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Ulster Unionist Party
Making Government Work

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Conference 200

Speech by

The Rt. Hon. David Trimble MP, MLA

to the

Annual Conference

of the

Ulster Unionist Party

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I have been in Conservative Conference at Bournemouth this week, but here it would be better to use the plain if blunt language of Portrush. It is time to tell it like it is - the good and the bad.

A lot has changed since the Portrush Conference five years ago. Who would have believed then that the title of our conference today would be "Making Government Work"?

I am frankly surprised that some actually want to return to Direct Rule. Are their memories so short? Are they so blinkered that they have forgotten what Direct Rule was like - the Anglo-Irish Agreement, cross-border bodies with no unionist input. Unionism sidelined, virtually ignored.

Do you remember Harold McCusker describing in 1985 how he stood at the gates of Hillsborough, locked out as others decided the future?

Unionism is on the inside now.

Some think that being inside is outweighed by having Martin McGuinness as a Minister.

Let's be honest - Martin McGuinness has been influencing government here since he first met Willie Whitelaw in 1972.

That influence was hidden. Now it is in the open where he is accountable.

The man who tried to destroy partition is helping to administer Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, on behalf of Her Majesty and on the basis of British law. This is the real seismic shift!

There are just two Sinn Fein members in the administration of twelve. Twelve - never forget the DUP are in it too. If we are "in government with Sinn Fein", so are they. They're just too shy to admit it.

The hokey-cokey hypocrisy, which surrounds their attitude to the Agreement, sums up the DUP. They say they're opposed to the whole lot. But it hasn't stopped them sitting beside Sinn Fein in committee almost 500 times.

According to them, the Agreement is heading us into a United Ireland. If so, why are they glued like limpets to their offices, sharing with Sinn Fein in the day-to-day administration of Northern Ireland.

They holler about the horrors of the Agreement but nothing will get them out of the Assembly.

We are determined to make government work.

Reg Empey is well on the way to being the most successful industry Minister since the Sixties.

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Sam Foster is determined to bring environmental protection up to standard and to lead the way in local government.

Michael McGimpsey knows that culture is going to be a political battleground. He will ensure fair play for our Scots and English heritage. The old regime was going to ignore the bicentenary of the Union this January - not any more.

Dermot Nesbitt knows that human rights and equality is also a unionist agenda to remove the discrimination we suffered under direct rule.

Our grammar schools are excellent, as are many other schools. We will not repeat the disaster of the English comprehensives. But we have to improve quality all over - a greater emphasis on skills and training, more flexibility, more diversity, more parental choice - imbuing everyone with a sense of worth and a pride in achievement. Danny Kennedy will pursue those goals.

Esmond Birnie will be seeking thousands more University and further education places so our young folk do not have to go across the water.

In Fred Cobain we have the right man to look after the interests of Housing Executive tenants. He's giving poor Maurice Morrow a hard time. Keep it up, Fred.

There will be a Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels. Providing a direct voice in the European Union alongside Northern Ireland's only full-time MEP, Jim Nicholson. And an upgraded Ulster presence in Washington.

Politics in Northern Ireland is changing - in many ways for the better. Society is changing. More women are working outside the home. We must build on the success of the Unionist Women 2000 conference with more women in councils, at Westminster and in the Assembly.

Belfast is looking more and more like every other British city. Ulster has always been a home to minorities. We now welcome new cultures to it. Later this year, we will bring forward a party paper on ethnic minorities.

We have not forgotten our roots either. That is why I made sure that there would be an effective advocate for the right to march in the Civic Forum, even if he does not agree with me all the time. It is a matter of ensuring fairness, as against the unfair disregard of loyalism that characterised direct rule.

The Agreement is nothing if it is not about peace. "There must be an end to bombings, beatings, killings, the acquisition of weapons and the progressive dismantling of paramilitary structures."

We do not have that yet. A man murdered in Magherafelt. Loyalist thuggery on the Shankill. So-called punishment beatings on an almost nightly basis. Weapons being acquired in America. The UVF, UFF, the IRA - all still there. It is a sorry picture.

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The Agreement held out the prospect of an end to violence and the threat of violence. But paramilitaries have been switching from terrorism to gangsterism. We warned of the danger of a mafia society emerging. I welcome the new anti-racketeering measures announced by the Secretary of State: but more is needed.

The fact is that the paramilitaries, all of them, have failed to keep the promise of the Agreement. The IRA have even failed to keep the promises they made in May.

We cannot live on promises alone. We have had enough prevarication. Our people are losing faith in a government whose response to paramilitary pressure is to look for another set of goodies to give them.

The revolving door in 10 Downing Street for any nationalist with a grievance gives the impression that some victims are more privileged than others and degrades the suffering and sacrifice of so many. Is there really such a moral vacuum in Downing Street?

The award of the George Cross to the Royal Ulster Constabulary, whatever the motive, was richly deserved. They are the real heroes of the conflict.

It is sad that the prospect of partnership government is being poisoned by the policing issue.

We know who to blame. Patten asked "what did we expect when we signed the Agreement?"

I'll tell him what we expected.

We expected his Report to be acceptable to the greater number of people in Northern Ireland.

It wasn't.

We expected his Report to reject sectarian procedures for recruitment.

It didn't.

We expected his Report to accept and respect the constitutional position of Northern Ireland.

It didn't.

It was "shoddy".

Are nationalists really saying that the future depends on Patten, the whole Patten and nothing but Patten? We now have the sad spectacle of Seamus Mallon being praised by republicans for being "surprisingly staunch" in his criticism of the Police.

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Gerry Adams attacks the Government for "turning the policing issue into a battleground". But we all know who made policing not just a battleground but a killing ground.

Nationalists need to get real about policing. Do they really want to destroy the best chance in perhaps a lifetime of an agreed way forward in Northern Ireland?

I expected a more pluralist attitude by leaders of the nationalist community and of the Catholic Church towards the majority community. We expected equal appreciation of our concerns. The response has been deeply disappointing.

Those in the United States would be wise to tread carefully too. Does anyone believe that US police forces would match the controlled and lawful response of the RUC had they faced the same onslaught? Not for a minute.

We are in a new situation. The Provos' armed struggle is over. After thousands of needless deaths, the armed struggle failed. There is no United Ireland. But the guns are now being used as bargaining chips for more concessions. Until the Government stands up to this blackmail it will be rightly accused of a craven approach.

But we have forced republicanism to face up to the reality of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. All they have left is rhetoric about the inevitability of Irish unity. And it is just that - rhetoric. The consent principle in the Agreement drove a Steak Knife through it. The rhetoric only disguises their ideological defeat.

Unlike the DUP we don't believe our opponents' rhetoric. We make up our own minds. We didn't run for cover. We weren't afraid to defend the Union.

On the Constitution we got what unionists have always wanted.

At Sunningdale when the anti-Union vote was in the low 20s Articles 2 and 3 were not changed and there was a Council of Ireland, not answerable to the Northern Ireland Assembly. This Party was right to reject Sunningdale.

In 1998 when the combined anti-unionist vote was over 40% Articles 2 and 3 have changed decisively. The North-South Ministerial Council is answerable to the Assembly. Cross-Border co-operation takes up just 0.1% of our budget. Unionists have a veto. This Party was right to run with the Agreement.

We must not throw away what we have achieved Some talk about re-negotiation. But re-negotiation is not a one way street.

Yes, on flags and policing nationalists have not respected the constitutional position. They have adopted a tactical position on that. We too can adopt tactical positions. Hitherto we have acted in good faith. Perhaps now we should also adopt a tactical approach to the Agreement.

I am not impressed by the self-serving calls for us to rush out of the Assembly. Knee-jerk reactions are unwise. But we are looking carefully at each aspect of our

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participation under the Agreement. Hitherto we have worked proactively in the North South Council. I see that being more problematic now.

We are still determined to achieve decommissioning and devolution. We have not broken their linkage.

In May the IRA promised that, on devolution, they "would initiate a process that would put their weapons completely and verifiably beyond use."

What do you say about a person who makes a promise and nearly five months later has done nothing to keep it?

I believe they think that, using loyalist violence as an excuse, they can bluff their way.

They thought they could bluff their way in January. In February we proved there was a bottom line. It has not changed.

We remain committed to pushing all paramilitaries to deliver the peace they promised.

We are justifiably hurt by sections of the Party who question our good faith on this.

John Taylor has said we should give republicans three months to prove their good faith on weapons. I understand his point. But I think three months is too long when republican promises made in May have not been kept.

But what we do, when we do it should be the result of careful, quiet consideration.

People talk about electoral meltdown. Yes, the electorate sent a message on Patten. But a return to the failed tactics of yesteryear is not the answer.

The electorate will not forgive if unionism is marginalised again.

Remember 71% voted for the Agreement: 29% did not but, most of them are spoken for by the DUP.

Polls show that 75% of UUP supporters want the agreement to work.

By elections prove it. The three candidates who took a positive approach did well, the five who were, or allowed themselves to be seen as, negative did poorly.

Yes, there is disquiet. But if we simply to go fishing for votes in a small pond already dominated by the DUP, we might as well go home now.

Yes, we must address the real concerns of our people. That is why after South Antrim I asked the Party Officers to arrange special meetings to consider policy, tactics and the general behaviour of parts of the Party.

It's a pity that some could not wait for such a debate and had to rush into public attacks and simplistic responses.

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We will be more successful if we are united with a more mature approach. That is why I won't be walking away from the Executive just yet. A considered and calibrated approach if others do meet their commitments will be better.

I hear loud calls for a change of policy? I'll give those who have been shouting a change of policy.

Stop undermining the Party.
Stop undermining the leadership of the Party.
Stop undermining democratic decisions made by your Party. Stop running to the media and bad-mouthing your Assembly team.

No one in this Party is denied the right to air their concerns.

We are not a theocracy. But I wish some people would respect the mandate of the Ulster Unionist Council. There are policy differences in the DUP, in the SDLP and in Sinn Fein.

They keep them to themselves. So must we.

There is no unionist Utopia out there. Politics is a rough business with limited choices.

Will we sleep any sounder in our beds if we are seen to ditch this Agreement? Will there be decommissioning? Will the Union be guaranteed?

No, no and no again.

The choice we have is simple.

On the one hand we can draw nationalism and republicanism into a consensus.

On the other we can be governed by London with Dublin interference, deprived of a voice, deprived of a vote, deprived of a veto.

You didn't elect me to take you down that path. And I won't go down that path.

Nor will unionism.

Unionism will not take the rap if the Agreement fails.

Look at where we were a decade ago.

Limp and lifeless. Sidelined and ignored.

Getting the IRA to abandon their habits was never going to be easy. Persuading nationalists away from a United Ireland towards a more constructive agenda was always going to be a struggle.

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But today's Northern Ireland is a better place for our struggle. Unionism is stronger too.

I brought it back to the very heart of the political process. I put it back on the agenda.

I gave it - we gave it - a new credibility.

I secured an internal settlement. I want to move unionism closer to the heart of British politics.

We in this Party have taken huge risks for peace.

We did so for a united Northern Ireland, within a pluralist United Kingdom. A much better option than any united Ireland.

It has been said that war is a continuation of politics by other means.

In Northern Ireland today that is reversed. Politics are a continuation of the so-called war by other means.

We cannot run away from the political struggle.

Of course there will be challenges.

In life, change is constant.

We can make changes for the better.

It will not be easy.

But it is worth the effort.

If we all face up to the challenge, we can make for a better future.

We can, and will, make government work.

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