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Discussion with Jack Allen

Treasurer UUP

2 February 2000

I spoke today to Jack Allen, Treasurer of the UUP, about the present crisis. He was very pessimistic about the prospects of avoiding a suspension and made the following points:

- Trimble, while doing well with the unionist electorate, faces severe problems within his party. Trimble is determined to avoid the Ulster Unionist Council meeting on 12 February, as he believes that there is every possibility that it will unseat him as party leader;

- The only way for Trimble to survive is "to face down the Provos". If a unionist leader is in difficulties, a "scrap" with Republicans is a sure way to shore up support;

- The UUP has been assured by Mandelson that he will move to suspension and follow this up quickly with a Review. With the UUP in negotiations, any talk of leadership issues will have to be postponed, including hopefully the UUC meeting on 12 February. The UUP is now in suspension mode and their Ministers have been told that they will be stepping down next week;

- Allen emphasised that Trimble will not risk facing a vote in the party at present. He also added that one of the party's Assembly Members, Pauline Armitage, will not vote for Trimble again. However, on the positive side, another dissident Assembly member, Derek Hussey, is back on board and playing a constructive role;

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- I asked Allen about the strategy of the UUP and put it to him that suspension will be extremely difficult to reverse. Allen agreed but said that the UUP's concerns were much more short term and related almost exclusively to the survival of Trimble. Without suspension, Trimble would have to resign. With suspension, Trimble at least would be around to negotiate with during the Review, and the possibility that something unexpected might turn up was always there;

- I asked if the UUP could be satisfied with a form of words from the IRA. Allen replied that he did not think so. In his view, the worst possible scenario for the UUP leadership would involve a commitment by the IRA to a time table for decommissioning. Trimble might be forced by the British Government to try and persuade his party to accept it but the likelihood was that he would be unable to sell it;

- There is a growing weariness among unionists about the process, as they believe that all the concessions have gone in the one direction. The Patten Report had helped change the climate and many now felt that they had no more ground to give. It was well past time for Republicans to give on something important like decommissioning;

- Allen said that he would personally be very sad if the Institutions fell. He had been appointed by Trimble to one of the new North/South Boards and looked forward to serving actively on it.

Ray Bassett
2 February 2000

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