is in Belfast. But if they won back East and South Belfast, along with Fermanagh/South Tyrone, then they would have two-thirds of the seats and a spring in their step.

So is it somehow wrong, sectarian, immoral, or a backward decision for the unionist parties to come to some sort of arrangement that gives them an opportunity of increasing their tally of seats?

If their task is to champion and promote the Union, then surely they have a collective duty to co-operate as and when required? And nor is this a one-way street. A few months ago, Martin McGuinness issued an invitation to the SDLP to consider the possibility of a pact, or understanding, with Sinn Fein to protect the eight parliamentary seats they hold between them. The invitation was issued again last week.

The SDLP is saying no: probably because they reckon they can hold on to South Belfast, South Down and Foyle without a pact and maybe because there is some evidence that Alasdair McDonnell, Margaret Ritchie and Mark Durkan have attracted some "soft" unionist voters in the past.

Yet it is also quite clear that the SDLP has underperformed in places like Fermanagh/South Tyrone, Mid Ulster, and Newry and Armagh, because a significant section of their potential vote has chosen to vote for Sinn Fein to maximise the chances of a nationalist holding the seat.

It's also worth bearing in mind that Alliance has also "played the game". In 2001, they didn't field a candidate in North Down, because they wanted to give Lady Hermon the chance to unseat Bob McCartney, leader of the United Kingdom Unionist Party. She won and has held the seat since then.

They did the same thing in Upper Bann in 2001, where David Trimble was coming under increasing pressure from the DUP's David Simpson. Trimble held on, but saw his majority slashed from 9,252 to 2,058. In the previous election, the Alliance candidate polled 3,017, so their decision to withdraw probably saved Trimble.

And it's worth remembering that in November 2001 Alliance MLAs redesignated as "unionist" to save the Assembly from collapse. To all intents and purposes, those decisions amounted to pacts: they were done for a very specific reason during a very specific circumstance.

Pacts, understandings, arrangements, one-offs, nods-and-winks. Call them what you will: the parties have always been prepared to do what they believe is in their interests at particular times. And so have their voters.

Indeed, we saw it in East Belfast in 2010, where it was obvious that unionists who wanted rid of Peter Robinson voted for Naomi Long. Not because she was Alliance, but because she was their best option for "getting at Peter".

The bigger question, particularly for unionists, is this: doesn't the need to consider pacts on so many occasions suggest that there are too many unionist parties? Is there really any need, for example, for the DUP, UUP, Ukip, TUV, PUP and Conservative associations and groups in East Belfast? All they do is bicker with each other for most of the time, shred the pro-Union vote between them and create gaps for non-unionists to slip through.

And if the differences between them are - in the words of one DUP MLA "substantial and significant" - then why would they even consider a pact in the first place? Pacts and understandings are an inevitable consequence of a political environment in which your position on the constitutional question still determines how most people vote. During the Euro and council elections last year, NI21 realised that they weren't making any inroads into the pro-Union electorate, so, on the eve of the poll, they announced that they would be redesignating as "other".

It was a deliberate strategy to make themselves more appealing to one side rather than the other: and, in so doing, they became part of the us-and-them landscape here.

For so long as the constitutional question dictates voting habits here, then for so long will pacts - or something which serves the same end purpose - be part of election campaigns.

Jim Allister, for instance, has a point when he says that wider choice in last year's Euro and council elections increased the overall unionist vote, yet it didn't maximise the number of unionist seats on the councils.

The TUV makes decisions on which seats it will contest on May 7 based on whether or not he thinks it will damage the chances of unionists holding, or regaining, a seat: so TUV, even in the absence of a formal pact, is "playing the game".

In the very specific case of East Belfast, it will be interesting to see how the electorate responds to a pact built on what Peter Robinson summed up as a "dry your tears, you're on you way out" campaign against Naomi Long. One thing is certain, though: a section of unionist voters will not vote DUP. They never have and they never will.

I think we'll also see some traction towards her from non-voters, who will not be happy with what looks like the DUP/UUP machine ganging up against her. The odds remain heavily against her, yet she has a 42% non-voting pool to tap into if she turns this into a "Naomi versus the unionist machine" campaign.

Given our political realities, pacts are neither good nor bad as such: they go with the territory. With or without them, voters tend to stick to their own side. Those who want to change these realities need to come up with a credible alternative. So far they haven't.

And 45 years since it was founded, Alliance - the self-professed anti-us-and-them party - is still averaging just 6%.