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NI unionists need to strengthen their ties with fellow unionists in England, Scotland and Wales, argues AUSTEN MORGAN

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Northern Ireland's unionists need to strengthen their ties with fellow unionists in England, Scotland and Wales, argues AUSTEN MORGAN

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Northern Ireland – I have no doubt – will be a part of the United Kingdom in 2021. That has been the position in international law since January 1, 1801.

And I cannot see the Republic, a stable state since the 1920s, taking over these six Ulster counties by 2016 (the latest target), through the use of force, blarney or economic temptation.

Writing as a constitutional lawyer, I accept that the Belfast Agreement of April 10, 1998, set the framework

for contemporary British-Irish relations.

That is different from the so-called Good Friday myth, which nationalists and radicals use promiscuously to justify their prior positions.

But 1998 should also be seen as the year when the Westminster parliament devolved powers from London to, not just Belfast, but also Edinburgh and Cardiff – new Labour's variable-geometry devolution, which David Cameron's coalition is treating with due respect.

Eamon de Valera achieved the Irish Free State in 30 months.

Gerry Adams failed to destroy Northern Ireland in 30 years.

That is a measure of recent republican violence (even if Tony Blair, and the Northern Ireland Office, sought to gratify the republican generals).

Edward Carson saved 'Ulster' from home rule in 1912-14.

The loyalist terrorists of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s made it more difficult for the UK to maintain the rule of law.

It is to the credit of Protestant voters that they have not generally promoted gunmen and women to be their political representatives.

Devolution in the UK, I submit, will be more important than London/Dublin relations, over the next ten years.

I do not think we are looking at the break up of the UK state, even with Alex Salmond's intelligent Scottish nationalism.

Wales is still not taking to cultural nationalism.

And, as for surviving Irish nationalism, in the north west (plus west Belfast), Martin McGuinness seems delighted just with being deputy first minister.

One finds it difficult to respect the new Stormont, even though it is elected.

The logic of: one for me (Peter); and one for you, Martin; reinforces Protestant – and Catholic – sectarianism. This is alien to the liberal democracy of the rest of the UK, and much of the European Union.

I hope there will be progress towards voluntary coalitionism in Northern Ireland.

It has worked in Scotland and Wales. And Cameron/Clegg is a class act.

But every devolved administration has fallen in the subsequent election.

So, why should the involuntary coalition of the extremes at Stormont not give way to a more genuine coalition of the centrist parties?

London's financial policies will, most likely, produce social democratic reactions in the devolved regions.

Some of this may be justified objectively, but Peter Robinson's no surrender on the block grant, and even demands for more, is a strange unionist position reeking of Ulster nationalism.

The other distinct feature of Northern Ireland, which is likely to decline over the next decade, is the equality industry and the human rights community, both of which have appropriated international concerns for provincial (Catholic) communal ends.

Finally, should the unionist parties merge? The question is not that simple.

Pan-unionism could be less pluralist, and lack attractiveness for Catholics uninterested in nationalism and repelled by violence.

One, two or three parties (plus the loyalists) is not the issue.

In a system of proportional representation, it should be possible to have it both ways: unionist solidarity against tribal nationalism; and minimal indulgence of politicians' egos and party differences.

It is really a question of whether Ulster unionism can work with the regions and the centre of the UK.

Austen Morgan is a barrister in London and Belfast. He is the author of *The Belfast Agreement: a practical legal analysis* (London 2000).
