

# British government to implement reform of Royal Ulster Constabulary

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There were forecasts of trouble for the recently formed Northern Ireland Assembly when Secretary of State Peter Mandelson announced his support for the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Speaking in Westminster, Mandelson said he would implement the vast majority of the 175 proposals made by former Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten in his report on reforms of the province's paramilitary police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), published September last year.

Mandelson said he would be implementing a change in the name of the force from the RUC to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the proposal that has raised the most controversy, particularly in the Unionist camp. The change had been deemed necessary by Patten, who was asked to draw up his report as part of the plans to set up the Northern Ireland Assembly, to ensure "cross community" support for the police force whose present composition is 90 percent Protestant, 10 percent Catholic.

The Northern Ireland Agreement signed on Good Friday 1998 pledged the creation of policing in "constructive and inclusive partnerships with the community at all levels". The term "Royal," and the crown contained in the RUC badge, were seen as representing the force's loyalty to the British Crown, and therefore Unionism. If it were ever to be accepted by a majority of Catholics, Patten argued, the new force would have to have a more neutral name and image.

The Patten report was seized upon by anti-agreement Unionists, who said the conclusions represented the latest in a whole list of concessions to Republicanism. Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader and Northern Ireland First Minister David Trimble declared his own opposition to the report. Such was the tense mood within the Unionist camp that Mandelson had intimated

last year that he would throw out some of the more controversial proposals, in order to get the Assembly off the ground. His announcement on Wednesday was greeted by a predictable outcry from Unionist and Conservative politicians, who brayed and heckled during Mandelson's speech.

There were indications, however, that on the part of the Trimble wing of the UUP, at least, the verbal opposition was more for effect than of political substance. When UUP Security spokesman Ken Maginnis accused Mandelson of betrayal, he replied, "I'm surprised he chooses to say these things," adding that behind closed doors Maginnis had offered support to Mandelson's proposals for RUC reform. He said Maginnis speaks "differently in public from what he says in private". This effectively shut Maginnis up for the rest of the debate.

Some commentators question the timing of Mandelson's announcement, saying it makes things unnecessarily difficult for Trimble. His party's ruling council is set to meet February 12 to reconsider their decision of November last year to participate in the Assembly. Trimble only secured a narrow majority of the Ulster Unionist Council in favour of entering the Assembly after tendering a post-dated resignation letter for himself and other UUP Assembly members. Trimble had promised the resignations would come into effect if there had been no decommissioning of arms on the part of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) by that date.

It is argued by some that Mandelson would have done better to wait until after the February UUP meeting to drop the bombshell that the RUC was to lose its name. What is more likely is that Mandelson's decision to allow the reforms to go forward is part of a behind-the-scenes move to coerce the IRA into handing over

weapons ahead of the UUP deadline.

Though politically contentious, the change of name and removal of the crown only made up a small part of the Patten report. In the main, the proposals amount to a strengthening of the police, and in particular its ability to deal with "public disorder".

Significantly, Mandelson has made a number of concessions to Unionism, watering down those aspects of the Patten report dealing with increased police accountability. Patten had suggested the formation of local "partnership boards" involving representatives of the political parties, including Sinn Fein, to oversee the operation of the police on a local level. While these are to be established, their powers will be severely weakened. The term board will not appear in the name of the new organisations, as they will have only a consultative role in monitoring local police performance. Plans to let district police partnerships buy "additional services" have also been scrapped. It was feared that this could lead to the setting up of private "security firms" by former paramilitaries, which might then sub-contract duties formerly carried out by the RUC.

Patten had proposed four partnership bodies for Belfast, but Mandelson has said he would prefer one for the whole city. He believes that in this way the influence of Sinn Fein can be reduced.

The proposals for a central register of officers' interests to be held by the police service or the ombudsman will not be implemented. Instead, membership of organisations such as the Orange Order or the Freemasons will be placed on the records of individual officers.

Though a new oath is to be implemented emphasising human rights, this will only be applicable to new recruits. The much hated bottle green uniform of the RUC is to stay and there will be no reduction in the number of police officers on the streets for some years to come.

Mandelson has delayed the date of the name change until the autumn of 2001. He has also kept silent on what flag should fly from police stations (which currently display the Union Jack) and has left it up to the police boards to redesign the forces badge and logo, though he did suggest incorporating the George Cross, a medal given to the force last September and widely seen as a sop to encourage the smooth implementation

of the Patten proposals.

The announcement by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has rekindled speculation as to the fate of Unionism in general, and the UUP in particular. Much rests on the response of the IRA to the discussions under way on decommissioning. If arms are handed over by February 12, then Trimble will be saved from a humiliating resignation. If not then his future as UUP leader and that of the Assembly itself remain in doubt.

Even if the political bodies were to break down, however, there can be no return to the past for Northern Ireland. In an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* Mandelson said of the RUC proposals, "These are changes that Unionists can live with. They will have a police service that is better because it is accepted and effective because it is representative. When their understandable anger has passed, I hope that Unionists do what they have always done and support the police."

However loud the protests of Unionism, the political landscape in Northern Ireland is changing. With demographic surveys showing that Catholics will outnumber Protestants in the North within five years, Unionism is justifiably nervous as to its own future.

Mandelson's reassurances to the Unionists should be taken as a warning by working people. The main purpose of the new Police Service of Northern Ireland, no less than its predecessor, will be to control the mounting social antagonisms that are a product of the profit system.

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