

Ulster Unionist Party resumes power-sharing with Sinn Fein

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The power sharing Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly met Tuesday for the first time since Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson suspended the body on February 11. The meeting was made possible by the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) narrowly backing its leader David Trimble on Saturday and agreeing to retake their seats in the Assembly. The main pro-British Protestant party voted by 459-403 at Belfast's Waterfront Hall to resume power-sharing alongside the IRA-linked Sinn Fein.

Mandelson immediately signed an order restoring limited devolved governing authority to the Assembly, with Britain retaining control of security. The Assembly will hold its first full meeting on Monday, June 5.

The Assembly was suspended by Britain after 72 days of its existence, when Trimble said he would resign as First Minister over the IRA's failure to begin arms decommissioning. Three weeks ago the IRA promised to begin putting its weapons "beyond use" if power-sharing were resumed. The organisation agreed to former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari and Cyril Rhamaphosa, ex-secretary general of the African National Congress, acting as international arms inspectors.

This promise by the IRA was enough for Trimble to win the backing of 53 percent of the Ulster Unionist Council, the party's ruling body, but his share of the vote was 3 percent down from the support he won following a recent leadership challenge by hard-line anti-power-sharing Unionists. UUP Deputy Leader John Taylor's backing was instrumental in swinging the yes vote. He said he had been prepared to vote no until he received Britain's assurances that the name of Northern Ireland's largely Protestant police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), would be

maintained and the Union Jack would continue to be flown over government buildings.

UUP hardliners who maintained their opposition to power-sharing backed Jeffrey Donaldson's proposal demanding IRA decommissioning take place before the Executive was reinstated. Donaldson and others said they would continue to press from within the UUP for the IRA and Sinn Fein to honour their obligations, meaning that they would continue to oppose Trimble's leadership. Ulster Unionist MP William Ross warned, "There are very few occasions in the past where a party leader has carried on with 47 percent of his party against him. I fear the Unionist party is heading for electoral disaster. We are dancing to the terrorist tune."

Ian Paisley, the leader of the rival Democratic Unionist Party, accused the UUP of "surrender Unionism" and said his party would soon represent the majority of Loyalist voters. Believing that the decision to retake seats in the Assembly prior to decommissioning would lead to splits in the UUP, he offered his party as the natural home for hard-line unionism—just as he has for the past three decades. "Resistance and opposition to the republican [Irish nationalist] programme must ... be assembled completely outside the ranks of the now wholly discredited UUP," he said.

The DUP is not in a strong position, however, despite superficial appearances to the contrary. It has few friends, outside of the extreme right wing of Britain's Conservative Party and only tenuous support amongst the North's Protestant workers, largely due to its success in whipping up fear of a possible future return to terrorism by the IRA. Trimble has the backing of the Protestant bourgeoisie in the North, as well as the British, Irish and US governments—who are anxious to end sectarian conflicts within Northern Ireland and

make it an attractive location for corporate investors. Moreover, Sinn Fein has made it abundantly clear it is prepared to do whatever it takes to secure a place in government. The DUP risks being completely undermined if IRA decommissioning goes ahead as promised and the Assembly enjoys an extended lifespan.

Trimble felt confident enough to taunt Paisley on Saturday, telling the press, "It's now time we heard from the DUP" over whether they would take up their seats in the reconvened Executive. The DUP has two Ministerial posts on the Assembly Executive, held by Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds, who presently refuse to sit in Cabinet with Sinn Fein. A complete withdrawal from the Executive would trigger the d'Hondt selection system, designed to balance Unionist and Republican/Irish nationalist seats in the Executive according to voting patterns. Withdrawal would mean the DUP's two ministerial seats would go to the UUP and the Alliance Party, as the other main Protestant parties.

When the 108-member Assembly meets next Monday, the DUP will propose a debate on a motion to bar Sinn Fein from taking their Executive seat. This would require a petition signed by at least 30 members. The DUP have promises of 29, tentatively including four dissident Ulster Unionist Assembly members, Roy Beggs, Pauline Armitage, Peter Weir and Derek Hussey. The move to bar Sinn Fein cannot succeed because it would need the support of the Irish nationalist parties, but it would confirm Trimble's relative isolation within the UUP.

In any event, the political agenda of the reconvened Assembly will be dominated by continued conflicts within the Unionists camp, and between the Unionists and Sinn Fein. The tenor of debate was indicated by Trimble's declaration that Sinn Fein would require "house training in democracy", with Martin McGuinness, Sinn Fein's chief negotiator and Education Minister, describing his remarks as "racist and highly sectarian". Sinn Fein has vowed to embark on a campaign to overturn any concessions to Ulster Unionists over policing. McGuinness said the proposed legislation to reform the RUC, due to be given its second reading at Westminster next week, was "totally and absolutely unacceptable" and a pale shadow of the proposals advanced by the Patten Commission.



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