**UUP fail to drive a hard deal in pact that boosts the DUP**

**Ben Lowry**

[**ben.lowry@newsletter.co.uk**](mailto:ben.lowry@newsletter.co.uk)

Wednesday 18 March 2015

**The unionist pact revealed late last night is a triumph for the DUP.**

With the Ulster Unionists giving way in North and East Belfast, it is nearly certain that Nigel Dodds will be re-elected in the former.

It is now likely that Gavin Robinson will win East.

The latter result is much more uncertain than the return of Mr Dodds. Pundits may have underplayed both the incumbency appeal for Naomi Long, and the extent to which a growing chunk of pro-Union voters in greater Belfast seem to dislike traditional unionists.

The DUP, who are canny number crunchers, are aware of this and have deliberately put up a candidate who lacks a lot of the baggage that seems to put off key swing voters.

Despite Gavin Robinson’s mild image, a DUP win is no more than likely, given the uncertainty as to how the 7,300 Trevor Ringland voters (Tory-UUP candidate last time) will divide. They need to go mostly DUP for Mr Robinson to win.

The Alliance Party is not going to allow him the moderate tag. At the weekend they referred to him “grinning beside Ruth Patterson” outside court (maybe he did grin, but I also saw discomfort in his body language that day — he knows that places such as Ballyhackamore have an army of voters who may be pro-Union and Protestant but who view loyalist protesters with contempt).

Despite the uncertainties, Mr Robinson’s chances are massively higher than 24 hours ago, when this newspaper understood that Chris McGimpsey was indeed going to stand in East Belfast for the UUP.

The UUP gets nothing like as good a deal out of this pact as the DUP.

Tom Elliott is widely known in Fermanagh, and the party believes he commands cross-community respect. Even so, he will have an uphill battle to win Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The combined nationalist vote was almost 25,000 last time, against 21,000 for Rodney Connor. Mr Elliott has the higher profile but as a longstanding unionist cannot repeat Mr Connor’s campaign, in which unionist imagery and colours were spurned in a bid to get centrist votes.

And it is hard to conceive of a scenario in which Danny Kennedy wins Newry and Armagh, despite the fact that Mr Kennedy is born and bred in the area and popular.

In 2010, the constituency voted Sinn Fein 18,857, Unionist (UUP,DUP,Frazer) 14,978, SDLP 10,526.

The UUP must think that the departure of the sitting Conor Murphy makes the seat less certain for Sinn Fein. But unless the combined nationalist vote splits precisely 50-50, which is improbable, Sinn Fein will win.

It is surprising that the Ulster Unionists did not make South Belfast a deal-breaker. This seat was within grasp for a single unionist: last time unionists and nationalists both tallied 14,000 votes.

It seems that for all the DUP’s public confidence, the party was anxious about its ability to win North or East Belfast in a divided unionist field.

If the UUP had not blinked and pressed ahead with their plans to run candidates in the various unionist marginals, firmly ruling out any deal in the absence of a clear run in South Belfast, it would have been remarkable if the DUP had not backed down — perhaps at the last moment.

The UUP had already shown some uncertainty in its approach to South Belfast. Its selection panel rejected the preferred candidate of the local association, Jeff Dudgeon in favour of Rodney McCune.

Mr McCune is the sort of bright, moderate young barrister who would appeal to all mainstream parties, so it is not hard to understand his attraction to the high command. But his selection, announced in a press release amid references to his wife and family, does raise the thought that Mr Dudgeon suffered because of his long association with gay rights.

If some observers believe that candidates such as Mr Dudgeon might in fact enhance the appeal of unionists, by reaching outside the shrinking traditional base, then the UUP seemed to lack confidence in such an analysis, even in a seat that includes the most cosmopolitan parts of the Province.

The pact raises questions as to the UUP’s future strength.

If the DUP emerges with nine MPs, as is much more likely now, and the UUP has none, which is not much less likely than before this pact, then the advantage of Peter Robinson’s party will be overwhelming.

Even a single UUP MP would be a massive shot in the arm. Any voice at Westminster will be influential in the next parliament, given how close polls suggest it will be and given how every MP’s vote will count to a greater extent than in most parliaments of the last 100 years.

It is unlikely, given the splintered vote, that either Labour or the Conservatives will win an overall majority.

The Ulster Unionists believe they have a good chance in Upper Bann and South Antrim.

They will need to have. Otherwise, it looks like they are heading towards something akin to a merger with the DUP, albeit on the latter’s terms.

**• Ben Lowry is News Letter deputy editor**