

A Better Union

A Unionist Manifesto for the 21st Century

Unionism, from the Latin 'unus' (one), is the concept that more than one group or entity working together is better than one in isolation.¹

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unionism>

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1. The United Kingdom

We believe that the Union of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales based upon:

1. Ultimate sovereignty resting with a single national Parliament
2. Equality of treatment and opportunity for all its citizens
3. Respect of diversity

is to the benefit of all its citizens.

2. Secularism

“ Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal rather than religion-specific values.”²

We believe in the concept of the modern secular state. Although we respect the deeply held religious beliefs of many in Northern Ireland and defend their right in all cases to have the freedom to practise their beliefs in an intimidation and threat-free environment, we also believe that no one person’s or group’s beliefs should be imposed against the wishes, or to the detriment, of the wider community.

We believe in the freedom of choice and as long as our actions do not impinge on any other person’s life or rights, our society’s citizens should be free to practise whatever life-styles and make whatever choices they see fit.

The traditional Ulster character was individualistic, non-conformist and suspicious of government interference in their lives. Over the years many (witness for example, the great migrations of the 17th and 18th centuries) left the province because they felt that they would be prevented from achieving their full potential by the ruling government or social/moral climate of the day. We believe that within Northern Ireland there is an over-involvement of government in our everyday lives, evidenced by a number of laws which exist to impose conformity to one standard interpretation of a particular set of beliefs.

We therefore believe that in a free society, legislation on issues such as abortion, Sunday observance and licensing laws should tend towards individual choice, not public dictat. Every one of us has our own personal conscience and our politicians and government owe it to each citizen to permit him or her to exercise it.

² Barack Obama, Illinois Senator

3. Democracy

We believe in the concept of democracy.

We believe that the only way to create a stable and prosperous Northern Ireland is by ensuring that everyone feels that their voice and opinion is important in determining the future of the country.

We believe that democracy means accepting and acting upon the results at the ballot box. Whilst we may not always like what party or which candidate is chosen by any section of the electorate we accept the opinions of the people of Northern Ireland.

We believe that, as democrats, we have a duty to engage, debate and argue with those who may not share the same views as ourselves. Unionism has done itself a great disservice over the years by backing away and leaving the forums where open and honest discussion can take place. Unionists must always be ready to present our political philosophies and beliefs in a positive way and if necessary, to disagree with arguments which we believe to be false and to confront and expose half-truths and lies.

We must, however, be prepared for and welcome genuine challenges to our beliefs; only when we fully understand the arguments against our political philosophy can we carry out the constant self-analysis and revision which is essential for any such philosophy to survive, develop and prosper.

4. Diversity

We believe that there is no one single definition of Britishness.

Our nation is comprised of people of different races, faiths, political views and sexual orientation. We believe (to steal a quotation from Jacques Chirac) that the United Kingdom is "stronger when it is brought together in its diversity."

We believe, due to Northern Ireland's social conservatism, women have never been granted full equality of opportunity within both the business and political spheres. Whilst glass ceilings are being removed, there is still much work to be done. Northern Ireland is too small a place for any people of talent to be denied for whatever reason. the opportunity to reach their full potential.

We believe that within our own part of the UK, diversity should be actively encouraged, we welcome the different perspectives and ideas that people of different cultures and faiths bring to our society. With the growing ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland, it will become more important than ever to ensure everyone feels they have a stake in politics.

More specifically to our way of thinking, there is no logical reason why a white Protestant male makes a better Unionist than anyone else. Different perspectives can bring fresh new ideas, which are imperative if any political movement is to survive and prosper in the modern age.

The UK, the Commonwealth and the European Union contain people of many races and religions and we are proud that Northern Ireland is a part of these entities. But this membership brings with it, not only benefits, but also responsibilities, we look forward to the day when in Northern Ireland everybody treats their neighbours, regardless of creed or race, with the respect and consideration with which they themselves would like to be treated.

We believe Unionism should not feel threatened by the Irish element in its identity, but be positively encouraged to explore and develop it further. The 2 countries on this island share much of their history and culture and it would be akin to cutting off your nose to spite your face to deny this fact. This does not mean embracing the symbols of militant republicanism or celebrating acts of rebellion against Britain, we simply desire the opportunity to recognise and acknowledge that which unites as well as that which divides us.

With the population of Northern Ireland rapidly changing, Unionism should not (and actually cannot) any longer rely on demographics for its survival. Not only is it a good way to lose a fight that ought to be won, it is morally wrong to expect complete but exclusive support from one tribe. If the only reason someone supports an argument is an accident of birth, then there was never much of an argument to begin with.

5. Honesty

We believe in the concept of the open society, where both the state's politicians and government are responsive and tolerant and the political system is transparent and flexible.

Every citizen also has the duty to be honest in setting out what they require and expect from their elected representatives. They should be prepared to (without fear nor favour) reject those who no longer meet up to their requirements and expectations at the next possible electoral opportunity.

Unionists must be honest in, not only recognising the mistakes that their movement has made in the past, but also in specifying what kind of future Union that they envisage with the rest of the UK. They should be honest with themselves in assessing the likely consequences of both this vision and also their present voting preferences.

Unionist politicians should use the media channels solely as a means of communication and not for self-promotion or the "spinning" of a particular party-line; they should have confidence in the electorate being intelligent enough to draw its own conclusions from the truth when it is broadcast from either television or newspaper.

We believe *"irresponsible criticism - the eagerness to expose and publicise a problem, unmatched by the willingness to propose feasible solutions - is perhaps the most common form of dishonesty in politics."*³ In keeping with this belief, we believe it is vitally important that politicians desist from pandering to populism induced by media pressure, instead they should be making the tough decisions that are right for Northern Ireland.

³ Aleksander Kwasniewski ex-President of Poland

6. A United Civic society

We have stated our belief in the right of the individual to exercise their individual choice and live life, as far as possible, without interference from either government or indeed wider society.

We do however also acknowledge that within Northern Ireland, many exercise this right of individual choice by participating collectively in such group activities as charities, societies and sports clubs.

At present, in many respects, dual and separate civil societies exist within Northern Ireland; we Unionists have a duty, to the wider society we are a part of, to assist in the breaking down of the barriers which exist on many cultural, social and sporting levels between the various communities within Northern Ireland.

We believe a strong and unified civil society in Northern Ireland would act as the engine to achieve the honesty in politics and the open society we mentioned when discussing honesty.

7. Promoting the Union

We believe that Unionism must move out of its comfort-zone and realise that long-term there is nothing to be gained from preaching an out-dated message to a choir whose size is steadily diminishing. The Union in the future will not be strengthened by melodramatic speeches and hyperbolic scare mongering.

There must be a realistic acceptance that for most of the world, the Northern Irish question is no longer top of, or, even halfway down, the political agenda. It must concentrate on those people and areas which can help and influence the continuance of the Union.

In 2006, Unionism must become more aware of the advantages of building its contacts and relationships with suitable partners and areas within Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the wider Irish/Ulster Diaspora.

We should not underestimate the potential support for Unionism within different sectors of British political, media and wider society. We have to examine and be honest why this potential has not been realised before. Whilst we believe those of a conservative persuasion will see more readily the advantages of continuing the Union, there are also people of a liberal frame of mind, who given the correct circumstances, may also give us their support. For this reason (and for its overall benefit), we believe that Unionism must rediscover its own radical roots, which have become overgrown and hidden with the weeds of sectarianism and bigotry scattered by various of its leading figures over the years. Like many on the left and liberal wing of British politics in recent times, we must not be afraid to explore deeply and analyse our political beliefs and cast aside those which have hindered our political development and advancement.

We are convinced that existing within the Republic of Ireland there are people who wish to learn more about our political philosophy and may even be sympathetic towards our long-term aims. For too long our message has gone by default in this arena and whilst again, this may involve Unionist moving into uncharted territory, it is important that we take every opportunity afforded to explain and publicise our political beliefs. As more within the Republic of Ireland appreciate our reasons for remaining within the United Kingdom, we are convinced the more difficult it will become for our political opponents to spread half-truths and paint black propaganda about Unionism as a political theory and individual Unionists as people.

We feel amongst the Ulster Diaspora many still retain the same strong attachment to Northern Ireland that they possessed when they left their country. These people are potentially an invaluable source of publicity for our cause within the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. Unionism should be building upon these networks. Those of a second generation, at present, struggle to learn more of their ancestral homeland, its culture and heritage. In order to take advantage of these links, Unionism will have to change its traditional parochial mindset and overcome its previous paranoia about internationalising our political beliefs.

8. Loyalism

We believe for a society ever to be classified as truly progressive and successful, then all its sectors must feel that they are reaching their full potential politically, culturally and economically.

We believe for a variety of reasons working class Unionism/Loyalism has been the one part of Northern Ireland's society that has been prevented from reaching its potential and as a result, the wider community has suffered and will continue to do so until this problem has been resolved.

We believe that until the paramilitary stranglehold on the community is broken then working-class Unionism can never fully develop. The paramilitaries not only strangle local enterprise through protection rackets, but entrap young people (particularly young males) from their community in a world where instead of being encouraged to develop through education and achievement, they are consigned from an early age to live a life dominated by the local terrorist godfathers, and by anger and fear; more often than not expressed through irrational hatred of difference, which frequently leads to violence, particularly against minorities.

It's no coincidence that Protestants, particularly working-class Protestants, are underrepresented in the numbers of Northern Irish students in third-level education. The permeation of the culture described above through urban working-class unionist communities has contributed in no small part to young people undervaluing education, with young males once again exhibiting the most severe symptoms. This level of indifference, verging on hostility, to education has in turn left working-class unionists with few real leaders capable of articulating their views in the political arena, thus allowing the paramilitaries to be seen to be filling a void – continuing the vicious cycle.

We believe that political and civic leaders have a responsibility to clearly demonstrate the advantages of not only traditional education, but also true political enfranchisement. However the responsibility does not lie solely with political leaders. Research has shown that Protestant parents do not impress on their children, to the same degree as their Catholic counterparts, the importance of continuing education.

We believe that the remedy to this situation necessitates young people becoming more self-aware and being given a wider understanding of what the present political process is potentially capable of delivering for them. Self-awareness can only come once young people are confident about who they are – because they've been taught about their heritage and understand where they fit into the world.

We believe that politically, loyalist communities are too often being left out of the political process. The result is a feeling that rather than participating in the process, the process is happening to them. It's up to political unionism to show that this is not the case and that rather than trying to prevent change, unionists can work to make sure the right changes are made. This kind of political awareness will no doubt keep the unionist parties on their toes, but it could well be the challenge that is needed to breathe new life into political movements that are in danger of becoming stagnant.

9. United Kingdom / Republic of Ireland Co-Operation

We believe in closer economic and political ties and deeper co-operation between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

We believe, despite their turbulent shared history, it is in the best interest of both the Republic of Ireland and the UK as a whole, that they formalise and strengthen their already solid political, economic, social and cultural links.

With travel (and consequently cross-border criminality) never having been easier nor cheaper between the two countries than it is today, we believe it is essential that there is the closest cooperation between the police forces of the two countries.

We believe also, due to this ease of travel between the two states and the fact that both Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom operate outside the Schengen Agreement, that a common immigration and asylum policy would be beneficial to both states.

It has been shown within the European Union that that countries working together, even on an informal basis (e.g. the Visegrad 4), can achieve many more of their objectives than by acting individually. We believe that on those issues where Irish and British interests coincide, a joint and united approach should be taken towards the wider negotiations.

There are already strong economic ties between the two states, however we believe these should be formalised in the setting up of shared practises and joint institutions, where the economies of scale dictate a potential benefit. An example of this could be the creation of a joint stock-exchange or the introduction of common mobile-telephone roaming rights between the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

With many first and second generation Irish living in Britain and many in the Republic of Ireland also possessing grandparents born before 1920 (i.e. before the creation of the Irish Free State), we believe that it would be an appropriate symbolic gesture for the United Kingdom to offer the opportunity of a United Kingdom passport to the afore-mentioned groups. The UK has never completely viewed the Free State/Republic of Ireland as a 'foreign' country (in the truest sense of the word), either legally or culturally, and we believe that these people (like citizens of Northern Ireland) have the right to be considered as Irish, British or indeed, both.

We also feel that the time is right for the Republic to consider the question of rejoining the Commonwealth. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the Republic, like many present members of the organisation, has shared an often troubled history with Britain. The Commonwealth is however now home to more than 30 per cent of the world's population, including many millions of Irish descent in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. About one quarter of world trade takes place between the countries in the Commonwealth and by joining, the Republic of Ireland would also receive cultural, political, social and sporting benefits. However, we believe that the decision whether to ultimately join the Commonwealth should be one taken by the citizens of the Republic by the means of a referendum.

Northern Ireland, as the part of the United Kingdom closest geographically to the Republic, would obviously gain from the above measures.

But we also believe that ever closer ties between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland can change the parameters of political discussion within Northern Ireland itself.

As this rapprochement continues, Unionists will no longer be able to point to an anti-British ethos within the Republic of Ireland as an over-riding reason for maintaining the link with the United Kingdom. This should help remove some of the sectarianism and tribalism from internal Northern Irish politics and move the debate more towards socio-economic issues.

10. Northern Ireland's interests are best served within a strong union

We believe that for Northern Ireland specifically, the continuance of the Union is the best scenario, economically, socially, culturally and politically.

The United Kingdom has the fourth largest GDP in the world. It is the fifth largest visible trader, third largest invisible trader in the world. It is the country with the fifth largest industrial and fourth largest services output. The FTSE has the third largest (the biggest in Europe) stock market capitalisation in the world. London is amongst the top 3 world financial centres.⁴

However, we believe that Northern Ireland, in common to certain other parts of the United Kingdom, does not yet reap full benefit from the above facts. We believe that once local politicians, businessmen and entrepreneurs develop more awareness and expertise at how to tap into this economic and financial strength, the present over-reliance on the public-sector will start to diminish. The rest of the United Kingdom is now, more than ever, an easily accessible potential market of over fifty-five million customers; with a more of a pro-active approach, industries such as tourism could easily take advantage of the opportunities provided by this. We also believe that modern technological developments such as the internet, will bring a closer integration of the various markets of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales much closer together to the benefit of all concerned.

The United Kingdom, as a whole, has always had a thriving and varied social and cultural sector. The arrival of many people of differing races and creeds over the last fifty years has developed this even further. We believe that Northern Irish artists, musicians and writers are an important piece in the overall jigsaw and again, should be looking to benefit from the wider audience for their work that the United Kingdom provides. We also believe that, whilst in the past parochial Northern Irish matters may have provided a steady audience, they (the artistic community) can now derive a greater benefit from widening their horizons and by taking advantage of their membership of the varied British, Commonwealth and European families of which they are also a part.

Civil society in Northern Ireland; charities, social and sporting groups can and should be taking advantage of the easier transport and communication links to promote and develop their ideas and build up relationships and friendships with similar groups within England, Scotland and Wales. Such swapping of ideas can only serve to push their organisations forward.

The United Kingdom Parliament presently consists of 646 members of parliament from all parts of the nation. Although Northern Ireland's MP number 18, other similar sized regions of the country with similar numbers of representatives manage to put aside party differences for the sake of the greater benefit of their region. We believe that if all Northern Irish MPs were present and working together for all of the country's population, then similar rewards could be reaped.

⁴ World in Figures 2005-The Economist

Surveys in Northern Ireland have consistently shown a majority of 55-60% in favour of Northern Ireland remaining within the United Kingdom. Yet at the same time, only 30-35% of the electorate are presently voting for Unionist parties at General, Local Government and European elections.

We believe that this is actually a positive sign that many (and it would appear a growing) number see the benefits for the continuing with the Union for solely non-traditional reasons. We believe that these people represent an opportunity for UK mainstream parties to recruit and engage within the wider political process but also a warning to the Unionist (and Nationalist and Republican parties) that a substantial part of the electorate is no longer interested in voting on solely communal, religious and national, lines.

We believe that as Northern Ireland's society becomes more stable a more and more people will be demanding that their elected representatives deal with real day-to-day issues.

Our hope is that in the not too distant future people will be voting and choosing their representatives on exactly the same issues as their fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom.