

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Ulster Unionist Council

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6 October, 2000

Mr Bertie Ahern, TD
An Taoiseach
Government Buildings
Dublin
Republic of Ireland

Dear Bertie,

I have, with those of my Party colleagues who have remained most committed to making the Belfast Agreement a success, been making a critical re-assessment as to why our efforts are increasingly being rejected by our electorate.

When Unionists took risk after risk during and subsequent to the Talks process it was in the belief that both sovereign governments would be pragmatic to the extent that, rather than being 'champions' of either Unionism or Republicanism in Northern Ireland, they would act as 'honest brokers' - the guarantors of the Agreement. That has not, however, proved to be the case.

Let me be blunt – there are basic issues that have compromised my leadership to such an extent that it is no longer reasonable for me to assume that I can continue to make progress. *Disarmament by the Provos and other terrorists, constitutional interference and policing and security* are critical areas in the political agenda. Other matters continue to frustrate, but it is the blatant disregard for the safety of society and insensitivity to the Unionist tradition that obliges me to review the day-to-day workings of the Agreement.

The Agreement should have produced benefits for both major traditions. For Unionists that was predicated on the end of the 'sovereignty' dispute – effectively ensuring that only the electorate in Northern Ireland could decide our constitutional position. Rather than compromise Republicans this in fact legitimised their aspirations within a carefully crafted democratic process. However your government continues to 'champion' those, particularly Sinn Fein, who challenge procedures that are integral to the sovereignty issue:

1. Unionists expected that the Union flag would be accorded the same courtesy and respect as is given to the Tricolour in your jurisdiction. This has not happened as Sinn Fein Ministers indulge in aggressive 'in your face' politics. Yet there appears to be no guidance from Dublin or sympathy for the Secretary of State's ruling.

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2. Unionists assumed that the Patten Commission would stick to the terms of the Agreement; that insignia and the name of our police service would reflect the need for officers to act within the context of a Northern Ireland *whose sovereignty is not in dispute* and that there would be 'widespread support' sought for any changes. Your government has been confrontational on this issue.

3. The checks and balances that already exist in respect of policing here far outweigh the sort of safeguards that apply in your jurisdiction. Your government continues to agitate in a way that fails to either acknowledge or understand what a 'Force under fire' for 30 years has had to endure. It has not gone unnoticed that there is a massive inequity between the way in which the RUC and the Garda Siochana are directed, promoted, and investigated, or that Dublin's predisposition is blatantly aggressive towards our police.

4. When I encouraged my Party to accept Sinn Fein in government *prior* to disarmament it was in the clear expectation that, with the International Inspectors providing an intermediate step, matters would be expedited towards fulfilling the disarmament obligation. We knew it was a difficult issue for the Provos and sought to accommodate them with the 'time and space' they required. But there has been no significant response, and only promises and inaccurate predictions from your government – nothing more.

All this has created a climate of total disenchantment with the Agreement to the extent that Unionists feel there was never meant to be equity for them. Whilst appreciative of the manner in which you have dealt with Real and Continuity IRA weapons dumps, they deplore the failure to do anything to inhibit the rapid organisational growth and development of these organisations. How, they ask, can top Provos like QM Sean Connolly be discovered in possession of Provo weaponry in his Dublin flat when we have been told that they will be put 'beyond use'? Yet Provo infringements benefit from the 'blind eye' treatment.

The Florida gunrunning affair, it is justifiably believed, could not have occurred in a vacuum - not without official sanction by the Provo leadership.

We would all like to see the Rosemary Nelson murder resolved, but your Government's promotion of the Finucane saga is offensive insofar as it is again seen as championing militant Republican interests above a multitude of other tragedies. Is this not in stark contrast to any activity in respect of, for example, the Buchanan, Breen, and other murders.

It would do little good to rehearse all my Party's disappointments and frustrations over the way in which my attempts to create a new, courteous and practical working relationship between us has failed to produce positive results for Unionists. Clearly, we are still regarded as the enemy.

Better therefore, that we should seek to create a more practical, sensible means of dealing with our business. Certainly I cannot continue to be a 'rubber stamp' for arrangements contrived behind my back with Whitehall or continue to ignore the interference of those malicious US elements that Dublin continues to cultivate. I will

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neither permit Unionists to be snubbed nor humiliated and I regret that my co-operation is being construed as weakness.

We have worked hard to implement all aspects of the Agreement. Our good faith is not in doubt. Your Department of Foreign Affairs has expressed "appreciation of the positive approach taken by the Unionist Ministers who have made clear that they are happy to work proactively in the NSMC on issues which are of common interest and bring real mutual benefit." (Irish Times, 30 Aug) In the light of the matters mentioned above I have to say that I do not think that nationalism generally, including your government, have matched our good faith.

I am not impressed by the precipitate and self-serving calls for us to leave the Executive, but I have reluctantly concluded that we should match the tactical approach to implementation evidenced by nationalists. Consequently we will be looking carefully at each aspect of our participation under the Agreement.

In particular there is strong consensus among my closest colleagues that I should withdraw our Party's Ministers from further involvement in the North-South strand of the Assembly's work until you and I are able to move the process forward in respect of those issues to which I have referred, and are able to deal with each other on a more transparent and assured basis. I have to admit to considerable sympathy with this proposal.

It is imperative, therefore, that we take urgent action to clarify our respective positions and to find a means to avoid an imminent breakdown. I am anxious to make the Agreement work – but I cannot do so without *immediate and effective reciprocal action* from Dublin. I simply cannot make progress while a sovereign government assumes a stance that is in conflict to the spirit of the Agreement.

Yours,

David Trimble

Rt Hon David Trimble, MP, MLA

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