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**Ulster Unionist Party Leader Robin Swann's speech at
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Verbatim text provided by Ulster Unionist Party**

Unionism – not for sections or factions, but for all

Ulster Unionist Party Leader, Robin Swann MLA

Queen's University, Belfast - 1 November 2018

Can I give my thanks to Queen's University for their invitation to speak here tonight.

It is an honour to speak at one of Northern Ireland's most prestigious and steadfast institutions. The contribution of Queen's to life here has been immense and it has rightly earned a global reputation for excellence.

Undoubtedly the presence of the University is a draw to Northern Ireland, not just for international students but for potential investors.

As a Party we have always had an active and vibrant Queen's Young Unionist Association and I am delighted that this continues to bring new talent into the party.

Many of my Party colleagues have found their feet at Queen's not just as students, but many as lecturers too.

One particularly weighs on my mind, especially as we approach the date marking 35 years since he was murdered just yards from where I stand.

The murder of Edgar Graham chills me to the core.

We have some shared history; we both went to Ballymena Academy and had his life not been brought to a callous end at just 29 years old, in all likelihood he, not I, would have been the second North Antrim man to lead the Ulster Unionist Party.

I hope we never see another day like that.

When a politician, a law lecturer, a human being is shot dead in cold blood by those motivated by sectarian hatred.

I would like to take this opportunity this evening to talk about the future, the future for unionism particularly, building on the thoughts I outlined at my Party's conference.

But I believe that to look forward, we must first reflect on where we have come from.

Politics here is deeply broken.

Twenty years ago we entered what was, and should have continued to be, a new era of hope for Northern Ireland.

A number of months ago I was present in the Whitla Hall as the 20th anniversary of the Belfast Agreement was marked. I sat amongst those who had played a key role in bringing it about, and their reflections brought a challenge to how we have ended up where we are today.

Twenty years ago politics in Northern Ireland was deeply broken. Society deeply divided.

But the UUP and the SDLP took a significant risk for the good of the people of Northern Ireland, because they knew that things needed to change – and that was worth a risk.

The devolved institutions designed by the authors of the 1998 Agreement offered something different – partnership.

Two communities doing it together – a step change.

Something that could set the tone.

Instead of mayhem on the streets, differences could be hashed out in a debating chamber.

Two communities could be given the space to heal and grow, and in time the institutions could grow and evolve with them.

But sadly it was not to be, because the Belfast Agreement was not allowed to grow and evolve with society – as it was meant to. That is because there are those who had much to fear from the normalisation of politics here and the threat it posed to their relevance.

The Agreement was corrupted in 2007 at St Andrews by two parties who had played to the extremes and were indulged by two Governments.

They embedded division in our political system and the race to the bottom that they have engaged in during the years since has led us to where we are today.

As their arrogance grew, anyone who pointed out that things were spiralling out of control was met with scorn, verging on contempt.

If we are to get back on track and restore an Assembly and Executive, then this has to be acknowledged.

We cannot just pick up where we left off without lessons having been learned. If we do, we will very quickly end up back in a mess worse than where we now find ourselves.

Just because we have our own unique challenges here does not mean that anyone should be expected to accept a lesser form of democracy.

This is not simply about resolving issues that certain parties view to be outstanding and then carrying on like nothing happened.

We must return to the original intention of the Belfast Agreement – power-sharing.

Power sharing is something that must be built on trust, it must be built on respect and it must be built on fairness in sharing space, sharing power and sharing responsibility.

If we do not truly examine how far away politics in Northern Ireland has moved from these principles and how we can renew our commitment to them, then we set ourselves back on a path towards inevitable failure.

And this is not all happening in isolation.

While it seems that the current situation is just being accepted by the UK Government, Northern Ireland is facing huge challenges.

We are at the centre of one of the most politically turbulent events since the Second World War.

With every day that passes there are major decisions being made on the United Kingdom's future outside of the European Union while the region which stands to be most affected by any negatives sees its democratic institutions stagnating.

The RHI Inquiry's forensic deconstruction of what went so badly wrong with the scheme has laid bare the true fault lines at the heart of an Executive run by two unelected cabals.

All while our health service is under unrelenting pressure with no Minister in place to take vital strategic decisions to try and alleviate some of the burden.

And it deeply concerns me that the public reflect on this and lose all faith in devolved politics.

Which is why we must see major changes in how we do business before we go back into Stormont.

The way the Executive conducts itself must change, and the culture of paranoia must end.

At our Party Conference I said that all parties around the Executive table must see their mandate respected, with agendas and papers delivered on time and answers to written questions being provided within a reasonable period of time and minutes of meetings actually being recorded.

If that needs to be formalised, then so be it. Because some of the behaviour in previous Executives damaged trust that needs to be rebuilt.

There must be new oversight for Ministers and SPADs. Self-governance and sanction has proved not to be effective.

If a colleague, Assembly member or member of the public believes a Minister has stepped out of line then they must have a line of recourse – just as is in place for MLAs.

We have proposed that the Assembly Commissioner should be able to investigate alleged breaches of the Ministerial Pledge of Office and Code of Conduct.

Those who are operating budgets of public money must be fully accountable.

And we want to see Special Advisors made subject to the Northern Ireland Civil Service disciplinary process for any breach of the code of conduct.

And we are supporting an independent review of the number, role, remit and salaries of all SPADs in comparison with their counterparts in the rest of the UK.

But we must see reform of the blockages in the Assembly too.

The Petition of Concern must be reformed before any return to devolution to prevent it from being used in any other way than how it was intended – to protect minorities.

We have put forward our ideas such as changing the threshold to mean that a successful petition would require signatories from either 90% of a designation or 40% of the whole house.

We're not saying it's a perfect solution, but we have to start somewhere. We will listen to any idea brought forward by other parties who are serious about reform.

Because when we do come back to discussions about reforming the Assembly and the Executive, the public will be cynical. Perhaps rightly so.

They must be able to have confidence that any talks process is working towards real solutions and reform, not simply another fudge or stopgap.

And I believe that the Secretary of State needs to move on instigating talks soon.

If she waits for a perfect time to hold a talks process she could find herself waiting for a very long time.

Just treading water until after Brexit will simply not do.

Both she, and the Government, have a duty to the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Simply allowing this place to wither until they aren't so occupied with Brexit is not an option.

But there also needs to be a willingness demonstrated by all parties that they really want this to work.

The UK Government must not be afraid to confront the DUP and Sinn Fein about their failures.

And I've said before, if it's a case that she truly does not think there is any prospect of restoring devolution in the near future then she needs to end the charade.

Appoint UK Government Ministers and move to direct rule.

Some parties might not be delighted.

But there are people on hospital waiting lists who are crying out for someone to take a decision.

I said at my party conference that unionism has been dragged into the gutter by the DUP.

I hear it from unionists and non-unionists alike that there is something about the tone of unionism that is being communicated nationally that they do not like.

That has to change. After all we have been through are we really content to let the union slide through our fingers because we could not resist being snide or obnoxious to our neighbours?

Unionism is a movement.

It is not owned by one party or another.

It is made up of all classes and religions and sexual orientations.

Liberals and Conservatives.

Capitalists and Socialists.

It is complex and it cannot be the case that one section tries to shape it to alienate others who have just as much to offer.

And it is not somehow "un-unionist" to call out others within unionism when you think they are in the wrong or are damaging the very thing they claim to cherish.

I said at my Party conference that sectarianism, racism and homophobia are not tenets of unionism and that anyone who thinks otherwise had no place in the Ulster Unionist Party.

But it is not just a case of simply “not” being something, we must also be strong advocates for our minority communities.

Earlier in the year I established a number of working groups within the Party to reach out to corners of society that we haven’t been as engaged with as we should be.

Such as our black and minority ethnic communities, the women’s sector and churches and religious organisations.

An important piece of that engagement has been forging and building relationships with the LGBTQ community.

Often the relationship between this community and elements of political unionism has not been an easy one.

But I want the Ulster Unionist Party to be a comfortable home for them, either as a member, elected representative or as a voter.

I was honoured to be asked to speak at the Pink News summer reception in Parliament Buildings a few months ago.

During my speech I reflected on research that reported that 66% of LGBTQ young people do not feel that school is the welcoming environment it should be.

That 61% said that they had experienced suicidal thoughts because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, with 25% making a suicide attempt.

Those aren’t just statistics. Those are children in this country, in our schools.

Instead of engaging in political sham fights, we should be asking what we can do to urgently reverse these figures and reflecting on whether our words add to their burden.

Unionism needs to be careful about its words.

If any of us were to summarise the contributing factors to the current political stalemate, how much of that would be down to the words of others?

It may feel good in the moment to say something that belittles another person, or a community.

But what does it do in the longer term?

Does it win converts for the union, or does it push people further away?

I am concerned that, just as there are those within nationalism who seek to exploit Brexit in pursuit of their ultimate political goal, there are those who proclaim to be unionists who are so focused on our exit from the European Union that they seem to have forgotten the risks this poses to our future as a part of the most important Union of all if it is badly handled.

What does it do for Northern Ireland unionism on the national stage to seem so hard headed all the time?

I am fed up with the politics of bullying and ransom, that’s not my unionism.

My unionism is not just the rejection of another constitutional arrangement.

I want people to look to unionism and not just see people who represent their constitutional aspiration, but people who are actually capable of providing good government for all.

Because I know that good government, serving a contented people will only strengthen our place in the United Kingdom.

Political unionism must urgently demonstrate it is committed to truly building a post-sectarian society.

It can no longer be enough to make a few nods towards it in Government before riling up your base in the run up to an election.

I said at the beginning of my speech that to look forward, it is important to first reflect on where we have come from.

There have been clear messages from leaders of unionism over the last 100 years that should have been heeded long before now.

Such as Lord Londonderry when he advocated for a single education system in the 1920's. A policy that anyone truly committed to ending sectarianism should throw their whole hearted support behind.

Or Terence O'Neill when he said that it is not just enough to be a part of the United Kingdom, we want be a progressive part of that Kingdom.

And I would recommend that Unionists of all shades reflect on the words of Edward Carson in 1920 when he talked of good government, fair government, honest government, and a government not for sections or factions, but for all.

To truly secure our place within the United Kingdom into Northern Ireland's second century and beyond, Unionism must embrace the principle of being not for sections or factions, but for all.

When the case is made for the union, I want it to be about more than just maintaining the status quo, or coasting by on a current majority.

I want it to be about where your jobs, welfare and healthcare are the most secure and accessible.

I want to it be about making the case that the lives of all citizens here are better as a part of that nation – one that advances their cultural, emotional and civic well-being.

I want to win hearts and minds. I want a unionism where even those who do not share our ultimate political aspiration do not doubt our ambition to serve them just as well in Government as those who do.

But that will take work. Both internally and externally.

But I'm up for the challenge.

The Ulster Unionist Party is up for that challenge.

I hope others are too.