

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Cab 12.10.00

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Ulster Unionist Party Conference, Belfast, 7 October 2000

1. Ray Bassett and I attended the UUP annual conference in Belfast's Waterfront Hall on Saturday. The event was well orchestrated by the party's leadership and, with both pro and anti-Agreement members focussed on the more significant forthcoming UUC meeting, was relatively low-key with less heckling and open antagonism than was anticipated by many.

General

2. David Trimble's leadership speech was the centre-piece both of the Conference and of the pro-Agreement "fight-back". Its main themes, echoed in other interventions, were: that unionism was marginalised and ignored under direct rule and that, therefore, an end to devolution is not an acceptable alternative to the Agreement; that failure of the Agreement would result in further "Dublin interference"; that the blame for concessions to republicans should be placed not on the shoulders of the party's leadership but on a British Government which has failed to deliver on its commitments; that nationalists need to "get real" on policing; that nationalists and republicans need to face up to the reality of Northern Ireland's position in the UK; that republicans need to deliver on promises made on decommissioning; and that the UUP will adopt a more "tactical" approach in future in relation to the NSMC.

3. While there was clearly a substantial anti-Agreement presence, the majority of delegates appeared to support the leadership's position. Calls for party unity and denunciations of the damage being caused by anti-Agreement forces were applauded. Trimble's speech was reasonably well received and his supporters appeared satisfied with the outcome of the Conference generally.

4. However, Conference is more loyal to and more supportive of the leadership than is the UUC (the former comprising constituency delegates and party officers, the

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latter including representatives of the Orange Order, Young Unionists etc.) and, therefore, represents less of a challenge. While no further damage was inflicted, the pro-Agreement side of the party did not make up any significant ground and now faces into the UUC meeting no stronger (but also no weaker) than before.

5. On the question of a date for the UUC meeting, in conversation Lord Rogan said that, having received the necessary request on 4 October, under party rules he should call the meeting for a date before 25 October (ie. within 21 days). However, the Waterfront Hall is not available on Saturday 21st and a mid-week date appeals to neither side. He therefore thought that a meeting on 28 October was most likely.

6. Despite the Conference's slogan of "Making Government Work", there was little evidence to suggest that the UUP sees itself as operating a partnership. The SDLP was listed among enemies in the pan-nationalist front by several speakers and, in fact, there was no positive reference to the SDLP throughout. Lord Rogan used his wrap-up speech to call on the SDLP to stop trying to "out Sinn Féin, Sinn Féin" and to have the "moral courage" to implement the Agreement.

7. Only Reg Empey spoke in positive terms about the economic benefits of peace, observing that the economy is a political issue with implications for the future of the Union.

Debate on Political Developments

8. In a clever piece of management, the leadership neutralised the debate on political developments, amending the motion to "note" rather than "welcome" political progress and adding a call for a moratorium on Patten and the down-sizing of the RUC "until there is peace on the streets". Without pinning the leadership down, this strategy wrong-footed anti-Agreement delegates, forcing them to speak and vote in support of the motion which was carried unanimously.

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9. Ken Maginnis was loudly heckled when he delivered an overheated and somewhat ill-judged speech, pointing to the reduction in the numbers of deaths in recent years, particularly among the security forces, and suggesting that there were some who appeared to prefer a return to the past. In private conversation later, Maginnis made his personal distaste for the 'no' camp, and in particular Jeffrey Donaldson, clear.

10. In an intervention regarded as a significant straw in the wind by many present, Tom Fleming, a delegate from the East Londonderry constituency and a long-time supporter of Trimble and the Agreement, said that his "bottom-line" on decommissioning had been reached last November and that Hillsborough went below it. He regarded the "amnesty" to OTRs as "the worst concession yet to Sinn Féin" and felt the time was now right for the party to develop a "plan B".

Leadership Speech

11. Trimble spoke authoritatively and with some conviction, particularly in laying down his challenge to party dissidents.

12. His speech sought to strike a balance - calling on his critics to stop undermining the party and its leadership, stressing the lack of any viable alternative to the Agreement (or rather devolution), while also appearing to adopt a harder line on participation in North/South arrangements and on decommissioning.

13. While defending the Agreement - "this party was right to run with the Agreement. We must not throw away what we have achieved" - and warning that "re-negotiation isn't a one way street", he added that it was, perhaps, "time we adopted a tactical approach to the Agreement".

14. He did not, however, leave hostages to fortune in the shape of specific

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undertakings on policing, participation in the institutions or decommissioning - suggesting only that working the NSMC "pro-actively" might become "problematic" and that three months might be "too long" for republicans to "prove their good faith on weapons". Observing that "knee-jerk reactions are unwise" he said that "what we do, when we do it should be the result of careful, quiet consideration".

15. Trimble called on nationalists not to "destroy the best chance in a lifetime of an agreed way forward" through demanding "the whole Patten" and warned the British Government that "our people are losing faith in a government who response to paramilitary pressure is to look for another set of goodies to give them". He also condemned the "hokey-cokey hypocrisy" of the DUP's approach to the Executive.

16. The section of the speech which generated most media interest was his forcefully delivered appeal to party dissidents. He argued that "there is no unionist utopia out there. Politics is a rough business with limited choices". He asked if unionists will sleep sounder if they were seen to ditch the Agreement, if there will there be decommissioning, if the Union will be guaranteed? "No, no and no again". The choice 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 will not go down that path". He called on those urging a change in policy to "stop undermining the Party. Stop undermining the Party leadership".

Local Government

17. Minister for the Environment, Sam Foster used the Conference to announce reviews both of local government and of planning which will, inevitably, prove controversial. However, as Willie Ross pointed out, the UUP has little chance of

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getting its way given that any change will require nationalist support in the Assembly.

18. All speakers challenged the continuing existence of non-elected quangos and what they saw as "over-administration" in the wake of devolution and the establishment of the Assembly. There was full support for a review which would look at both the number of Councils and their remit. On the latter, Danny Kennedy, MLA, was typical in (disingenuously) seeing scope for increased responsibility for Councils in areas within the competence of Sinn Féin-run Ministries - education and health. Suggested incursions into areas of DUP responsibility were also popular.

Other Debates

19. Other debates were predictable and of a generally banal quality and by the afternoon the crowd in attendance had noticeably dwindled.

20. Jeffrey Donaldson spoke in the transport debate and restricted himself to the subject at hand.

21. Even the debate on flags failed to give rise to controversy as all speakers found themselves in complete agreement with the motion calling on the British Government to "recognise the flag of our country by flying it on all government buildings on designated days". In his response to the debate, Junior Minister Dermot Nesbitt gave a familiar exposition of his views on the rights of minorities under the Council of Europe Framework Convention on National Minorities, appearing to ignore the importance of the Agreement's provisions in this area.

22. The final motion before Conference demanded "parity of esteem" for the "Ulster Scots and Ulster British traditions". In an eccentric intervention the Chair of the Ulster Scots Agency, Lord Laird, claimed for the Ulster Scots inventions as diverse

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as the ejector seat and the music of Elvis Presley. No speaker adverted to the fact that the Ulster-Scots Agency is part of the North/South Language Body. Minister for Culture, Michael McGimpsey suggested that not only were the self-sufficient Ulster British the most misunderstood and misrepresented of people, they were also the originators of the concept of rights (as embodied in the constitution of the United States) and the most tolerant of people.

Conclusion

23. As mentioned above, Trimble's supporters regarded the Conference as a success, albeit a modest one. But it was unquestionably success at a price. While Trimble avoided having to give firm commitments on difficult issues, his tone undoubtedly shifted to the right. It was also obvious that some effort had been put into minimising the potential for disruption - there was no "platform debate" as there has been in recent years and known anti-Agreement agitators were carefully watched by stewards.

24. It will be much more difficult to exercise the same degree of control at the UUC which has come, in recent years, to eclipse the Conference as the ultimate arbiter of policy direction within the party.

25. Curiously, perhaps, John Taylor did not attend at all, apparently having a more pressing engagement in his constituency. This did not go down well with delegates, either pro or anti Agreement.

Helen Blake

10 October 2000

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