

Ulster Unionists vote narrowly for power-sharing deal

New Northern Ireland Executive to convene this week

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30 November 1999

The Ulster Unionist Council voted in favour of entering a power-sharing Executive with Sinn Féin on Saturday. The slender majority should enable a devolved government with limited powers to be established in Northern Ireland by the end of the week.

David Trimble, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader and Northern Ireland's First Minister, had called the meeting to win support for his proposal that the party enter the executive before the Irish Republican Army (IRA) began decommissioning its weapons.

Media speculation anticipated that a 50-50 vote by the 829 members of the UUP's ruling body would split the party. In the event Trimble won, with 480 delegates (58 percent) in favour and 349 (42 percent) opposed.

The result was significantly down on the 72 percent support that the Ulster Unionist Council had given the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. It also fell short of Trimble's first stipulated minimum of 60 percent backing, which he later revised to 55 percent.

Nonetheless, it was enough to enable the Northern Ireland Assembly to meet on Monday for the various parties to appoint representatives to the new Executive and agree their portfolios. On Tuesday, the British parliament will be asked to approve the devolution of certain powers to the Assembly, and on Wednesday the Irish parliament will be asked to approve the rescinding of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, which lay claim to the North. Almost in parallel with the devolution of powers to the Assembly on Thursday, the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries are expected to appoint representatives to the Decommissioning Body chaired by General De Chastelain, and begin the decommissioning of weapons.

Trimble's victory was the result of intensive lobbying

by the British government to try and sweeten the Unionists. Last week, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Mandelson had signalled that changes to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), set out in the Patten Report, would be subject to Unionist veto. On Tuesday, the RUC was awarded the George Cross by the Queen in recognition of its "heroism".

Mandelson also sent two confidential letters to John Taylor, Trimble's deputy, who had previously spoken out against accepting Sinn Féin into the Executive before the IRA began decommissioning. These were rumoured to contain assurances that should the IRA fail to decommission the British and Irish government would suspend the Assembly's institutions, but this would not jeopardise the Unionists share in power.

Finally, to ensure a majority in favour, at the last minute Trimble pledged to reconvene the council in February, and guaranteed that if IRA decommissioning had not taken effect by then, he and the UUP's other three members of the Assembly Executive would resign. The concessions ensured that whilst Taylor did not speak in the meeting, Trimble was able to state in his closing remarks that he had his deputy's support.

Following the vote, William Thompson, Member of Parliament for West Tyrone, stated his intention to resign from the UUP on Thursday and sit in Westminster as an Independent Unionist. Thompson complained that the vote had gone through only after intense pressure from the business community and political establishment.

Jeffrey Donaldson, the UUP's leading opponent of the Agreement, acknowledged that "significant concessions" had been made, stating, "now we'll see if the IRA meet their obligations." His remarks indicate

that the anti-Agreement forces will postpone their threat to split the party for the time being.

Others are hoping to capitalise on the fall-out from the vote amongst disaffected Ulster Unionists. Ian Paisley, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader, said that Trimble “was as much the enemy of Ulster as the IRA,” whilst Peter Robinson, also DUP, said that his party's opposition to the Agreement, combined with the “no” vote in the UUC, showed that 80 percent of Unionists opposed Trimble. The DUP has said that it will nominate its members for the Executive, but will not sit in meetings with Sinn Fein.

The Unionist Council's February deadline intensifies the pressure on Sinn Fein and the IRA to begin the immediate decommissioning of weapons. Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams complained that the deadline was outside the terms of the Agreement, which allowed for decommissioning by May 2000. Mandelson rejected this in an interview with BBC's *Breakfast with Frost* programme on Sunday. As soon as devolution began on Thursday, he said, “I want discussions about decommissioning to begin”.

An indication of the “business pressures” driving the creation of the Assembly referred to by Thompson was given by the London *Times* on Monday. Big business and the British, American and Irish governments are demanding huge cuts in public spending and the rationalisation of industry and services as the price for attracting international investment to the North. The Assembly and its new ministers are charged with implementing these demands.

Under the headline “A novel experience of power”, the *Times* singled out the health and education portfolios as “poisoned chalices” because of “a range of unpopular decisions that must be taken.” It specified that the new government's tasks will include:

- * Closing 11 hospitals;
- * “Losing” 500 school places by closing rural schools;
- * Cutting jobs in the public sector, which employed one-third of workers in Northern Ireland in 1997.



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