DUP Leadership and Unionist Dominance in Northern Ireland Historical Analysis

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In 2018, it had been 47 years since the Democratic Unionist Party's inception. It became the dominant unionist party, surpassing the UUP about 17 years ago. It has seen, in the previous decade, two leadership changes, two further election successes, its founder's death and occasional controversies. The DUP has enjoyed a surge in popularity, yet the voting patterns reveal that its support is largely based on personalities and has remained regional for the most part (Irish Political Maps, 2017). Ian Paisley was its founder, who led it until 2008. His successor was Peter Robinson, who assumed leadership in May 2007. Arlene Foster replaced him in December 2015. Though it is believed that all three leaders displayed consistent and resilient leadership that led the DUP to become the leading party affiliated with unionism, factionalism and disagreements within the party suggest that the reasons for their success may also lie elsewhere.

Origins and Unionist Position

Out of the two main unionist political parties in Northern Ireland, the DUP is the larger one. It is grounded in Protestant views stemming from the insecurities of its working class. The DUP has always been a staunch supporter of a union with Great Britain, and Ian Paisley merged his Protestant Unionist Party into the new DUP party to contest electoral votes. Initially, the Ulster Unionist Party UUP supported the DUP, but later, in the mid-90s, they both took highly divergent stances in their discussions. As Sinn Fein entered the talks in 1997, the DUP boycotted them. The historic 1998 Belfast Agreement was rejected by the DUP, which did not agree to the new power-sharing formula in Northern Ireland. They objected to Sinn Fein's inclusion and condemned the new Northern Ireland Assembly for diluting British sovereignty. But later, in 2006, following the St Andrews Agreement, a power-sharing devolved government formula was agreed to by the DUP, which, to the surprise of many, agreed to ally with Sinn Fein. In 2007, a majority of the party favored the new power-sharing deal, but there were definite reports of disagreements within the party (BBC, 2007).

Conservative Politics and British Identity

The DUP, in its policies and views, is an Ulster Unionist party that strongly supports Northern Ireland being a part of the UK, essentially opposing a unified Ireland. The party perceives itself to be defending Ulster Protestant culture and Britishness against Irish republicanism and nationalism

(NewsLetter, 2008). They define themselves to be on the left of center when it comes to social policies and “right-wing in the sense of being strong on the constitution” (DUP, 2011). Despite that, they are well-known for taking conservative positions on social issues. The inner-city working-class areas and the rural communities in Northern Ireland include some deeply religious groups that form their main constituencies, something that reflects the anti-Catholicism and fundamentalism of the DUP’s founder (O’Malley, 2013). The party, later on, moderated its positions on several issues and accepted Sinn Fein’s participation in a power-sharing deal. They prioritized the economy in their latest manifesto, seeking to assist the province in recovering from the recession (DUP, 2011). They take an unwavering pro-Israel line when it comes to foreign policy, agreeing to Israel’s aggressive stances. They supported “Leave” during the Brexit campaign, the only party from Northern Ireland’s government to do so (Pasha-Robinson, 2017). They also call to maintain the ‘Common Travel Area,’ opposing a hard Irish border (Paul Taggart, 2002). They opposed LGBT rights in Northern Ireland while also maintaining “pro-life” adoption stances. Some DUP politicians have also called for creationism to be taught in schools (Henry, 2007).

Ian Paisley’s Hardline Leadership and Pragmatic Turn

The founder of the DUP, Ian Paisley, founded the party a year after he became a Member of Parliament for North Antrim. He led the party for forty years until 2008. Paisley, throughout his political and religious activism, was seen as a hardline unionist and a firebrand. Any attempts to resolve the conflict between Irish republicans/nationalists and unionists through a power-sharing deal were staunchly opposed by him, along with any endeavour for the Republic of Ireland to intervene in the affairs of Northern Ireland. His charismatic personality won him a lot of followers. He held an uncontested moderatorship of the ‘Free Presbyterian Church’ for 54 years, and his leadership of the DUP remained unchallenged until his final years (Southern, 2005). What surprised many commentators was his decision to enter the government sharing power with Sinn Fein following the St Andrews Agreement, wherein they agreed to an all-Ireland governance in particular matters. Though there were many disagreements, Paisley’s moral capital was used by some of his chief supporters in order to justify that deal, which would otherwise be seen as a complete betrayal of all he stood for in his earlier activism (Patterson, 2014). As part of the deal, Paisley and Martin McGuiness became the ‘First Minister’ and ‘Deputy First Minister,’ respectively, though they could only remain in power together for a year. Owing to some controversies and disagreements, Paisley’s leadership came into question. In 2014, Baroness Paisley, his wife, accused senior DUP members of treating her husband “shamefully” (Breen, 2018). Commentators said that the DUP, which was a ruthless and well-organized outfit, began to see that Paisley had outlived his usefulness. Regardless of that, they agree that he deserved enormous credit for his final massive gesture of political pragmatism (Meagher, 2014). The factionalism and disagreements within the party and the alliance continued. Martin McGuiness later resigned from his position, citing differences with the DUP and the leader of that time, Arlene Foster, stating that:

“Apart from the negative attitude to nationalism and to the Irish identity and culture, there has been a shameful disrespect towards many other sections of our community. The public is demanding robust action and accountability (over RHI), but the DUP, in particular, its leader Arlene Foster, has refused to accept this. The DUP leader has a clear conflict of interest.” (The Irish Times, 2017).

Peter Robinson and Stable Power-Sharing

After Paisley, Peter David Robinson assumed charge of the DUP from 2008 to 2015. He was, along with Ian Paisley, a founding member of the DUP, and everyone agreed to his leadership. His leadership, although marked by controversies, was still seen as stable. He was nominated unanimously as leader-designate in April 2008 by DUP MLAs along with Nigel Dodds as ‘deputy leader-designate.’ He and McGuinness worked together on several issues, one of which oversaw the devolution of justice powers and policing to the Northern Ireland Assembly from the British Parliament after the power-sharing deal was negotiated with Sinn Fein (BBC News, 2010). Robinson announced his resignation in November 2015 as First Minister and from the leadership of the DUP.

Arlene Foster, RHI, and Renewed Division

Arlene Foster’s leadership also saw many controversies and disagreements (Walker, 2018); the author of ‘DUP: From Protest to Power’ said: “Mrs Foster is in the car, but it’s being driven by Nigel Dodds.” (McCann, 2018). Because of the RHI inquiry, her situation as the DUP leader deteriorated, and party members were heard contemplating how she could be removed without bringing any damage to the party (McCann, 2018). Ever since Mrs Foster collapsed the latest Stormont talks, the unionist parties, as well as resistance from within DUP leaders, surprised Mrs Foster and her cabinet advisors even though a majority saw it as a poor deal for nationalists (Manley, 2018). Electorally, the DUP remained dominant under Peter Robinson, continuing from Ian Paisley, but the relations began to cool down between the unionists and the nationalists in the executive. Robinson did not win a seat in Westminster in 2010, handing over DUP’s leadership to Mrs. Foster, who assumed charge in 2015 as a leader and as ‘First Minister’ in 2016. Controversy over the Renewable Heat Incentive Deal RHI in 2016, in which it was speculated that over 400 million pounds were overspent, began to tarnish her leadership abilities. It also led to a power-sharing executive collapse in 2017, leading to an earlier election in Stormont. She made some controversial remarks over the Irish language act, in which she proclaimed that the DUP would never agree to such an act. More people, according to her, speak Polish in Northern Ireland, so there should be a Polish language act. It was one of Sinn Fein’s demands that the DUP perceived as devaluing Britishness, to which she reacted and said, “If you feed a crocodile, it will keep coming back for more” (Press Association, 2017).

Why the DUP Overtook the UUP

Though with strong yet not so consistent leadership, the DUP overtook the splintered, weakened, unpopular UUP as the biggest Unionist party. It can be said that the DUP's dominance of unionism was not the result of consistent leadership alone but of other factors as well. One factor could be that opinions themselves hardened amongst voters on both sides, so the moderate parties decreased in popularity while the more extreme parties, such as the DUP, increased in popularity. Out of that, fear arose that if you don't vote for your own, it might mean that your biggest enemies may take power. The "enemy's enemy is my friend" rule has to be applied; even if it is an extremist on "my side," it is a better defense against the lunatic extremist on "the other side." It was the SDLP & UUP who paved the way for the Good Friday Agreement, who put in the hours, had the tough conversations and made the compromises to try and find something workable while the DUP was still adamant in its position. In Northern Ireland, the SF and DUP are the main parties, and SDLP, UUP and Alliance are fringe parties. So, rather than weakening their voice by voting for a minority party, they preferred to go with the loudest voice again, and the DUP is the stronger voice in the Unionist community, which explains why the DUP continues to dominate unionism.

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