

Northern Ireland's First Minister Trimble adapts to hardline anti-Agreement Unionists

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Northern Ireland's First Minister David Trimble survived another challenge to his leadership at a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Party's ruling council on October 28, but only by conceding ground to opponents of the Good Friday Agreement.

The ruling council met to consider a motion submitted by anti-Agreement MP Jeffrey Donaldson for the UUP to end power sharing with Sinn Féin if the IRA had not started to decommission by November 30. The move would have effectively scuppered the Good Friday Agreement and led to the collapse of the power sharing bodies—bringing together Protestant British-loyalist and Catholic Irish nationalist-republican parties—it introduced.

The motion was the fifth challenge to Trimble's leadership in 12 months. In May he narrowly won a vote to resume power-sharing alongside Sinn Féin in the face of Unionist opposition, but last month the UUP lost a seat in the British Parliament to the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party led by Rev. Ian Paisley. This prompted opponents of the Agreement within the UUP to raise the stakes in advance of the council meeting, publicly venting disagreements within the party by circulating a letter to the body's 860 members. Signed by former UUP leader Lord Molyneux and Donaldson amongst others, the letter set out an eight-point plan for "hardening" the UUP's stance against the republicans, including a cut-off point for IRA disarmament.

In an angry response, Trimble accused his opponents of launching "a full scale assault on the party". In a letter to council delegates, the UUP leader pledged that he would outline a "carefully considered response should republicanism continue to ignore its commitments on the issue of disarmament", but warned that support for Donaldson's motion would mean Ulster Unionism losing "credibility overnight".

In the run up to the council vote, the British and Irish governments, the media, Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic Labour Party—the largest of the nationalist parties—pulled out the stops to help ensure Trimble's survival. Editorials called on Unionists to back Trimble's

leadership, pointing to a survey in the *Belfast Telegraph* newspaper suggesting that 60 percent of UUP voters backed him.

Responding to pressure from the Irish government, the IRA confirmed that the decommissioning body had reinspected a number of weapons dumps it had first made available to the body in June. Arms inspectors confirmed that the dumps remained secure, but were unable to report any further progress with IRA decommissioning in the last five months. Irish Premier Bertie Ahern welcomed the IRA announcement, but called on republicans to go further.

Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson also took the carrot and stick approach. Manipulating Unionist fears of a Dublin "takeover", he warned that the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly would ensure an even greater role for the Irish Republic in Northern Ireland. At the same time, the British government announced that Sinn Féin ministers would be forced to fly the British union-jack flag over their departments on Remembrance Sunday this month and on the birthday of the Prince of Wales two days later.

Just one day before the UUP vote, Prime Minister Blair made his first visit to Belfast for five months to plead for Unionist backing for the Assembly. The Northern Ireland Agreement is "an imperfect process," Blair admitted, but still it must be given "time to work". To help Unionists make up their minds, Blair threw a lifeline to the ailing Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast. A stronghold of Ulster Unionism, Blair said the yard would be given the contract to build two ferries for the British military, ensuring its 600 workers at least a few more years of employment.

Whilst complaining at such open pro-Unionist bias on the part of the British government, Sinn Féin fell into line with the campaign to save Trimble's leadership. The British, Irish and American governments have made plain that the Agreement must be implemented if the island is to attract further international investment. Accordingly, Sinn Féin's Education Minister Martin McGuinness called on the "wiser counsels" within Unionism to prevail and prevent a return to the "bad old days of the past"—warning in apocalyptic terms

of a Middle East scenario engulfing the north if Donaldson's forces won the UUP council vote.

In the end Trimble survived by stipulating that he would implement immediate sanctions against Sinn Fein's Assembly members unless the IRA began decommissioning. The UUP leader's alternative six point plan won 445 votes (54.3 percent) against Donaldson's 374 (45.7 percent). This is a one percent increase in support for Trimble within the ruling council, but Donaldson pointed out that only the UUP leader having moved "very firmly on to our ground" had achieved it.

Under Trimble's plan, Sinn Fein ministers will not be nominated to attend North-South ministerial meetings. This sanction will only be lifted once the IRA begins "substantial" engagement with the Decommissioning Commission. If any government or party attempted to block this action, UUP ministers would withdraw from selected North-South Ministerial Council and British Irish Council meetings. Trimble also proposed a formal review of the Agreement by the respective governments and a moratorium on policing reforms pending an "assured peace". The UUP is to review progress on the measures it has outlined in early January. Trimble also stated that the Assembly only faced its current difficulties due to the "default of republicans" and that Blair supported his stance on a more proactive engagement between the IRA and the arms inspectors.

Anti-Agreement Unionists welcomed the plan, but warned that the UUP could face an "exodus" of members in January if the leadership did not deliver.

Both Sinn Fein and the SDLP condemned the motion, stating that in essentials it did not differ from that tabled by Donaldson. Whilst ruling out any cooperation with Trimble's sanctions in public, the SDLP indicated covertly that they would try to resolve the impasse by urging Sinn Fein/IRA to make further accommodations on decommissioning.

The North-South Ministerial Council and six cross-border bodies go to the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. It is through these political structures (whose participants must have cross-party backing) that the respective governments and parties hope to establish the framework for attracting transnational corporations and international investment to the entire island of Ireland. Sinn Fein has presented the cross-border bodies as an embryonic united Ireland. More importantly, it regards them as a prime means for strengthening its economic and political clout within the new structures. The party reacted angrily to the threat of sanctions, with Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams accusing Trimble of making "stupid and unattainable demands". McGuinness called on the British and Irish governments to defend the "integrity of the Good Friday Agreement", and reject Trimble's "provocative" actions.

Despite Trimble's stance, the majority of the UUP also have a keen economic interest in maintaining the cross-border bodies. Speaking at a conference on devolution and regional government in Valencia, Spain this week, Trimble praised the Agreement for giving Northern Ireland "a huge boost in self-confidence and in its ability to sell itself in the global marketplace". He has also made clear that the sanctions will only affect Sinn Fein ministers and will not prevent meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council.

Northern Ireland has been economically eclipsed by the Irish Republic and faces declining British subsidies and a lack of industrial competitiveness. The Unionists hope that the new structures will enable a revival of the north's economy and establish a vehicle through which they can consolidate their own privileges whilst counteracting any unwarranted extension of the Republic's influence.

Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson said he was pleased at the result of the vote and said a victory for Donaldson would have "directly threatened the agreement and probably would have meant its eventual collapse". He also urged nationalists not to "over react". The Agreement "could not be cherry picked" and the IRA should show its commitment by engaging properly with the arms decommissioning body, he warned.

Yesterday (November 1), however, Trimble again upped the ante by stating that the North-South Ministerial Council meeting on food safety planned for November 3 and involving Sinn Fein's Health Minister Bairbre de Brun, would not take place because he refused to authorize her attendance. The Sinn Fein Minister was due to meet her southern counterpart Michael Martin.

Sinn Fein repeated its denunciation of Trimble's tactics and said de Brun would attend anyway. But SDLP deputy leader Seamus Mallon warned that Trimble's actions threatened to make the Northern Ireland executive unworkable. Pointing out that of the four parties in the executive, "One is excluding itself (the DUP) and one is now being excluded by one of the other parties", he asked, "I simply ask people how long can it last?"



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