

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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The Current Situation: An Analysis of the Unionist Perspective

1. This note seeks to supplement Eamonn McKee's excellent analysis of the republican community's expectations of, and approach to, the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement by exploring the unionist perspective on these matters.

Background

2. The first, and most fundamental, reality is that the quintessential unionist experience over the past thirty years has been of decline and political defeat. Moreover, unionists were, and in many respects remain, ill-equipped to assess the sources and scale of these phenomena, and to formulate their responses to them.

3. Northern Ireland was conceived of as, and was in practice, a Protestant/unionist state for a Protestant/unionist people - just as, on the other side of Lloyd George's bargain, the South was to be a Catholic/nationalist state for a Catholic/nationalist people. These basic assumptions were not seriously questioned. It must be recalled that the substantial fundamentalist section of the Protestant community is, in principle, hostile to Catholicism, certainly in its collective and often in its individual manifestations. Many unionists regarded nationalist dissent as inherently treasonable, and as justification for discrimination against them. Even the more tolerant and liberal strands within the unionist community, while critical of the narrowness and rigidity of Northern Ireland's society and political system, would have had little appreciation of, or sympathy for, explicitly nationalist or Catholic critiques of the situation. Moreover, there would have been during much of the 1950s and 60s a general sense that Northern Ireland was modernising, and that the sharp edges of sectarian difference were being blunted.

4. Thus most unionists were completely unprepared for the massive onslaught on the political order which developed so rapidly from the late 1960s, and disinclined to distinguish between the different elements within it, or to accord legitimacy even to mild reformism, seen as the thin end of the wedge. The speed with which civil rights demands

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were transformed into the language of traditional nationalism seemed proof of the fundamentally destabilising intentions even of the civil rights movement and of the moderates within the SDLP. The failure of the Sunningdale experiment, and the fate of Brian Faulkner (as earlier of Terence O' Neill), seemed clear proof of where the centre of gravity lay within unionism, and as a salutary lesson to those tempted to make a deal with nationalism.

5. To this sense of renewed siege by a resurgent nationalism was added a profound distrust of the intentions of the British Government (the validity of which was confirmed in unionist eyes by the seismic shock of the Anglo-Irish Agreement) and a loss of confidence in unionism's capacity positively to shape the political agenda. All of this was accompanied by the attrition of the long war and by the steady drain of bright young Protestants away from Northern Ireland (as the Catholic middle class steadily grew in prominence and prosperity).

6. Fundamental to unionists' view of the situation as it evolved was a sense of deep unfairness: that, even if Northern Ireland before 1969 was not perfect (and almost all unionists would believe that the extent of the imperfections has been grossly exaggerated for propagandist purposes) nothing about it warranted the ferocity of the republican attack on it, and them, or the extent of subsequent reforming initiatives. By the same token, the counter-measures taken by the security forces were fully justified by the extent of the threat to the state. And no legitimacy could be conceded to the actions of the IRA or to the demands of their fellow-travellers (a flexible category which could from time to time expand to include the SDLP and the Irish Government). Despite this, their own Government persisted in political initiatives aimed at reconciling the irreconcilable and shrank from the resolute, principled stands deemed to be required in both the political and security fields.

7. Other enduring components of the broad unionist view, as it has been shaped over the past thirty years, are:

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- a strong measure of pessimism, indeed in some cases defeatism, about the future;

- a corresponding apathy about the capacity of politics to achieve their desired ends;

- a high, indeed in some cases excessive, sense of the cleverness and ruthlessness of their political opponents, which is resented and admired;

- a sense of isolation (which Trimble has tried hard to combat).

8. This account is inevitably a simplification. Half of unionism indeed was, and remains, politically and psychologically attuned to rejection and defiance, a stance which has deep historical and religious roots. But there has developed a substantial section favouring some accommodation with moderate nationalism. For a very long time, this section had, or pretended to have, an unrealistically modest expectation of what such an accommodation might be. This in turn was based on a continuing reluctance to accept nationalism on its own terms. Equally, the dissociation of all political parties in Northern Ireland, without a chance of power, from their natural hinterlands meant that unionist moderates within the business community, the professions and the churches were largely without influence over the party.

9. Furthermore, Enoch Powell's blend of romantic unionism and conspiracy theories, Jim Molyneaux' congenital caution and minimalism, and the post-1985 need to manage the relationship with the DUP, all reinforced the inability of the UUP to respond positively and imaginatively to the devolution option within the Anglo-Irish Agreement, or to the opportunity presented by the Brooke process. Much intellectual energy was dissipated in the far-fetched integrationism of Bob McCartney and the Cadogan Group. The failure of the 1992 Talks (blamed by most unionists on the intransigence of John Hume and the Irish Government) seemed proof of the inability of the moderate "neo-Sunningdale" approach to deliver, and had the effect of marginalising the leading liberals (Ken Maginnis and the McGimpseys).

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10. Unionism was thus poorly placed, for reasons both tactical and more fundamental, to respond to the peace process as it developed from 1993 onwards. Not only did it have to re-engage in the search for a three-stranded political settlement in which it had little real belief, but it had to confront the extraordinary phenomenon of Sinn Féin's entry onto the main political stage.

11. It must be recalled that, even though Trimble succeeded in building good working relationships outside Northern Ireland and in improving the public image of unionism, and even though he did score a number of negotiating victories in the Talks, the institutional shape of the settlement was a long way from what the UUP had originally sought, and from what it advocated until well into 1998 - essentially, low-key administrative devolution, with an unstructured "good neighbour" North/South relationship. Certainly Trimble's early leadership was presentationally innovative but substantively conservative - and, of course, relied in part on his hero of Drumcree image. Thus most unionists would not have expected, and would have had little enthusiasm for, what was in fact achieved in the Talks, even if it had simply meant a partnership with the SDLP - which was all even the most adventurous expected.

12. The restoration of locally-accountable government is conditional on an advanced form of power-sharing (a term and concept steadily resisted by the UUP throughout the post-Sunningdale era). The North/South relationship, though less alarming than that sketched in the Framework Document, goes well beyond mere good neighbourliness. The British-Irish Council is clearly less significant than the UUP would pretend. And constitutional reform was never, perhaps, as viscerally important an issue as a handful of intellectuals (Trimble included) would have thought. But grafted on to that institutional settlement is a whole set of additional elements mainly aimed at the republican constituency: and, hardest of all, Sinn Féin, the enemy within, is entitled to a place at the heart of Government.

13. This is not to say that there are many unionists who are not solid supporters of the Agreement. They have come both to see its merits as a means of stabilising Northern

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Ireland within the Union, and to recognise that they have no serious option. But their enthusiasm is inevitably more muted than that of, say, the SDLP; there is a far greater sense of the difficult trade-offs that had to be made; much depended on the pressure of events, and above all the election of Tony Blair; and there is no sense in which the Agreement was at its core intellectually or emotionally their creation.

Unionists and Republicans

14. The deep unionist loathing of the republican movement is entirely explicable - republicans have, after all, been seeking to overthrow the unionist constitutional settlement, for twenty-five years using terrible violence to do so. Allied to loathing are fear and a kind of grudging respect. Republican violence is perceived to have been the motor behind political change, which Dublin and the SDLP persuaded London was the best way to combat terrorism; and, paradoxically, the mere withholding of violence (allied to the implicit threat of a return to it) have placed Sinn Féin at the heart of the process over the past six years. Certainly, given the rough equality of electoral support for the DUP and Sinn Féin, it is hard for the average unionist to understand what - other than Sinn Féin's intimate link with the IRA - explains the obsessive attention paid to one and the relatively dismissive attitude to the other. Sinn Féin is seen as cunning, devious, tactically astute and strategically relentless, and to have successfully manipulated a series of people of goodwill, starting with John Hume, into facilitating its position at the heart of the political process..

15. Trimble himself has sought, from time to time, to emphasise the extent to which Sinn Féin has been forced to compromise its ideals and goals, and to play up UUP victories. But he has not done so consistently - either because it is a line he himself does not believe in his heart of hearts, or because his constituency finds it unpersuasive, not least because of the persistent ambiguity of republican language, and because of the continuing sense that the main interest of republicans is in destabilising Northern Ireland.

16. Perhaps the hardest thing of all for unionists to do - and this links into Eamonn McKee's account of republicans' sense of themselves - is to acknowledge the possible validity or

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legitimacy - even partial - of the republican perspective on Northern Ireland or on the Troubles. Indeed, most unionists have not accepted even a mild nationalist view of the Stormont era or of the subsequent conflict - Trimble's elliptical reference to a "cold house" at Oslo has been as far as he went.. There are, therefore, at least two competing central narratives of what happened - and neither allows much, if any, space for the other. To accept the republican view of decommissioning is to enter into a version of history - of mythology - which unionists find as dishonest as it is outrageous.

Decommissioning Issue

17. If the above is a broadly accurate picture of where unionism stands as a set of instincts and beliefs, then the extreme difficulty of the decommissioning issue becomes easily explicable. If the unionist community is prone to defeatism and apathy; if it has a shaky faith in politics; if the core political settlement is a long way away from what unionists advocated over many years: it is then understandable that there is a lack of vigour or confidence among unionist supporters of the Good Friday Agreement, and that its opponents are energetic in their attacks on it.

18. Furthermore, aspects of the Good Friday Agreement, above all prisoner release, are seen as deeply offensive, and as appearing partly to legitimise an illegitimate campaign. The Agreement's ambiguity on decommissioning, and the failure to achieve a clear linkage between disarmament and office-holding, are further flaws from a unionist perspective. It is therefore scarcely surprising that unionism split so evenly in the referendum and in the Assembly election, despite the Prime Minister's intervention. It is also clear that from the very beginning - from the first UUP split, on the afternoon of Good Friday - that Trimble realised he had made a mistake in agreeing to the text of the Agreement as it stood, and accordingly that he then sought to rectify matters.

19. It was almost certainly inevitable that Trimble would subsequently feel obliged, in response not just to the demands of party management in a very difficult situation but to the overall mood of the vast majority of his community, to continue to demand clear evidence of a change of heart from republicans. Initially, he outlined a number of

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possible tests, of which decommissioning was only one, but again it was probably likely that the issue would crystallise around decommissioning, given that it had been the focus of Donaldson and his supporters on Good Friday, and given its prominence throughout the talks. The symbolic resonance of the issue for unionists, as for republicans, is manifest. The weapons were used against the unionist community and its state. The destruction or surrender of even some of them would powerfully symbolise the end of an era, even if the practical importance of such a gesture is questionable. It is partly a desire for public repentance, or even an acknowledgement of the hurt inflicted by republicans. Again, the emotive terms in which republicans have portrayed even a limited gesture as a surrender or betrayal draws unionist attention to the fact that a battle between rival communal myths is involved - who was right and who was wrong?

20. Equally, however, in unionists' own terms it is entirely reasonable to look for clear and definitive assurances that the use of political violence is at an end, unqualified by distinctions between Sinn Féin and the IRA or by evasive conditionalities linked to (unspecified) progress in the implementation of the Agreement. The failure of republicans to move on weapons is contrasted with progress on prisoner release and other aspects of the Agreement. Republican concessions - the ceasefire, and the de facto acceptance of a partitionist settlement - are minimised as concessions to morality and to realism respectively. And, paradoxically, the very obduracy of republican attitudes increases the attractiveness of decommissioning as a litmus test for unionists: "the bastards can't be allowed to get away with it.".

21. The attachment to a decommissioning precondition has helped Trimble to keep his Assembly party more or less united, despite the deep internal tensions within the wider UUP. However, in so doing he has undoubtedly left himself very little, if any, room for manoeuvre, given the number of public statements (and private assurances) which are now on the record. Sinn Féin are disinclined to place much store by Trimble's alleged vulnerability: but the extreme delicacy of the Assembly arithmetic, the growing confidence of the anti-Agreement opposition even within his own party, the difficulty of sustaining the leadership of an Executive from a minority position - all of these must

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surely be given due weight.

Future Options

22. It would be facile to blame Trimble either for the lukewarm and divided nature of the wider unionist response to the Agreement, or for the salience of the decommissioning issue. Both have much deeper roots. We will never know if it might have been possible for him to have jumped into an inclusive shadow executive without some movement on decommissioning immediately after the election of the Assembly. The UUP's very poor Assembly election showing would have made this a huge gamble. Certainly, by the end of July senior UUP sources were telling us that some decommissioning gesture was essential.

23. Equally, we do not yet know if Trimble personally would be prepared to shift his position on the issue, in exchange for other commitments. There is no evidence that he would - and his very fragile political position must make his capacity to make such a move highly questionable.

24. However, it is clear that he has no real political options outside the Agreement. Even if he held on to the leadership of his party, he would be a lame duck, his judgement proven to have been wrong. Likewise the Agreement will not survive without some movement on his part. This may just possibly open up some limited scope for a last throw of the dice. If, in the extreme circumstances into which we now seem to be moving, one final effort were to be made to persuade the UUP to enter into an Executive with Sinn Féin before decommissioning, it would seem essential that Trimble be able convincingly to claim the following, on the basis of clear and unambiguous public assurances from Sinn Féin and the IRA:

- that the war was definitively at an end

- that decommissioning would take place within a specified period

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- that the two Governments and the SDLP were prepared to exclude Sinn Féin if either of these commitments were to be broken.

25. Even so, such a move by Trimble would represent an obvious climbdown and a departure from a frequently-rehearsed position. It would be ruthlessly exploited as such by his opponents, very probably with disastrous effects. Whether he could bring with him even the bare twenty-four of his Assembly party required as a technical minimum for the achievement of parallel consent within the Assembly would be in serious doubt, as would the solidity of his support in the Ulster Unionist Council and its Executive Committee. One - absolutely last-ditch - gamble would be a dissolution of the Assembly and a "back me or sack me" election. **But the odds must still be that any move away from some sort of decommissioning event before or simultaneous with devolution would destroy Trimble and bring down the Agreement, and that for that reason he will not move. All options should however be explored.**

Rory Montgomery
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