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Reference Code: 2021/97/30

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

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Position of Parties on Recent Election Proposals

1. Since David Trimble's speech to the Ulster Unionist Council on 22 September, the idea of elections to an elected body has gained momentum and support. This development was recognised by the two Governments in the Joint Communiqué when they said that the issue of "*whether and how an elected body could play a part*", in the context of an inter-locking three-stranded process could be examined in the preparatory talks. While recognising that the issue was outside its remit, the report of the International Body maintained that "*if it were broadly acceptable, with an appropriate mandate, within the three-stranded structure, an elective process could contribute to the building of confidence*". An examination of the parties' positions on a possible elected body follows.

British Government

2. While the British have embraced the idea of elections prior to negotiations, they have remained vague on whether such elections would necessitate the establishment of a body. As far back as the 30 November Mr Major admitted that he could see "*the advantage in having an elected Assembly, not to govern Northern Ireland but to produce nominees from that Assembly to negotiate constitutional matters*".
3. It was not until Mr Major's Commons statement on 24 January that the British were prepared to publicly advocate the idea. Mr Major said that if the paramilitaries would not begin decommissioning, the only other route to all-party talks was "*to secure a democratic mandate for all-party negotiations through elections specially for that purpose*". Recognising the need for nationalist concerns about this proposal to be addressed, he nevertheless stated his readiness "*to introduce legislation, and to seek both Houses' urgent approval for it, in order to allow an elective process to go ahead as soon as may be practicable*".
4. Speaking in Scotland on 27 January, the Secretary of State argued that elections would provide a means whereby "*parties can ask the electorate to endorse their claims to be wholly committed to peaceful methods*". Insisting that this was not "*a proposal for another Assembly*", he suggested that "*from those elected could be drawn the teams that negotiate for each party*". Sir Patrick continued to try to disassociate this concept of elections from an assembly during an interview on 29 January when stating that an "*election, not an Assembly, but an election process is what's needed*".

British Labour Party

5. During the debate in the Commons on 24 January Mr Blair reaffirmed his party's bipartisan approach to the peace process. Agreeing that Mr Major's proposal for elections deserved "*serious consideration*", he signalled his intention to support any necessary legislation.
6. However, Mo Mowlam has been anxious to stress the need for agreement among the parties on elections before proceeding with them. Speaking in the House of Commons on 25 January she said that Mr Major's announcement the previous day had generated "*a worrying air of distrust and a lack of confidence*" and she urged the Government to allay nationalist fears by making clear that movement towards any body would only go

ahead with the agreement of all parties.

7. Ms Mowlam is already on record as being tentatively supportive of the idea of having talks electorally mandated. Speaking on 4 December, she said that *"it may be that some sort of electoral mechanism or index would help to bring all parties into negotiations- but...it must not lead to the domination of negotiations by one community nor be seen as a precursor to or form of internal settlement"*.

Ulster Unionist Party

8. In a speech to the Ulster Unionist Council on 22 September, Mr. David Trimble suggested that one way in which Sinn Féin could obtain a democratic mandate and show a commitment to the democratic process would be through its participation in a new Assembly. Suggesting that the new body could be time limited and have very restricted (if any) powers, Mr Trimble argued that it could provide a forum for all the parties to discuss the future of Northern Ireland with each other at a time when certain parties have yet to prove their commitment to exclusively peaceful means and could not be involved in substantive negotiations. Thus he argued that *"an Assembly could bridge that gap until they do meet the requirements of the declaration"*.
9. However, Mr Trimble has made little attempt to sell the plan to its nationalist opponents and has been repeatedly vague on how (and if) such a body could become a vehicle for substantive negotiations. In meetings with the British before Christmas he indicated that he did not necessarily regard the body as a vehicle for all-party talks, but rather as a mechanism for preparing the groundwork for these talks and to take evidence, either in plenary or through committees, on matters such as North/South cooperation and policing. He also suggested that when the conditions were right, "members" might indeed conduct substantive negotiations- but this would be on behalf of their parties and probably outside the context of the body itself.
10. Despite apparent differences between this plan and the British idea of elections to negotiations, Mr Trimble welcomed Mr Major's Commons statement and suggested that nationalist objections could be overcome if there was the necessary will. He said that the necessary legislation *"could be carried through the House very quickly and we ought to set for ourselves the target of elections in April and May of this year so that the elected body can get down to work as soon as possible, and so open the way both to decommissioning and to substantive negotiations"*.
11. While the UUP appear slightly more positive on the possibility of talks developing from the body, Mr Trimble continues to give ambiguous signals on how and when this could be done. Speaking on radio on 27 January, he stressed the need for a large ninety-member body to accommodate all shades of opinion in the North. Initially, he said, this body would be a forum for debate but that later its members would *"move through that into negotiation"*. He also admitted that *"the exact way in which we do that is not yet determined"*.
12. Speaking on 25 January, Mr Reg Empey argued that *"if the method of a strictly limited elected conference/negotiating table makes representatives of the unionist community better able to address all the issues, then surely that is also in the interests of nationalists"*. Mr Empey also maintained that the body could deal with *"the totality of*

relationships throughout these islands”.

13. The UUP continues to insist that decommissioning must be addressed prior to substantive talks regardless of whether or not elections take place. Speaking on 26 January, Mr Trimble said that the issue would *“still have to be satisfied for the purpose of moving into serious negotiations”* and he insisted that *“it is the only way there is going to be dialogue with all the parties”*. Mr John Taylor, speaking on 28 January, said that initially *“we would...have each party in the body stating its position, but I would hope that people would quickly gain confidence in each other, there would be some decommissioning, and then negotiations”*. Mr Taylor also rejected the idea that an elected body should be discussed in the preparatory talks. Arguing that it had *“nothing to do with the Government in Dublin”*, he said that it was *“a matter between the United Kingdom Government and the parties in Northern Ireland”*.

SDLP

14. Nationalists have traditionally been wary of unionist Assembly proposals, fearing an attempt to force an internal settlement and to abandon the three-stranded approach by effectively giving priority to one dimension of the talks. This fear was best articulated by Mr Seamus Mallon when, speaking on 9 November, he suggested that that the offer of an internal election amounted effectively to unionists telling nationalists that if they accept and seek election upon the unionist concept of the constitutional framework of Northern Ireland, then *“we can perhaps do business”*. However, Mr Mallon argued that *“since the nub of the problem is that nationalists do not accept that framework as their own, and will not do so unless there is a new dispensation they can genuinely relate to, the election proposal is a means of making acceptance of an essentially unionist perspective the entry ticket for negotiations for nationalists”*.
15. The party reacted with anger to Mr Major’s Commons statement. Accusing the Prime Minister of buying votes to *“keep itself in power”*, Mr Hume asked Mr Major if he would agree *“that this commission does not recommend any form of election, that the proposal was outside its remit....if all parties commit themselves to those principles, then that would allow you to fix the date for all-party talks”*. Speaking on 28 January, Mr Mallon claimed that the election proposal was *“a smokescreen..which is trying to cover up the fact that the British Government and the Unionists have rejected the essential element in the Mitchell report and that is something of great significance”*.
16. Nevertheless, Mr Mark Durkan has indicated both publicly and privately that the possibility of some linkage between elections and negotiations could be explored. Speaking on 10 October he said that *“we are not opposed to the idea...that when we move into talks it might be useful to in some way get those talks electorally indexed”*. Speaking on 27 January, Mr Durkan repeating this view, maintained that *“since people are raising the issue of mandate we would obviously have to listen to a case that might emerge for the all-party talks being electorally indexed”*.

DUP

17. The DUP reacted to Mr Trimble's September speech by claiming that it was a variation of the DUP's 1993 "Breaking the Logjam". In this document it was proposed that a new

Assembly would have the task of agreeing a form of government, firmly within the UK, for Northern Ireland. Any proposal which gained the support of 60% of the Assembly could be put to Parliament. The document also argued that any agreement arrived at by the Assembly and supported by Westminster must be put to the North's people. Since September the party has been very vocal in calling for the establishment of a constitutional convention along similar lines to that outlined in their 1993 document. While they accept the need to work with Sinn Féin within such a convention, they adamantly reject any attempt to equate this with negotiation and have ruled out the possibility of it being addressed as part of the twin track process.

While there would be no role for the Irish Government in Strand One issues, Strands Two and Three would be handled by committees which could hold discussions with the Governments. They also propose that an independent chairman chair meetings between the committees and the Governments.

18. Welcoming Mr Major's backing of the election proposal, Mr Peter Robinson pledged his party's commitment to work with the British Government towards electing the body. He said that he could see "*no other route...unless there is to be decommissioning prior to talks. That of course, would remove the need for the elected group*".

Sinn Féin

19. Initially, after advancing his proposal at a speech on 22 September, Mr Trimble took some encouragement from the fact that Sinn Féin, despite being unenthusiastic, did not dismiss the idea completely out of hand. While claiming that the UUP proposal was a "*diversionary distraction*", Mr Adams, speaking on BBC television on 1 October, said that if elections were held to any new assembly, Sinn Féin would participate in them. However in his statement of 9 October Mr Adams argued that "*seeking to promote and create a new unionist dominated Assembly, repackaging an old unionist proposition, will not build bridges of trust with nationalists*".
20. Speaking to the "Irish Times" on 12 January, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin seemed to indicate a significant shift in Sinn Féin policy towards Mr Trimble's proposal. He said that if reports of a British Government proposal to establish a 45-member elected body were accurate, then his party would "*give very serious consideration to the proposition*". Speaking on the same day to the "Belfast Telegraph", Mr McLaughlin said that while "*negotiating delegations selected by the parties would be a better idea...a proposal for a 45-member forum that would not just be another talking shop would go some way to meeting Sinn Féin's requirement for all-party talks and would be more workable than any 90-member body*".
21. However, the response of senior party members to Mr McLaughlin's comments suggested that he may have been engaging in something of a solo run. Giving an emphatic dismissal of the proposal on RTE radio on 14 January, Mr Martin McGuinness said that "*many of us who have been deeply involved in this process view the prospect of an elected assembly with almost dismay*" and maintained that "*an elected Assembly in the North of whatever size, ninety or forty-five, is a non runner*". Explaining this intense objection, he argued that a new elected body would:

- "*be an invitation for parties who have refused to come out of their bunkers to remain there;*

- *stiffen the resolve of those who believe that an internal settlement is possible;*
- *detach Dublin and minimise its role in negotiations for a real and true democratic settlement;*
- *further delay and prevent meaningful all party negotiations."*

22. The party's reaction to Mr Major's Commons statement was hostile. In a statement issued on 25 January, Mr Adams said that the proposal had *"nothing to do with consolidating the peace process, it has everything to do with keeping Major in power and with satisfying Unionist resistance to all party talks"*. Speaking on 26 January, Mr Adams said that if unionists wanted to pursue the electoral proposal *"let them come into talks and put it where it belongs- as part of the necessary discussion, but not as any sort of precondition. Our opposition to that is implacable and absolute"*.
23. Addressing a rally to mark the 24th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, Mr McGuinness said that *"we are not going to give them their new Stormont. We are not going to be part of their Assembly"*. When asked in a radio interview on 28 January if Sinn Féin would participate in elections, Mr McGuinness said that in the next few weeks the *"National Executive will meet and discuss that and in due course we will make our decision"*.

Alliance

24. The Alliance party have been deeply critical of nationalists for rejecting Mr Major's latest initiative. Party chairman, Mr Steve McBride, speaking on 26 January, argued that *"elections would allow us to move forward without anyone surrendering their principles or compromising their position"*. Criticising Sinn Féin, he said that *"now, when the possibility exists of moving forward into talks and political dialogue through simple democratic methods of calling elections, Gerry Adams and Sinn Féin are again saying no"*.
25. In a document entitled "Let the people have their say", published last November, the Alliance Party expressed grave doubts about the prospect of preparatory talks succeeding and called for the establishment of an elected body. This body would have no executive, administrative or legislative functions and its purpose and remit would be to *"seek the maximum agreement on a political settlement which addressed all the different sets of relationships already agreed and set out in the previous Inter-Party and Inter-Governmental Talks in 1991/2"*. The party also proposed that the body contain the following elements:
- be elected by PR (5 members elected by STV from each Westminster constituency, 90 in all);
 - to be constituted for a fixed term of 12 or 18 months, with no more than a limited possibility of extension. If it was being used as an obstruction mechanism it could be wound up early;
 - any report or conclusion emerging from the body would require the support of at least 70% of its members and should then be put to the people by referendum;

- committees to be set up within the body to examine and seek agreement on matters such as policing, North/South relations and the economy. Submissions could also be received from community, business, religious and other bodies;
 - to be chaired by an independent figure, be held in a venue "without associations" and to have a non-parliamentary layout for seating.
26. The document insisted that the body should be "*specifically required to address the North/South dimension, to meet and consult with relevant parties and bodies, North and South, and to include proposals on North/South issues in any report or conclusions submitted*". While such a provision would appear to suggest the possibility of some Irish Government involvement, no attempt is made to articulate what this involvement could or should be.

PUP

27. Despite the fact that the PUP have, as recently as their meeting with the Tánaiste on 23 October, advocated the establishment of an elected body, reaction to Mr Major's initiative was mixed. Speaking on RTE on 29 January, Mr Billy Hutchinson said that while his party thought "*an elected assembly in Northern Ireland is a good idea*", they believed Mr Major was "*putting the cart before the horse (in that) elections should come after all party talks, not before*". Agreeing that his party needed to get an electoral mandate, he nevertheless argued that he did not believe it was a good idea at this stage and that instead "*people should be allowed to sit down round a table and discuss how we move forward*". He also wondered that in the event of no loyalists being elected who was going "*to talk about loyalist decommissioning*". However, Mr David Ervine said that his party would not stand in the way of moves towards a new elected body "*in spite of our personal fears*"

UDP

28. Speaking on 27 January, Mr Gary McMichael signalled his fear that "*elections are a means of sidelining the people we represent*". He continued to suggest that "*if we have elections and they hold discussions, we may not get beyond the decommissioning issue. And if that is the case and no political agreement emerges, then the unionist parties are opening up the opportunity for the two Governments to impose their Framework Document recommendations*". He also said that members of the UDA "*feel the unionist parties are trying to get rid of them from the process*" and that "*that is taking us into a dangerous phase, and at present those elements have no incentive to subscribe to the Mitchell principles*".

Anglo-Irish Division
29 December 1996