

# The Union Group



## 21st Century Unionism: Rooted in the Past, Envisioned for the Future

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As Unionists we are committed to the healing and reconciliation of this society and to a better understanding within and between all parts of these islands. We want to see societies at peace with themselves and with their neighbours.

### The place of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom

Unionism means maintaining Northern Ireland as a full and equal part of the United Kingdom. In practice this preserves the long established bonds and common heritage of the two islands. It sustains the religious and cultural freedoms for all its citizens. The Union of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom is internationally recognised in the Belfast Agreement.

The challenge and opportunity for Unionism is to progress from where we are and to build a coherent political vision for Unionism, in the context of a modern Ireland and the already emerging new relationships between the Republic of Ireland and the devolved regions of the United Kingdom. Our vision is for a Unionism relevant to the 21st century but based on the best principles of the founding fathers, as expressed by James Craig:-

*"The rights of the minority must be sacred to the majority . . . it will only be by broad views, tolerant ideas and real desire for liberty of conscience that we here can make an ideal of the parliament and executive.*

We welcome the advent of the sharing of power, and reject majority rule by either tradition over the other. The greatest failure of the 1922-1972 Unionist government was the failure to move beyond the politics of the sectarian headcount. We reject the politics of exclusion, and assert the equal legitimacy of the nationalist and unionist traditions across every county in Ireland. Our two great historical traditions are the shared birthright of all on the island.

### Democracy and responsibility in an inclusive Government

Living in a democracy is a privilege to which we have become so accustomed we no longer perceive it as a privilege. This is reflected in the increasingly low turnout for elections. Without a high rate of participation in the electoral process however, the whole concept of democracy becomes distorted. Unionism upholds the democratic process and seeks to encourage the greatest possible participation in the electoral process.

Electoral reform brought refinements to the notion of simple majority rule, allowing each of us to have more than one preference heard and registered. This represents an attempt at greater fairness. Unionism must listen to all voices, including the ones that differ substantially from our own.

Unionism recognises the real benefits that derive from sharing responsibility in an inclusive government with other democrats for the good of Northern Ireland. We wish to encourage and foster mutual respect. This means sharing responsibility with others involved in the democratic process even though we may not always share their vision or aspirations.

### Rights and responsibilities

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Unionism stands for individual rights and responsibilities. Observing and protecting the rights of everyone in society must be the highest principle of democratic government. We support fair and just laws guaranteeing the rights and freedom of all under the law from the cradle to the grave. These rights are many and complex in a constantly evolving multinational and multicultural society.

With rights come responsibilities. As President John F. Kennedy said, “ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” We might begin for example by protecting the environment of Ireland’s green and pleasant land. This is an important part of the Unionist agenda.

## **Stability and the rule of law**

Modern societies can only thrive in stable environments, allowing for the development of infrastructures and public services. Peaceful, stable societies improve the quality of family and social life.

The legislative and law enforcement processes are necessary for the good of all. Respect for the rule of law is paramount to creating stability and opportunities for everyone. All parties/people representing any constituency should support and be seen to support the law and its enforcers in the lawful execution of their duties. We support an open and accountable policing service and criminal justice system that can maintain the confidence of the whole community.

## **Safety and prosperity**

Unionism seeks a safe and prosperous Northern Ireland in which future generations can live together in peace. One of the most powerful routes to sustaining that peace is by increasing affluence through employment. The old economy characterised by local ownership and manual labour, and a lean public sector, has gone - in its place is ownership by multinationals, with jobs requiring knowledge and technical skills. We want to expand the private sector with increasing local ownership, in order to be more competitive in the world economy.

Unionism must not shirk its responsibility to take hard decisions to build the future by encouraging quality education and training for all, reducing excessive bureaucracy and encouraging good industrial relations. These are measures that will make employing people in Northern Ireland an attractive proposition, so we can compete more successfully in the global marketplace.

Crucial for our future economic well-being is the maintenance of a mixed economy that gives devolved government the levers to manage aspects of the economy and encourage local entrepreneurs and local ownership.

The Union has created markets in ideas, money and people as well as demand for our goods and services, and is a springboard for exports. Unionism must put into practice policies that enable businesses to fully grasp the market opportunities that the modern world offers, and ensure that everybody can participate and benefit. All opportunities must be grasped within the United Kingdom, on this island, in Europe, the Commonwealth, the United States and beyond.

## **Equality Agenda**

We must tackle issues of gross inequality, educational under-achievement and homelessness. We will never have a truly shared society while many of our people live in poverty, or when so many of our children do not benefit from the educational opportunities available. In the new Northern Ireland, we must not leave any section of society behind.

Unionism’s task is to endeavour to remove every barrier that divides people - sectarianism, racism and social exclusion - and to build upon all that unites us, and seek to include everybody from all religions, races, and backgrounds.

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## Inclusiveness In A Pluralist Society

A society based on the core principles of Unionism is one in which inclusive Irishness and Britishness are equally respected. Unionism must promote equality, tolerance and respect for the diversity of all races, religions and ethnic groups within Northern Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and throughout these islands.

Unionism is not the preserve of a select few. Anyone, regardless of racial, religious or ethnic background, who supports the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is welcome within Unionism. We therefore stand where Carson once stood:- "A fairness and a justice towards all classes and towards all religions of the community."

Unionism must be a truly broad church and drive the debate on the "Shared Future". Unionism is incompatible with sectarianism, and racism, and must challenge them in all their forms and guises. We are therefore pledged to initiate and strongly support all measures and actions for the promotion of a shared future.

As Unionists we support the amalgamation/integration of education as one of the best tools in the healing of a divided society. We would urge parents and schools to be innovative in actively seeking to create greater opportunities for our children to engage together in meaningful ways. Only through mixing at an early age can children form friendships and develop the understanding that is vital for a stable society.

Unionism recognises the very real benefits that derive from co-operation with the people of the Republic of Ireland, and therefore seeks to have a positive and developing relationship with the Republic.

No man is an island and in an attempt to explain our sense of who we are and to better understand the increasing complexity of Northern Ireland, a variation of a quotation from the Ulster poet John Hewitt is of assistance. He defined his identity as follows:-

*I am a Belfast man,  
I am an Ulster man,  
I am British and I am Irish,  
And those last two are interchangeable,  
And I am European and anyone who demeans,  
Any one part of me demeans me as a person.*