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Speech delivered to Ulster Unionist Party Annual Conference by Party Leader, David Trimble, 24 October 1998

[\[CAIN Home\]](#)

[\[Key Events\]](#) [\[Key Issues\]](#) [\[Conflict Background\]](#)

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The following is the text of the address to the Ulster Unionist Party Annual Conference by the party leader, Mr. David Trimble, 24 October 1998.

The sadness of this remarkable year is that a small number of extremists could not accept the will of the people, could not accept the prospect of peace.

The tragedies of Ballymoney and Omagh followed. Every section of our people suffered. We in this party in particular remember Fred White, the long serving treasurer of our Omagh branch.

But our thoughts also go to the families of all the innocent victims of the summer events.

It is also with regret that we must remind Government that the statutory arrangements they put in place to regulate the traditional events of the summer failed utterly.

As we predicted the Parades Commission has been an abject failure.

They made no attempt to discharge their conciliation and mediation function. Their misconceived regulatory function has been exercised in a highhanded and unfair manner. Indeed my one meeting with that body left me astonished at the arrogance of some Commission members.

There must be radical changes before next year.

We must also criticise the behaviour of some loyalists. The tactics of some have been abysmal. The lunatic action at Harryville may have ended but the same approach, indeed I think the very same people, have disgraced the unionist cause in parts of Portadown to the great anger of the true unionists of that town..

Those on the Garvaghy Road who are responsible for creating the problem and whose intransigence is prolonging it are probably the only ones pleased. Thanks to Alister Graham they need do nothing and so will do nothing.

Government has to resume the responsibilities it has abdicated.

It must also show that full respect for civil and cultural rights and parity of esteem for the identity and ethos of the community are not just empty words, but have real meaning for the largest cultural organisation in Northern Ireland.

In September, Danny Kennedy at a reception at the Armagh Unionist office for the opening of his new constituency service for Newry and Armagh, remarked of this year, that "It has been a white knuckle ride."

These rides can look alright in theory, when you're on the ground looking at them. It's very different when you're way up there and it suddenly plunges.

When it does, you tighten your grip and keep your nerve. One thing you definitely don't do, is to take fright and jump out!

Especially when we actually achieved so much by holding on in there!

Eleven years ago this party set itself the task of repairing the damage done to the Union by the Anglo-Irish Agreement and Direct Rule. Specifically in the 1987 election manifesto we set ourselves the objective of negotiating an alternative to and a replacement for the Diktat.

X It has been done. Thatcher's imposition is being replaced. Direct rule is going.

X The Irish territorial claim is gone. Even the DUP acknowledge that. It was the reason their Mayor of Londonderry gave for meeting President McAleese.

All the parties, including the Irish, nationalists and republicans, are signed up to the statement that the constitutional future of Northern Ireland is to be determined by the people of Northern Ireland, without any interference or coercion by anyone else.

Of course that makes the Union secure. To say otherwise is to say that our people can't be trusted with the vote!

X To put it another way, look what Sinn Fein were saying at the beginning of this year.

X They said there would be no change to articles 2 and 3. They have changed.

X They said there would be no return to Stormont. We are back there. The abstentionist party is inside.

X They said there would be joint authority. There isn't.

X They said there would be powerful cross border bodies with no Unionist veto. The north/south council will have no executive authority and any agreements will require the approval of the Assembly.

X On all these matters Sinn Fein were driven below their bottom line.

X Yes they made gains on prisoners. Something we dislike, but unfortunately that matter was and is not under our control.

X Remember all those shouting about the Frameworks documents - that the Talks had only one predetermined outcome.

Strange how we haven't heard anything about those documents lately isn't it?

The Ulster Unionist Party had the courage and the vision to take the fight to our opponents to secure the Union - others, loud in declaring their unionism, did not.

Don't ever let any of them take a shred of credit for what we have achieved.

They ran away from the enemies of Unionism in the Talks. Now they enter Stormont as the self-proclaimed defenders of Unionism, well, they weren't to be seen when they were needed, when there was hard work to be done. Oh no they wouldn't dirty their hands then.

But there is some dirty work they are only too willing to do now. That is to blackguard those who did the work, who are delivering accountability, who are building a future, secure within the Union.

But I have to remind these critics. Where is your alternative? You know that ever since our government imposed the Diktat that it could only be removed by persuasion. Ever since then, you and we have been committed to a process of negotiation.

So if you did not want to negotiate this year then, when were you going to do it? When were you going to get a better chance. If you cling on to direct rule for another decade would Ulster be stronger or weaker? How would unionism face the rest of Britain or the rest of the world if it threw away the chance of achieving peace this year.

Year in and year out we have stood on platforms like this and said to nationalists that we seek a partnership to build a better, united Northern Ireland.

Now there remain two questions, but they are really the same.

Will there be real peace? To whom does the offer of partnership extend?

The Agreement is quite clear.

In the opening Declaration all the parties affirmed their "total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means" and their "opposition to any use or threat of force by others".

There is only one thing you can do with semtex. There is only one reason for holding on to it. It is to destroy people or places. It is the same with Dushke machine guns.

Retention of guns and explosives is a clear threat of force.

That is why the Agreement commits parties to "achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms."

On holding Office the Agreement is equally clear.

It says, "Those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means, and those who do not should be excluded or removed from office." And there is an express cross-reference to this statement in the opening paragraph of the decommissioning section, which also recalls that the resolution of this issue is indispensable.

Could anything be clearer?

Republicans say there are no pre-conditions. That is a misuse of language. There is an obligation. An obligation that those seeking office must satisfy.

That Friday afternoon, we queried the section on Decommissioning. Tony Blair said that "its effect, with decommissioning schemes coming into force in June was that decommissioning should begin immediately".

The republican movement has failed to honour its obligation. It has failed to show that it will only use democratic non-violent means.

Therefore, consistently with the terms of the Agreement they ought to be excluded from office until they do.

If they want to be included, they must show they do mean to use only peaceful methods. That is easy. They need only begin to fulfil their obligations and decommission in a verifiable and credible manner. That means beginning a process in a significant way that is clearly visible to the people.

Throughout this process government has postponed this issue to the next stage and made promises. This is now the last stage. So my message is, there can now be no backing down on these promises and no turning back from the implementation of all of the Agreement.

We have never said that those with a past cannot have a future. The offer of partnership stands. But only if the past is left clearly behind, with no going back.

To the republican leadership we say, "You know in your hearts that you must go down this road. There is no other way. After Omagh the people will not tolerate a return to the terrorist campaign of the past. So, 'if it 'twere done, 'twere best 'twere done quickly'. But if you need time, we can wait"

To other nationalists we say, "If we have to wait and it is too much of a strain, there is an alternative way to proceed, if and when you want to use it."

To the Government we say, "How long will you continue to deliver your side of the bargain on prisoners, when all the organisations concerned are defaulting on theirs?"

I am not surprised that republicans misrepresent the Agreement. But why do some unionists go round saying that Sinn Fein is right, when patently it is wrong?

Why is it that Bob McCartney goes to the Decommissioning Commission and tells General de Chastelain that he must sit and do nothing? Does he really want disarmament and an end to violence or is he putting sectional interest, self-interest, first?

This is not the only misrepresentation of the Agreement. It is being said that 31 October is the deadline for creation of a shadow executive. Bunkum!

It is the target for, and I quote, "identifying and agreeing ... areas where co-operation and implementation for mutual benefit will take place". We may still meet that target. Certainly if others had, a month ago, shown the same urgency as ourselves, there would no problem.

But neither here nor elsewhere is there any specific deadline for the institutions of the

Agreement.

The Agreement stands. There is no other way forward. Northern Ireland needs strong Leadership at this time.

But everyone stands to gain in the future if this Party continues to offer that leadership.

Today in the new Northern Ireland Assembly we are starting to deliver accountable democracy.

To do that we need to keep our nerves. We need to recover that steadiness and unity that characterised this party when it created the first devolved legislature some 75 years ago.

James Craig and his colleagues faced problems similar to ours. They also faced criticism from some unionists. But this party, then as now, shouldered its responsibilities. Our forbears pulled together and they pulled Ulster through. We can now do the same

And we will.

After more than a quarter of a century out of power, unable to control our destiny, we are now on the verge of taking power back into our own hands. Power, it is true, that must be shared with others, but Northern Ireland's problems will now be tackled by the representatives of Northern Ireland voters - and predominantly by Unionists.

We face real politics. Decisions about schools, hospitals, roads, the economy, and the environment. There will be difficult decisions. There will be genuine divisions.

But is there not also a sense of excitement about taking responsibility - about beginning anew - about a real chance to do what Craig and Carson wanted to do then? Build a Northern Ireland at peace with itself and its neighbour.

The Ulster Unionist Party is progressive, pluralist, confident, respected internationally and will be the force to be reckoned with in the Northern Ireland of the future.

We must lead the way. We need a strong united and effective Party. Our resources must be developed as never before.

Our presentation and self-discipline must be the most professional of all the Parties.

In Government, the Unionist people will look to us for leadership - and we shall provide it.

We have come a long way over the past few years and we have achieved much. Our future holds prosperity, a future of confident co-operation with the rest of the British Isles.

Prosperity is already bringing people to Northern Ireland. The 1990's have been the first decade in living memory when each year more people moved into the Province than moved away.

The IDB North America Roadshow, that I have been on, that Jeffrey was on until family bereavement forced his return, where Danny Kennedy is continuing the work, shows clearly the massive opportunities for trade and investment.

We need them.

We have to turn an economy, distorted by violence, to an economy growing in peace and prosperity.

We cannot to continue with 60% of jobs in the public sector.

The switch of European funds to the Mediterranean and Eastern European countries will challenge us.

The crisis in agriculture needs our urgent and sustained attention.

We must refocus our economy from low added-value areas vulnerable to cheap foreign competition to high added-value areas which take advantage of our greatest resource, the quality of our people with their proud inventive commercial tradition.

These will demand all our energies.

As a society, we cannot afford to allow those energies to continue to be sapped by division and demoralisation.

There is one road ahead for this Party and this Country. It is the road to stability - to prosperity - to peace.

Let us have confidence in ourselves. Look at what we have endured over the past thirty years and look at what we have achieved.

We now have to work for our future. The road to that future is always under construction. We are now building it.

The Ulster Unionist Party will continue to grow and develop. We will meet the opportunities and the challenges ahead of us. We know we will be stronger together than divided. It is time to move forward and build for the future.

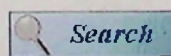
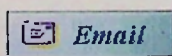
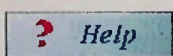
This year has been the watershed for Ulster. But the goal of stability and accountability is in sight.

It has been a testing time for this party.

But we have come through and we have carried with us and we have kept alive the hopes and yearning of this people.

We can now move into the future.

A future where Ulster Unionism has an assured and respected place in this Kingdom, in Europe and throughout the world.



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