

Ulster Unionist leader Trimble narrowly defeats leadership challenge

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The annual meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council on March 25 delivered a serious blow to Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble.

Trimble, the first minister of the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, was challenged for the party leadership by Martin Smyth, UUP chief whip at Westminster and a former grand master of the Orange Order—the hard-line Protestant cultural organisation that plays a major political role within Unionism.

The Trimble camp had tried to dismiss his opponent as a "dinosaur", believing Smyth would get no more than 30 percent of the vote, leaving Trimble with a comfortable mandate. In the event, Smyth won 348 votes, or 43.2 percent, against Trimble's 457 votes, or 56.7 percent. Up to 120 Orange Order delegates are thought to have voted for Smyth.

Trimble's weak showing has serious repercussions for the future prospects of the Northern Ireland Assembly, established under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, which was supposed to bring an end to sectarian fighting in Northern Ireland and initiate power-sharing between the officially recognised Protestant (British loyalist) and Catholic (Irish nationalist) leaderships. The UUP leadership vote followed the collapsing of the Northern Ireland Assembly in February by the British Labour government, after the Irish Republican Army (IRA) failed to name a date for the decommissioning of weapons.

The closing down of the Assembly was designed to save Trimble from a challenge by anti-Agreement forces within his own party and the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley. Trimble had offered his party a post-dated resignation letter, to take effect in the event that the IRA failed to decommission.

In the end, however, Britain's attempt to rescue Trimble only served to strengthen the hand of his opponents. When the votes of the anti-Trimble UUP are added to the vote of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and other anti-Agreement groups, it represents a clear majority within Unionism.

Trimble was again defeated while attempting to amend a motion forbidding him from re-entering a devolved government alongside Sinn Féin unless the names and symbols of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) were preserved. This is a direct challenge to the recommendations on RUC reform made by the British government's Patten Commission. Making reconvening

the Assembly dependent on both IRA decommissioning and preserving the RUC renders further discussions with Sinn Féin (the political wing of the IRA) virtually impossible.

East Londonderry UUP Assembly member Pauline Armitage, previously loyal to Trimble, said following the UUC vote that she was quitting the party because the Agreement "has had its day". This leaves Trimble with the support of only 26 of the 28 UUP members in the Assembly and a minority of the party's Westminster MPs.

DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson crowed, "The Good Friday Agreement is no longer an agreement that has any credibility. It doesn't have the support within the community to take it forward." He said 75 percent of Unionists were now opposed to it and the UUP was no longer a party because of its "irreconcilable differences".

The leader of the nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party and deputy first minister of the Assembly, Seamus Mallon, spoke of a split in the Unionists which, he believed, could not be healed under Trimble's leadership. "We almost now have two Unionist parties under the one name. One will destroy the other," he told reporters.

The British government had no answer to the crisis facing its attempt to develop a new constitutional settlement in Northern Ireland, other than to issue dire warnings and ultimatums. Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson said, "We are faced with a choice. We either implement [the Good Friday Agreement] broadly as it is, or we just face many years of continued stalemate, of impasse." Prime Minister Tony Blair's spokesman Alastair Campbell said the Good Friday Agreement was "as good as it gets".

The Blair government and the Clinton administration have relied on Trimble's ability to hold on to his slim majority within the UUP and keep the "peace process" on track. They exerted constant pressure on Sinn Féin to deliver on decommissioning. But Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams was unable to convince the IRA to accept the February deadline. In the ensuing deadlock, the hard-line anti-Agreement faction within Unionism went on the offensive.

Trimble is now something of a lame duck. Only 60 signatures are required to mount a fresh leadership challenge. The next time around he could well face a more formidable opponent,

such as the outspoken critic of the Good Friday Agreement, Jeffrey Donaldson.

It is a striking feature of the two years since the signing of the Agreement that the more assurances have been given to the UUP, the firmer the opposition from hard-line Unionist has become. The Agreement asked the Unionists to sit down in a devolved Assembly with their republican-nationalist enemies in return for a promise to maintain a Unionist veto on any future unification with the South. For its part, the republic of Ireland (in the south of the island) agreed to drop its constitutional claim to the northern six counties. The Agreement further stipulated that the designated Unionist parties would enjoy a joint veto with the republican parties on all social and economic legislation passed by the Assembly.

As well as these political safeguards, what won Trimble to the Agreement was a carrot-and-stick combination of economic factors. The rapid economic decline of Northern Ireland, together with the cost of policing civil unrest in its oldest province, has forced Britain to heavily subsidise the northern six counties. The stick waved at the Unionists in talks leading up to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement was Britain's warning that it was no longer prepared to continue subsidising the North.

The carrot proffered to the Unionists was the chance of emulating the economic successes of its southern neighbour. In contrast to Northern Ireland, the southern republic had been able to establish itself as a favoured location for international investment, particularly from the US, by corporations seeking access to the European market and a relatively cheap, well-educated and English-speaking workforce. The US promised to increase its investment in Belfast to levels similar to the South, once conflict on the streets was ended.

For Trimble, and the sections of the northern bourgeoisie he represents, this was an acceptable trade-off, providing there was no serious and immediate challenge to their political domination of the North. He understood that in order to survive he had to accept certain compromises forced on him by changing circumstances.

Others within the Unionist camp could not afford to be so sanguine. Both the DUP and a significant section of the UUP believe they have little to gain and everything to lose by accepting the demands of London and Washington for power-sharing with Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic Labour Party. A few well-paid positions in the Assembly cannot compensate for an end to Britain's subvention, opening the North to the dictates of global competition and the reform of the Protestant-dominated RUC. With Catholics rapidly becoming a majority in the North, this would, they believe, lead to the destruction of Unionism and the privileged existence of its leading representatives, followed by eventual unification with the South.

Theirs is a rearguard action to place maximum pressure on Britain. But despite the attempts of the British government to

prolong the life of the Ulster Unionists, their days are numbered. Historically, Unionism has advanced itself as the defender of the interests of all Protestant people. The northern bourgeoisie was able to secure a broad constituency in the Protestant middle class and working class for most of the last century by offering preferential treatment compared to Catholics in jobs and housing. Moreover, Unionism was also able to exploit fears of discrimination against Protestants if Ireland were unified under the South's explicitly Catholic constitution.

The Unionists' ability to secure the loyalty of Protestant workers has been seriously weakened by the perilous state of the North's economy and Britain's inability to continue propping it up. Essentially parasitic, the northern bourgeoisie and its political representatives cannot articulate a programme that can win popular support by promising higher living standards, let alone advocate an alternative plan to that laid down in the Agreement. All they have left in their political arsenal is an attempt to derail the present "peace process" in the vain hope that the status quo ante will be restored.

The anti-Agreement faction of the Unionists has been able to dominate political developments not because there is popular support for their perspective. Their strength is a product of the character of the Agreement itself.

The Agreement was shaped in order to meet the needs of big business rather than the masses of working people. Far from challenging the grip of the sectarian parties over political life in Northern Ireland, it has made sectarian divisions the basis of the proposed constitutional provisions.

The essential aim of the Agreement, and its American and British sponsors, is to establish a new *modus-vivendi* between the very forces that have spearheaded communal strife—one that largely excludes the mass of the people from the political process and perpetuates divisions within the working class so as to prevent a political challenge to corporate power. None of its provisions offer guarantees of decent jobs, housing, education or health provision. Rather, it encourages competition between two supposed "communities" for ever-dwindling resources, while promising the major corporations a chance to exploit a significant reservoir of cheap labour.



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