

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Ulster Unionist Party Conference, 9 October 1999

1. Ray Bassett and I attended the Ulster Unionist Party annual conference, which was held at the Killyhevlin Hotel, Enniskillen, on Saturday 9 October. This was the second time the Department had sent observers to the UUP conference, and again, while no particular fuss was made of our presence, we were warmly and courteously received.

Overall Assessment

2. Contrary to some expectations, there was little or no visible strife at the conference. David Trimble and his supporters in the party leadership were clearly in control, and managed proceedings skilfully - as Reg Empey said to us at the end, the anti-Agreement forces "didn't lay a glove on him".

3. Party policy on decommissioning was formally reaffirmed, both in the motion on political developments and in the leader's speech. But while Trimble used the "no guns, no government" formula, he clearly left room for manoeuvre on the application of the principle. Our regular contacts all emphasised the continuing determination to make a serious effort to find a solution (though Graham Gudgin was pessimistic, and thought that Trimble was personally dubious about whether Sinn Féin would move).

4. Calls for party unity, and denunciations of the negativism of the DUP and of Robert McCartney, were well received. Overt opponents of the Agreement were careful to pay tribute to Trimble. Jeffrey Donaldson and Willie Ross were both marginalised, being given slots as wrap-up speakers on less contentious motions. Neither Martin Smyth nor Willie Thompson spoke at all.

5. At the same time, despite a couple of dutiful salutes to the principle of

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inclusivity, absolutely no positive enthusiasm for entering government with Sinn Féin was evident. Lord (Dennis) Rogan's description of Sinn Féin as "a nasty, hate-driven sectarian organisation" was representative. While several speakers (and the political development motion itself) appealed to the SDLP to join the UUP in rejecting Sinn Féin should there not be decommissioning, the audience particularly relished criticisms of the SDLP as sanctimonious and equivocal.

6. The Irish Government was barely mentioned, coming behind the British Government and the BBC in the unpopularity stakes. David Trimble's one reference was an (unfounded) assertion that we had been opposed to establishing an implementation body on food safety, in an attempt to preserve our lower standards.

7. Following Trimble's recent lead, speakers made a point of attacking continuing loyalist paramilitary violence in harsh terms.

8. The debate on the Patten Report was emotional in tone and strongly critical in substance, though the party's two spokesmen, Ken Maginnis and Michael McGimpsey, made some attempt to put forward a more nuanced position. McGimpsey told us privately that, as there was some support in the Police Federation for the Patten proposals it was not advisable for the UUP to "out-police the police".

9. It was striking that, apart from an impromptu reference by Trimble to the review of the Parades Commission announced the previous day, which he described as very important, there was no mention of Drumcree or of the parades issue generally.

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10. The continuing efforts to modernise the party, though far from complete, were also noticeable.

Leader's Speech

11. David Trimble's speech is attached. It was delivered without particular aplomb, and was in our judgement received positively but not rapturously. Its major themes included:

- the need for realism and cool heads
- the value of devolution
- the lack of any alternative to the Agreement - Trimble poured scorn on the notion that either administrative devolution on the Welsh model, or enhanced local government, would be a realistic prospect should the Agreement fail
- the need to recognise Sinn Féin's electoral strength
- the importance of party unity
- the failures of the DUP and Robert McCartney.

12. Trimble attacked republican and loyalist paramilitary violence (without mentioning the status of the IRA ceasefire), and used the results of a survey on punishment beatings to question the strength of nationalist opposition to the RUC. His treatment of the Patten Report was otherwise cursory.

13. On decommissioning and the Review, he said : "We want devolution. We want decommissioning. To me "jump together" or "choreography" or "sequencing" all refer to the same thing - making sure that devolution is accompanied by decommissioning [as commentators have noted, "accompany" is very vague in

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this context]. But there is no point getting bogged down in the minutiae until there is a clear commitment by republicans to credible decommissioning. Put clearly and simply, the position of the Ulster Unionist Party is and will remain - no guns, no government."

Political Issues

14. Before the debate on political development, the motion as printed on the agenda was amended to incorporate a reference to party policy as set out in the Assembly manifesto and by the Executive on 9 July. But it remained sufficiently broad not to tie hands any more than they are already.

15. The motion was moved on behalf of the Assembly party by Sam Foster and seconded by Ken Robinson , who both spoke in favour of devolution, inclusivity, and a partnership with nationalism, while urging the SDLP to be prepared to get off the fence. Danny Kennedy spoke on similar lines.

16. David Brewster, the only consistently anti-Agreement speaker, praised Trimble's determination and effort, but argued that it was time to face the fact that the Agreement was dead. Roy Beggs jr, in a nervous speech, seemed to accept that some compromise was possible on the formation of the Executive, but would not countenance a surrender on the principle of decommissioning. We were told privately that Beggs was keen to get off the hook of simultaneous decommissioning on which he personally has been stuck.

17. John Taylor argued that it had been right to support the Agreement in April 1998; praised Trimble and the party for doing everything possible to make it work; but now feared that the republican movement would not and could not

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deliver its side of the bargain.

18. Speakers on the preceding motion on economic development, including Esmond Birnie and Dermot Nesbitt, also stressed the importance of devolution and local control of decision-making. Jeffrey Donaldson, in reply, stuck to the theme and did not deviate into political issues.

19. There were only three speakers, including Willie Ross, on the motion condemning the decision by the British Government to exclude the Republic from the scope of the proposed ban on foreign party political fund-raising.

20. In a session given over to a media panel (see also para.27 below), Eoghan Harris urged the party to consider entering the Executive without any guarantees on decommissioning: this evoked a spirited, and hostile, response.

Patten Report/Victims

21. Speakers from the floor on a motion opposing Patten were uniformly emotional in their hostility to the recommendations, in particular to the proposed changes to the name and emblem. Other aspects which were criticised included the District Policing Partnership Boards and the breach of fair employment legislation involved in Catholic/Protestant quotas. The *Daily Telegraph* poster displaying the RUC's emblem alongside photographs of the 302 officers killed during the Troubles was on sale and in evident demand.

22. Interestingly, however, Michael McGimpsey in proposing the motion, while attacking the symbolic elements and what he saw as the naivety of Report in not taking due account of the continuing difficulties on the ground, listed many of the unfulfilled demands of Sinn Féin and the SDLP, and pointed out the

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origin of many of the recommendations in Ronnie Flanagan's fundamental review. [McGimpsey told me afterwards that the hope is that the party committee working on policing will come up with a credible policy].

23. Ken Maginnis, in wrapping up the debate, took an approach similar to McGimpsey's. While attacking aspects of the proposals, he also referred to the Flanagan review; denounced any sectarianism which might lie behind the opposition of some unionists, and derided Paisley and Paul Berry of the DUP.

24. The debate on victims of violence, led off by Peter King, and including a contribution by Daphne Trimble in her capacity as trustee of a Memorial Fund, was factual and low-key, though a contrast was drawn more than once between the funds available to prisoners and to victims.

Other Aspects of the Conference

25. Modernisation was both an explicit and an implicit theme of the Conference. A new UUP logo (a red, white and blue arrow, somewhat reminiscent of the opening credits of *Dad's Army*) was unveiled (one delegate criticised the absence of the Union Jack from the hall); banks of monitors flanked the platform; Anne Smith of the party's Washington bureau gave a brief report on the US scene, saying that the unionist message was getting across and was reflected in the President's even-handed approach (his "drunks in a bar" remarks attracted only passing and mostly humorous reference.)

26. A number of organisations (including the Police Authority, nursing and teaching unions, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) had information stalls outside the hall, and there was a fringe meeting on cancer treatment.

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27. In what was a development of past practice rather than a complete innovation, an hour was devoted to contributions from a media panel. This, though lively, was not a complete success. Ruth Dudley Edwards spoke in familiar terms of how she had come to admire and respect the salt-of-the-earth Protestant Ulsterman. Dean Godson of the *Daily Telegraph*, with copious references to his own paper and none at all to television or radio, argued that unionists were now doing well in the British media battle. Eoghan Harris spoke for the best part of half-an-hour, being passionate and repetitive in equal measure, on how unionists should call the Sinn Féin bluff (see para. 19 above). Eamonn Mallie, after a witty beginning, unaccountably and to his own subsequent embarrassment , chose the Jim Nicholson case as an example of the party's poor media management: Mrs Nicholson, who was in the hall, was visibly upset. There was little time left for discussion.

28. Attendance at the Conference remained solidly middle-aged to elderly and, one would imagine, mostly rural/small town. There was perhaps a larger sprinkling than last year of male delegates in their twenties, but very few in the 30 - 45 bracket and hardly any young women.

RM

Rory Montgomery

12 October 1999

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