

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Confidential.

Mr McGarry

Passed to the Taoiseach.

20.5.99

Conversation with Ken Reid, UTV'S Political Correspondent.

I phoned Ked Reid, who is close to both David and Daphne Trimble, to get his sense of where we are in the current process. Reid had spoken with the Trimbles a number of times since last Friday and came away very pessimistic about any quick resolution of the current impasse over the Executive and decommissioning.

Reid said that Trimble had last Friday bought into the false confidence that with a nod and a wink that the impasse could be resolved and had allowed his instinct get the better of his judgement. He had made the fatal error of not keeping in touch with his grass roots on the issue. Reid believes that Trimble by nature is a risk taker but on this occasion he should have listened to Reg Empey's advice to stay away from Downing Street. Reid also mentioned that Trimble had remarked that Taylor's decision to leave the talks on Friday, because of an alleged family emergency ,does not square with the fact that he was seen dining in London later that evening and did not return to Belfast until Saturday.

The UUP Assembly meeting on Saturday had been a disaster for Trimble. Only 8 members offered any support to him at the meeting, the rest were in varying degrees vehemently opposed to the initiative. According to Reid, Fred Cobain, in particular, led a savage attack on Trimble's leadership and questioned his fitness to continue in that job. Cobain was the source for the Irish News story about Trimble's future as leader. Only Dermot Nesbitt and Jim Wilson of the Assembly members can be counted on for loyal support, with Reg Empey now distancing himself. Trimble was not helped by the Downing Street briefing of journalists that they should be ready for a major announcement of a breakthrough by 4pm on Saturday.

Reid told me that he had talked to Daphne Trimble on Sunday morning who said her husband was close to resigning that morning but he started to come around later that day. Monday's hardline press statement was the party reasserting itself, especially in the context of the upcoming election. Reid said that when it comes to the party, only their stance on decommissioning unites them. Hence the reason why any search for a solution to the impasse which does not involve prior decommissioning may well be doomed to failure. Trimble, as a result of the mauling he got on Saturday, will be ultra conservative in his approach to any new proposed initiatives by the two Governments.

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Reid said that the UUP tactic is now to play long. Trimble doesn't believe that 30 June is an absolute or irrevocable deadline. Only next May would fit into that category. Trimble, he feels, has miscalculated in not turning up today at Downing Street even if he has nothing more to offer. The SDLP and Sinn Fein have made the right tactical judgement vis a vis Blair that their presence alone, and his absence, will favour the argument that nationalism is trying harder to make the Agreement work. Reid feels that Trimble's trip to the US and Canada next week suits his wish not to get sucked into any horse trading on triggering d'Hondt. Only some movement on Drumcree, which Reid feels is unlikely, could give Trimble some political cover to allow the procedure to be set in motion. His week long absence abroad is also strange behaviour for a leader whose European election candidate is facing an uphill task. Nicholson at his press conference yesterday looked far from impressive. Trimble is now caught in a dilemma in how to play that campaign. A poor performance by Nicholson, where Trimble throws himself fully into the campaign, will reinforce the calls within the party for his resignation. His tactic for the moment is to distance himself from Nicholson.

Post the election, Trimble will have to assess the impact the Nicholson performance has had on the party and its leadership. This will take some time. Reid said that Trimble doesn't believe that a review of the Agreement can now be avoided. The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister are hardly likely to pull the plug on the Agreement four days before Drumcree. Reid said that in a perverse way, if Drumcree blew up, it might help Trimble politically, as the apathetic UUP supporter may come out to urge him to move to resolve the current impasse and not allow violence to return.

Dermot Brangan
20 May 1999

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