

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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DAVID TRIMBLE, PRESS CONFERENCE AFTER CHALLENGE TO LEADERSHIP - 25.3.00

DAVID TRIMBLE

...we had contested elections. This is of course, as I have said before, the most democratic party in the British Isles in terms of its procedures and in terms of it's openness, remarkable in terms of it's openness in that respect. The result of the elections you know. I have been returned as leader with a comfortable majority. We have had most of the outgoing officers returned, there has been a minor change in the election so far with the election of Dermot Nesbitt as a Party Officer, that is the only change in the line-up so far and as you will probably have heard the original motion on policing by David Burnside was carried also by a narrow majority. That has been the situation. Has that been announced? If you want to have the precise figures the amendment was defeated by 384 votes to 338 , which in round figures is 53% - 47%. So at the end of a long meeting there was quite an intensive debate on the tactics of this, no difference between the participants on the issue of principle, no difference between the participants on the issue of support or the Royal Ulster Constabulary and very strong feeling about the retention of the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, very strong feeling indeed as you can imagine and consequently the council voted to stick with the Burnside motion that the Party should not agree to enter a fresh Executive unless the clear assurances were given from the Government about the retention of the name. On the question of the offices of the party as I have said the existing officers team, who were up for election at this because we have three other offices that are filled from the party executive, the existing team was returned with just the one change in that Dermot Nesbitt has replaced David Brewster, otherwise it is unchanged. We did however make history in terms of Ulster unionism, in that you will be interested to know that for one of the onsets there was a tied vote. Exactly 402 votes cast for May Steel and exactly 402 votes cast for the Rev Martin Smyth. At the end of the day it was settled on the toss of a coin and Martin was returned on the toss of a coin. In doing so we were following the precident of electoral law and you mustn't think that either Martin or ourselves have resorted to gambling, is anything other than dealing with a very exceptional situation.

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MEDIA

...the Burnside motion. The amendment was defeated and what happened next then?

DAVID TRIMBLE

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The amendment being defeated I immediately proposed that we make the motion unanimous. And it was passed on acclamation.

MEDIA

Mr Trimble you said yesterday at your news conference that you felt that the benchmark was 42% opposition to you, and you would see how much it came up. Well it hasn't came up that much. But I think the rest of us would think the benchmark was 30% and that is not a comfortable majority. You are effectively now leading two parties, your credibility has been damaged.

DAVID TRIMBLE

I think what we say on that is that the benchmark was of course 42% because that was the last vote. And if you want to judge the direction of movement, yes it has moved from 42-43. And yes that has moved up but when you think about it we are two years into the Belfast Agreement, two years where there has been no decommissioning, two years when we haven't had clearly established peace on the ground, when there is still a significant level of violence and threats continuing, bombs discovered in Hillsborough the other day, two years in which a lot of people on the grassroots feel that the interests of unionism are being ignored and the interests of unionists are being ignored again and again and again and we have the Patten issue, the name of the RUC, which causes such grievous offence to people there, to be there as a constant gnawing reminder, is it any surprise that people are somewhat disillusioned should there not on the other hand, be surprised that there are still so many people who are quite ready to keep on going with this process in the hope that it turns right in the end. But there is a very clear message to Government on this and I think the message is to Government on this that they are trying the patience of the ordinary decent folk of Ulster too far and too hard. And they need to stop and think.

MEDIA

Unclear

DAVID TRIMBLE

I think the message of the party to me has not changed significantly over the course of the last couple of months.

MEDIA

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Isn't a fact though that the Burnside motion has shackled you and isn't it a fact that the only way you can survive now is to go to Tony Blair and say help, help, help give me more?

DAVID TRIMBLE

Do I look shattered.

MEDIA

Shackled!

DAVID TRIMBLE

Oh shackled, I thought you said shattered. I am not shattered and I don't think I am shackled either.

MEDIA

...the passing of the Burnside motion, does that not limit you tactically now in the weeks ahead in moving this process forward?

DAVID TRIMBLE

The motion demonstrates the very real concern and the depth of the concern and not just concern, the passionate feeling on this issue and that is there and we knew that that was there. The amendment that I proposed did have implicit linkage, and there was very little difference between the amendments I proposed and the exact motion. Now what I thought was wrong about the **motion is that there was too obvious and crude a linkage. There was still linkage in the amendment. Don't forget that. The amendment which I proposed still had an implicit linkage because it recalled the fact that we had agreed as a council, that in the event of any proposals to resume devolution we would meet again to consider the matter and to put that into a motion which is dealing with the name of the RUC is very clear implicit linkage. Now I just thought that diplomatically it would be more effective of Government to have the linkage implicit rather than explicit. Between the two there is a very fine line.

MEDIA

Does that not mean that the next time that the council meet everything will be on the table?

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DAVID TRIMBLE

The next time the council meets we will be dealing there with a hypothetic, who knows when the next time the council meets. It might be at the AGM in the year 2001, nothing having happened in the interval. The next time the council meets may be, we consider that there is some serious proposals that the council should consider because we want to have the authority of the council before implementing them. What those might be, I do not know. But obviously in view of the very strong feeling that there is with regard to the name of the RUC that issue would have to be addressed and would have to be addressed whether you were dealing with the Burnside motion or my amendment too. The differences between the two are so slight and I think it would be wrong to exaggerate them and indeed I am anxious to see that you do not.

MEDIA

Are you say explicitly that you will not go back into Government with Sinn Fein unless the name of the RUC is kept? Or are you saying you will look at a lot of things in the round that there was another opportunity to (unclear).

DAVID TRIMBLE

We have just passed a resolution which you know is explicit upon that and I proposed at the end of the meeting that that motion be made unanimous.

MEDIA

(Unclear) anti-Good Friday Agreement Unionists have reinvigorated, that they have tied your hands in terms of this issue on the leadership challenge, it was not a vote for Martin Smyth essentially an anti-agreement vote. On top of that your hands are now tied on a very important issue. How can you now progress in the attempts to reach peace and stability in NI?

DAVID TRIMBLE

You are quite right in regarding today as being a situation where there was a major push by people who are essentially anti-agreement. That is quite right. But the bid in terms of the leadership which was a serious bid and treated seriously, the challenge was serious, treated seriously by us, but the challenge has not succeeded and indeed if you were then to look at

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the changes in the officer team you would see that if anything the balance, the overall balance of the officer team at the moment has shifted some what in the direction of those who are positive on the agreement. So you have a mixed message and of course you can choose which of those parts of the message you regard as more important than others. As things stand at the moment I look at the people who have been elected in total, looking at it in the round and I don't feel discouraged, in the very difficult circumstance we have.

MEDIA

Are you a leader still committed to trying to negotiate a sequencing arrangement which it would bring the Executive up and running in the short term this side of the summer?

DAVID TRIMBLE

I have said and repeatedly said over the last few days that I regard the May 22 date as an extremely important one. I don't share the view of others that some how you can forget about that. That is absolutely critical. And I think that if we find on May 22 that we have not made significant progress then there is going to be a problem, there is going to be a serious credibility problem with regard to the Agreement. I think that undoubtedly is the case. Now I have said and it remains the case, that we are willing to explore the possibility of having a fresh sequence, I am ready to, I know my close colleagues are ready to, but and this is the important qualification, which was there and which was (unclear) by the word but said just as firmly in Washington given that certain media then decided to not report that little bit. But anyway, if we are going to have a fresh sequence, I will go back to the council and I will have to be able to put in front of the council reasons to believe that it is going to work and by work let's have no doubt about that either, because that means all of it working, that means the decommissioning section of the Agreement working as well. I will have to be able to give to the council reasons to show that it is going to work and it is worth the council's taking the effort to endorse it. Now that is the question of whether we will ever be in that situation, is not a question for me. But it is a question for the republican movement and it is a question for other parties. We have signalled our willingness to make another effort to get this to work but it has to work, all of it work, this time, no uncertainty. No nods and winks, no creating expectations and then failing to deliver from them. This time it has got to be clear that it is going to work and it has got to be something that is going to recommend itself to my party council. As I say that is a question for others and I am very disappointed, not surprised, not surprised, but disappointed, that in a week since I said something, we said this in Washington, all we have seen from the Republican movement is a further flight from reality. A further running away from the table and an indication that they are not prepared to make the effort, well if the Agreement is in difficulties, it is in difficulties because of their failure.

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MEDIA

..showing your willingness to re-establish a new sequence, doesn't your party today put a fresh obstacle in front of going back into Government?

DAVID TRIMBLE

That obstacle was always there. Always there.

MEDIA

Have you not taken the heat off the IRA in that we (unclear)

DAVID TRIMBLE

The obstacle was always there, one way or another.

MEDIA

You may have heard John Taylor saying the other night that the role of Ulster Unionist leader is the hardest job in British politics. Given today's events is there anything within you that says maybe it is time to call it a day?

DAVID TRIMBLE

I am not competent to comment on whether or not this is the hardest job in British politics. I am not getting wearied by it all, as I think you can see.

MEDIA

Your opponents will say 57%, maybe you should fall on your sword.

DAVID TRIMBLE

They will have to wait.

MEDIA

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Until when?

DAVID TRIMBLE

You know the other common part we can say to them is don't hold your breath while you are waiting.

MEDIA

... May 22 is very significant (unclear) that the agreement is over and gone

DAVID TRIMBLE

No I did not say that, nor is the logic that. What I did say and please don't put words into my mouth, what I did say was come 22 May, if we don't have this matter sorted then the Agreement will have a serious credibility problem. It will have a serious credibility problem with the people who voted for it, believing that it would be working by then and dare I say it, it might even have a credibility problem with yourselves.

MEDIA

What is the state of the process now after the result, because I think some people will assess that it has been damaged, that in fact the RUC motion may even have actually been the death penalty?

DAVID TRIMBLE

I think that would be a very wrong interpretation of it because as I said earlier, you know I dare say some commentators , if the amendment had carried would be throwing their hats in the air and saying the Agreement is saved. They would have been wrong to attach that much significance because the difference between the amendment and the main motion and it was between something that was a little bit in your face on something that was coming around in a more subtle manner. There is very little difference in terms of substance. It would therefore be, I think wrong, to treat that as indicating a very significant change. I think I said, correct me if I am wrong, I think I said when Patten was announced, in fact I think I said it before Patten was announced and I had some idea of what was coming in it, that the Patten report has the capacity to destroy the Agreement. And I said that when it was published and that has always been the case. This isn't an issue that has suddenly come into the fore, it has always

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been there this issue. And indeed it has been a great disappointment to me that Peter Mandelson has not treated the issue with the seriousness that it deserved.

MEDIA

.. deputy John Taylor (unclear) and your leadership over the last 20 years in NI?

DAVID TRIMBLE

Oh no I think that is most unfair, most unkind as well and absolutely inaccurate.

MEDIA

Unclear

DAVID TRIMBLE

No John said yesterday very clearly at a press conference that I held, in party headquarters yesterday morning that he was going to support the Burnside motion and of course he was as true as his word. You wouldn't have expected anything else from him, so you know the answer.

MEDIA

What was he saying to you in doing that?

DAVID TRIMBLE

John and I just had a genuine difference about the tactics we have that regularly. It doesn't in any way effect our working relationship which remains excellent and it doesn't.....

MEDIA

DAVID TRIMBLE

I have said before and I will just say again, I will not go back to it again, to avoid needless repetition that you would be very wrong to see any great different between the motion and the amendment. They are very similar.

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MEDIA

The amendment is history now, the motion has been put and has been carried by a majority. How do you cope with that reality that your.....

DAVID TRIMBLE

The reality was that which ever motion we had, that the issue of the RUC was always going to come back. That was always the reality. Now it depends just how starkly you project that at this stage or later.

MEDIA

Are you saying that the fundamentals have not changed here, that we can still have an Executive (unclear) without the RUC name ....

DAVID TRIMBLE

No, I am not saying that, I am not saying that. I am saying that that issue was always here.

MEDIA

Can we have an Executive without the RUC name being changed (unclear)

DAVID TRIMBLE

You know the resolution that has been passed by council today which I proposed we made unanimous, now that is making clear and up front what was always likely to be the case in any event. And I think that people have to take that on board seriously.

MEDIA

Are we not further away from the Agreement at the end of the day than we were.....

DAVID TRIMBLE

We were quite some distance away anyway, because of the refusal of republicans to engage. And that was the case yesterday, the case this morning and it is the case this evening and that is the reality that we want to avoid.

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MEDIA

Unclear about another leadership challenge (unclear) how do you feel about that?

DAVID TRIMBLE

I think they would be very ill advised.

MEDIA

Unclear

DAVID TRIMBLE

Well the points I would make to him, which I would have made to him anyway and will make to him, is that Patten got it wrong in terms of the symbols and that without changes on the symbolic front then the process is in very serious danger. Certainly I would say to him that we need to try and get things moving quickly, we don't want to get into the republican agenda of waiting for a year or 18 months and then renegotiating the Agreement which appears to be the position of republicans but there has to be concerted pressure by the Government, by the Irish Gvoernment and others and indeed by society as a whole to compel republicans to come back to the table and engage seriously rather than to run away from the process and without that happening, then we will be in real difficulty come 22 May. But I don't think it is wise to go too far into the hypotheticals of that situation because we don't know exactly what that situation will be until we reach there.

MEDIA

With 43% voting for Mr Smyth, effectively voting against you, is there anyway do you think in which this election has done what you wanted it to do which was clear the air within the Ulster Unionist Party?

DAVID TRIMBLE

I recall that when I was selected to be the Ulster Unionist candidate, the Upper Bann constituency 10 years ago on the third count I achieved 55% of the votes, so I am quite comfortable living on that sort of margin.

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MEDIA

Do you think the other pro-agreement parties will accept today's ultimatum on the RUC?

DAVID TRIMBLE

They know how serious the issue is. They have known that themselves and I think they may have received a reminder of just how serious it is.

MEDIA

What is your assessment now at this point (unclear) today what you have heard publicly and presume privately, what is your assessment now of the chances of getting an agreement, the Executive back up and running in the short term?

DAVID TRIMBLE

In the short term the problem, as I have said is the failure of republicans to engage and the fact that they appear to have shifted their agenda to some situation in the long term, comparitively long term rather than the immediate future and that situation there isn't much encouragement we can have unless and until republicans come back, show they are going to deal with the weapons question seriously and actually implement the agreement and do so within the time scale provided by the agreement. If that isn't happening then obviously we are going to have a problem.

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