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## The Great British public lend us your ears?

By Fair Deal,

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**Fair Deal (Belfast, Sluggor O'Toole [1]):** Sinn Fein is trying to engage mainland opinion [1] in favour of Irish unity but what are Ulster's Unionists going to do?

Throughout the Troubles, Unionism failed to engender significant public or establishment support in Great Britain. Equally, Unionism failed to engage in the battle of ideas. Northern Ireland was presented primarily as a security problem with a security solution.

Will Unionists engage in the battle of ideas and give greater priority to mainland audiences in the future?

### Battle of Ideas

On the battle of ideas, it seems the DUP leader Peter Robinson plans for Unionism to engage [2]. A think-tank, called the Unionist Academy, has been announced but full detail will be provided in the autumn. So should this 'Unionist Academy' keep the GB opportunities in mind?

### 50% + 1

Northern Ireland's membership of the United Kingdom lies not with the GB electorate but with Northern Ireland's (unless the Union itself ceases to be). Thus, the Unionist parties will give obvious priority to the vote patterns there. In this scenario it would be quite tempting for a small regional political movement, which broad Ulster Unionism is in UK terms, to focus its efforts within Northern Ireland.

### So should it not bother?

Absolutely not! While Irish republicanism's murders and Irish nationalism's words failed to persuade the establishment in favour of compelling unity it did shape the analysis of the problem. The lack of GB public sympathy for Ulster's Unionists ensured the establishment had an authorising environment to change Northern Ireland's arrangements within the Union largely as it wished with no reaction from public opinion.

Additionally, relying on an 'establishment' approach alone failed before. This is what Unionism followed in the post-war era. It relied on its relationship with the Conservative party and acting as lobby fodder for them as its protection. It proved itself to be wholly inadequate when faced with a crisis.

### Barriers

The most obvious problem is the one that faces any UK campaign, the general indifference of the GB public to a wide variety of political issues particularly constitutional.

The primary practical barrier to Unionism being more pro-active on the mainland is money. The Labour's party's present problems with finances are Unionism's near-permanent state.

In the mid-90's the UUP's David Burnside estimated in a Young Unionist pamphlet that a budget of £1m was required for a re-launch of Unionism in GB. At that time, the UUP's annual budget would have been barely £100K. Even today the combined budget to the two main Unionist parties falls well below £1m and derived primarily from public purse. The Unionist community needs to be convinced that its long standing tradition of politics on the cheap is not in its long-term interests.

In addition to finances it needs to look at people, especially its Westminster team. They should be Unionism's primary ambassadors in GB. It goes without saying that full-time ambassadors are best. However, the long-standing practice of multiple mandates by Unionist MPs and now the restoration of devolution makes it impossible. Never mind Unionist MPs developing a policy specialisation or campaigning roles that would enable them to engage with a greater cross-section of GB groups and public.

## **Opportunity**

Interestingly, devolution could present an opportunity to challenge the perception of "Ah but Northern Ireland is different". Most social and economic problems are common across the UK. Through policy innovation and hopefully success Northern Ireland could subtly but surely enter the national conversation. While it mightn't impact on support or opposition for the Union it would at least impact on perceptions.

## **The Task Ahead**

As Unionism re-organises itself in light of changed electoral patterns and the restoration of devolution it must avoid the temptation of a NI-only focus. It will be a slow and most likely generational task to address GB attitudes but a necessary one.

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### **Links:**

[1] <http://sluggerotoole.com/>

[2] <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/DUP-fights-back-against-39erosion.4218546.jp>