

Ireland: Ulster Unionist Party could split

Steve James
28 June 2003

David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and First Minister of the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, narrowly won a majority in his own party to avoid a rejection of the April 2003 Joint Declaration of the British and Irish governments. At a special June 16 meeting of the party's leading body, the 860-strong Ulster Unionist Council (UUC), Trimble defeated his long-standing opponent Jeffrey Donaldson by 54 to 46 percent.

The Joint Declaration is the latest effort by the British and Irish governments to patch up the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that established a power-sharing Assembly involving the Protestant unionist parties and the Catholic nationalist parties. The Assembly was suspended last October by the British government in an effort to prevent the UUP being ousted as the largest unionist party by the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of the Reverend Ian Paisley.

By suspending the Assembly, both the UUP and Britain's Labour government hoped to gain time to pressure Sinn Féin into disbanding the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This in turn would allow the UUP to fend off criticism from the DUP, which accuses the UUP of conceding power to Sinn Féin and undermining the union with Britain.

The UUC vote was proclaimed a victory for Trimble. It did not last long, however, before giving way to a new round of vicious infighting within the UUP.

After a few days of pondering, Donaldson and two fellow UUP MPs in Westminster, David Burnside and the Reverend Martin Smyth, resigned the party whip—reducing the UUP to just three MPs.

The three rebels, backed by former UUP leader Lord Molyneux, refused to resign from the party, indicating that they intend to keep up their internal struggle against Trimble. Trimble replied by insisting they must leave the party. The UUP is now split down the middle, with both factions squaring up for a confrontation.

Recent events in the North give an indication of what the dispute is about.

Before the June 16 UUC meeting, a row erupted over the future of the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR)—the most recent in a succession of Protestant-dominated part-time army units that have prevailed in Northern Ireland since 1921.

In the aftermath of Ireland's partition, the UUC had established a part-time paramilitary police, the Ulster Special

Constabulary, to support the full-time paramilitary Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). One section of the part-timers became known as the "B Specials" and, as with the RUC, quickly won the hatred of the Catholic population.

The civil rights movement of the late 1960s demanded the unit be stood down, a demand which was conceded in 1970 under conditions of incipient civil war.

But the 8,500 "B Specials" were replaced by the 4,000-strong part-time and locally recruited Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and a new reserve force for the RUC. This was in addition to the thousands of British troops sent to the province in 1969 by the British Labour government to prop up UUP rule.

The UDR was also Protestant-dominated and was rapidly discredited following its members' involvement in killing nationalists and Catholics. It functioned as an adjunct to the British Army and a kind of halfway between the Army and loyalist paramilitary gangs such as the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force.

The UDR was wound up in 1992 during the developing rapprochement between republican Sinn Féin and the British government, and replaced by the RIR. The RIR included a regular battalion of the British Army and three Ulster-based part-time battalions.

This May, documents from the British Army's General Officer Command in Northern Ireland were leaked to the press suggesting that the three Ireland-based part-time battalions should be disbanded. The 3,000 troops should be offered the chance to join the regiment's remaining 1st Battalion, currently occupying southern Iraq.

The proposal was seen as another incentive to Sinn Féin to disband the IRA as part of restarting the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly and was made simultaneous with the British and Irish Joint Declaration.

News of the threat to the RIR sent unionism into paroxysms and was reportedly the last straw that triggered Donaldson's decision to call a UUC meeting over the Joint Declaration.

The Joint Declaration claims that "transition from violence to exclusively peaceful and democratic means is being brought to an unambiguous and definitive conclusion." Completing this process requires that "paramilitarism and sectarian violence...must be brought to an end, from whichever part of the community they come."

IRA arms must clearly be put beyond use. Parallel with this,

and as an incentive to Sinn Fein, the British government outlines a timetable to reduce troop levels, demilitarise police stations, close a number of military bases and watchtowers, and reduce helicopter flights over border areas.

In return, Sinn Fein should “remove all discouragements to members of the community from supporting and applying to join the police, and making it a priority to encourage them to apply. Part of this process would involve Sinn Fein deciding to join the Policing Board and the District Policing Partnerships.”

The declaration seeks to deepen cross-border and intergovernmental cooperation on security and economic matters, noting that the Good Friday Agreement envisages a joint forum between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Parliament. An annex to the declaration sets out terms for the further devolution of security and government. Particularly problematic would be a Justice Department, perhaps jointly run by one nationalist and one unionist minister. Or a Police Department could be run by nationalists, while Justice would be run by unionists, or vice versa. Or the police could be run by a unionist first minister, and the judiciary by his nationalist deputy.

The declaration deepens the basic orientation of the Good Friday Agreement, which makes all aspects of political and social life an arena for fostering sectarian divisions between Catholics and Protestants while hopefully ending armed conflict between them. Sinn Fein’s intended role is to assume responsibility for policing and government in nationalist and Catholic areas on behalf of big business, while the unionist parties and former loyalist paramilitaries are to play the same role in loyalist areas. The whole process is to be overseen by the British, Irish and US governments, all of whom engaged in considerable diplomatic traffic before the declaration’s publication, seeking to chivvy both the UUP and Sinn Fein into compliance.

Within the UUP, a pragmatic layer around Trimble believes that Ulster-based business has no alternative to the Good Friday Agreement if the North is to attract international investment. Having lost much of its former industrial base, faced with a growing Catholic population and worldwide loathing of the “dirty war” it prosecuted along with the British government, this section of Ulster unionism understands that it must develop a working relationship with the Irish government and Sinn Fein to overcome the province’s endemic economic weakness and political isolation.

Trimble’s perspective, along with his allies in Westminster, is to package this in terms acceptable to the Ulster Unionist constituency. Before the UUP meeting, Trimble sought to convince the UUP that the party could “cherry-pick” aspects of the Joint Declaration.

Trimble also won reassurances from British Defence Minister Geoff Hoon and army commanders such as General Sir Mike Jackson that the RIR leaks were false and that the Ireland-based battalions would not be disbanded regardless of whatever steps

the IRA might take.

Opposing Trimble are UUP elements who opposed, or were deeply suspicious of, the Good Friday Agreement—they see subsequent events confirming their worst fears. Donaldson is their most prominent figure. He and his supporters view relations with Dublin, and particularly with Sinn Fein, as anathema.

Writing in the London *Times* after his resignation of the party whip, Donaldson complained that the years since the Agreement was signed represent continual “appeasement” of the IRA for which Trimble bears responsibility. The Joint Declaration was a “fundamental breach of Unionist principle,” Sinn Fein were “unrepentant terrorists.” Donaldson’s goal was to “realign Unionists into a force capable of defending the Union, and repairing the damage already done.”

What this realignment requires is finding a working arrangement between the anti-Trimble faction of the UUP and the DUP that can overthrow Trimble and the Agreement. Politically not much separates Donaldson from the DUP, which is likely to overtake the UUP as the largest unionist party whenever elections are next held. Like Donaldson, the DUP opposes power-sharing with Sinn Fein.

While the DUP is every bit as oriented to winning corporate investment as the UUP—Peter Robinson, DUP MP for East Belfast, is the regional development minister in the suspended Assembly—it sees this as being possible without Sinn Fein. The DUP wants to renegotiate the Good Friday Agreement to ensure Sinn Fein’s permanent exclusion and to strengthen economic and political ties with Britain.

Where Donaldson and the DUP differ is in the base of their support. Donaldson is the MP for the largely middle-class Lagan Valley area outside Belfast. Press commentary frequently and approvingly mentions his mild manners, as well as his friends and family members in the UDR killed by the IRA. The DUP, by contrast, built itself through the bigoted bible-thumping demagoguery of the now elderly Paisley and open advocacy of loyalist paramilitarism.

Cooperation between two parties that have long viewed each other with disdain has potentially destabilising consequences for Northern Ireland as a whole. The first impact would likely be on the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, twice-delayed elections for which are currently scheduled for some time in the autumn, and which is likely to see Sinn Fein emerge as the largest nationalist party.



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