

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Recent Conversations with Unionists

1. At the end of last week I had a lengthy conversation with Alan McFarland, the UUP Assembly member for North Down. On Monday, I had a quick conversation with Reg Empey before the sectoral Trade and Business meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in Newry, and later had dinner with Arthur Aughey and Henry Patterson, both academics at the University of Ulster and members of the pro-union Cadogan Group.

2. The unvarying message, confirming all that we have been hearing from other unionist sources, is that there is an overwhelming unionist requirement for an early start to decommissioning, and a view that the UUP cannot remain in the Executive unless decommissioning begins. Aughey and Patterson, who are both sceptically pro-Agreement, argued strongly that these attitudes extend well beyond the politically active.

3. In simple terms, there is a sense that unionists have done their bit and are taking continuing pain (the appointment of Martin McGuinness, the decision on Patten), with no reciprocation from republicans. McFarland argued that neither of the main republican concessions to date (the cessation of violence and the acceptance of a Stormont Assembly) was seen by the unionist community as much of a sacrifice: the campaign of violence was immoral, and entry to the Assembly had resulted in salaries, respectability and Ministerial office. Aughey felt that there was a political need for unionism to be seen to win on something.

4. Empey pointed out that he, as a senior unionist, was the first Northern Minister to cross the border after his appointment, and the first to participate in a sectoral

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North/South Ministerial Council meeting. There could be no suggestion that unionists were dragging their feet.

5. Decommissioning continues to be seen as "an outward and visible sign", in McFarland's terms, that violence is indeed at an end. McFarland himself accepted that for the current generation of republicans the war is over, but noted that there has been no repudiation of violence in principle. He appreciated the difficulty the republican movement faces (in his eighteen years as a British army officer he "got to know them well") but felt that there is a need for the clear leadership and openness to change republicans demand of others.

6. Aughey, looking at the matter in a longer perspective, was more positive: the 1970s was the decade of armed struggle pure and simple; the 1980s that of the armalite and the ballot box; the 1990s that in which the ballot box assumed practical primacy; and the 2000s, he hoped, that in which there would be a definitive transition to politics. But he accepted that this was not widely believed by unionists, and nor had there been a clear and decisive debate within republicanism. Patterson is friendly with Anthony McIntyre, the former IRA man and writer who is critical of the republican leadership for selling out: he shares McIntyre's view that Adams and McGuinness have been tactically masterful in steering the process forward, but that the consequences of their avoidance of honest internal debate are negative as well as positive.

7. McFarland, who was a prominent spokesman in favour of a yes vote at the UUC, accepted that there had been no definite promises from Sinn Féin during the Review. But there had been a clear understanding, he felt, of the need for movement within weeks of devolution. This had not been privately contested by Sinn Féin during the Review or immediately afterwards. He acknowledged

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that Trimble's decision to reconvene the UUC in February had not been agreed, and was difficult for republicans, though he said that it had been politically essential. But the UUP had been led to expect that decommissioning would have started by the end of January, thus rendering February's meeting a formality.

8. McFarland said that the judgement of the entire pro-Agreement side would now be questioned. In discussions with his constituency's delegates to the UUC, he had said that he believed, after eleven weeks of dialogue with Sinn Féin, that republicans were for real, and understood the needs of unionism. It would now be impossible to deploy this "trust us" line of argument again, no matter what de Chastelain said: only product would impress people now.

9. McFarland, who led for the UUP in the informal media handling group established after the end of the Review (it also involved Gerry Kelly and Aidan McAteer of Sinn Féin, and officials of both Governments), acknowledged that contact between the two parties had dried up since then. People were very busy, either as Ministers or committee members, and were reading themselves in to their own special areas - there was a degree of tunnel vision. This new crisis had as a result crept up on them.

10. Looking ahead, McFarland felt that the institutions would have to be suspended quickly in the event of a negative report from de Chastelain. This was the only way in which to prevent Trimble's resignation. The two Governments would be expected to honour their responsibilities. However, when he went on to suggest that, in the Review, it had been clear that if blame were obviously to lie with one party, then in a subsequent Review others would quickly agree to go ahead without it, I demurred: the SDLP had been very careful to avoid entering into hypotheses. There must be serious question marks over whether general

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nationalist support for a start to decommissioning would translate into a willingness to see Sinn Féin excluded at this time and on these grounds. [McFarland's view, however, may help to explain the near-complacency marking Trimble's comments on suspension].

11. Aughey and Patterson questioned how deeply the unionist population at large felt about devolution. What they wanted was peace, stability, and an acceptance of their place in the UK. Suspension of the Executive and Assembly need not be felt as a great loss. Obviously politicians and interest groups would think differently.

12. Patterson, who is involved in research on the functioning of the unionist parties in the Assembly, commented on the very poor quality of many of the UUP members, and their lack either of practical organisational ability or of any kind of vision of what they hoped to achieve.

Rory Montgomery

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26 January 2000

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