8 Dialogue with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

INTRODUCTION

The DUP emerged from its forerunner, the Protestant Unionist Party, in September 1971. The Reverend Dr Ian Paisley has led the party from its inception. The DUP professes itself to be ‘right wing in the sense of being strong on the constitution, but to the left on social issues’ (Flackes and Elliott, 1994, p. 134).

In its first electoral contest – the District Council Elections of 1973 – the DUP secured 4.3 per cent of the votes cast. The Democratic Loyalist Coalition, led by Paisley, received 10.8 per cent of the vote in the 1973 Northern Ireland Assembly election. In cooperation with other Unionist parties in the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC), the DUP received 8.2 per cent of the vote in the 1974 Westminster General election, a figure that was to increase to 14.8 per cent in the 1975 Convention election. Despite the demise of the UUUC and its skilful steering committee, the DUP proved to be a viable electoral force in its own right, securing 12.7 per cent of votes in the 1977 District Council elections. Indeed, the DUP momentarily eclipsed the UUP in the 1981 District Council elections with 26.6 per cent of the vote compared to the UUP’s 26.5 per cent. Since the 1987 General Election, the DUP has polled less strongly with 11.7 per cent of the vote in that election and 13.1 per cent in the 1992 General Election. The party has fared better in the District Council elections during this period with 17.7 per cent of the vote in 1989 and 17.3 per cent of the vote in 1993. However, it is the elections to the European Parliament that give the DUP and its leader greatest electoral satisfaction. In 1979, the Reverend Ian Paisley was the only candidate returned on the first count, his 29.8 per cent share of the vote bringing him comfortably across the 25 per cent threshold. This led to the declaration by his supporters that he was ‘Northern Ireland’s most popular politician’. This success has been repeated in subsequent
elections to the European Parliament, although with a narrowing percentage between himself and his nearest rival, John Hume, each time: from 11.5 per cent in 1984, to 4.4 per cent in 1989, to 2.2 per cent in 1994 (Flackes and Elliott, 1994; Irish Political Studies, 1995). In the 1996 Northern Ireland Forum election the DUP secured 18.8 per cent of the vote followed by 13.6 per cent in the 1997 General Election (Irish News, 3 May 1997).

The DUP is strongly anti-European integrationist, with its leader referring to the EU in disparaging biblical terms such as ‘the whore of Babylon’ and ‘the Antichrist’ (Bruce, 1989, p. 229). During the Common Market referendum campaign in 1975 the Protestant Telegraph recorded Dr Paisley’s views on the implications of Common Market membership for the Ulster Protestant identity:

There can be no future for Protestantism under the Common Market. The Common Market had a religious dimension, a constitutional dimension, an economic dimension, an Irish dimension and a legal dimension (Protestant Telegraph, 7 June 1975).

Dr Paisley took to referring to the Virgin Mary as ‘the Madonna of the Common Market’ at that time (Hainsworth, 1989, p. 56).

When campaigning in elections to the European Parliament the DUP criticizes the encroaching nature of the EU; and what the party perceives to be the pervasiveness of Catholic influence and the corresponding threat for Ulster Protestantism. Perhaps Dr Paisley’s most memorable contribution to the European Parliament is recorded by Flackes and Elliott:

At the first session in Strasbourg in July 1979 he intervened twice. On the opening day he was the first MEP to speak, apart from the acting president, when he protested that the Union Flag was flying the wrong way up outside the Parliament Buildings. Later he interrupted Jack Lynch (president in office of the European Council), saying that he was protesting against the Republic’s refusal to sign the European Convention on Terrorism (Flackes and Elliott, 1994, p. 261).

Dr Paisley reprised his protest tactic in October 1988 when he interrupted an address by Pope John Paul II. However, Dr Paisley does play an active role in promoting Northern Ireland’s economic and social interests at EU level and works closely with fellow MEPs in this regard (Hainsworth, 1989, p. 64).