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The unionists have surprised many people by agreeing to enter the Brooke talks. The big question is whether they can now produce any further surprises. Frank Millar, London Editor, reports.

United front raises eyebrows

THE Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) enter next week's constitutional talks about a possible new British-Irish agreement as one team, apparently in pursuit of common policy objectives.

This decision by the leaders, Mr James Molyneaux and the Rev Ian Paisley respectively, has caused some surprise, and a little scepticism, within their parties.

The unionists are at one in their opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, but since the collapse of their protest campaign, unionist unity has largely been a matter of the personal relationship between the two party leaders.

Relations otherwise are strained to say the least — and these strains and stresses personally attach to many who will now sit together at the conference table.

The UUP leadership is openly suspicious of, and hostile to, Mr Peter Robinson, the DUP deputy leader, whose enthusiasm for the talks process prompts suggestions that he is too eager for compromise.

The DUP's most prominent "young turks" are equally contemptuous of Mr Molyneaux's agenda, which they say could convert to the greatest compromise of all. To the UUP, those who want devolution are presumed ready for power-sharing and are therefore deeply suspect.

To many in the DUP, Mr Molyneaux's preference for reform of Westminster procedures, and minimal administrative devolution, looks perfectly cap-

able of co-existing with the existing agreement.

Some senior members in both parties believe these inherent conflicts will quickly surface once the talks begin. But there are good reasons why they should not. Certainly Mr Molyneaux and Mr Paisley are not alone in recognising that the prospects for a durable solution are not enhanced by a falling out which permits either unionist party to move to the right of the other.

The key to continuing unionist accord — and thus to its prospect of success — will be the detailed development of its blueprint for an alternative agreement.

The existing model — a precis of which was published in *The Irish Times* — was drafted by a joint 10-man team in December 1987, and formed the basis of previous "talks about talks" with the former Northern Ireland Secretary, Mr Tom King.

In its outline proposals, the unionists say they accept that "the realities" on which their plans are based "are not necessarily those that unionists would like to exist nor even those that unionists contend to exist, but rather are those the (British) Government has demonstrated it believes do exist." The realities are "the three sets of relationships".

The unionists told Mr King they sought to "regularise and normalise" relations with the Republic. Their prerequisite for this is withdrawal of the constitu-

tional claim contained in Articles 2 and 3.

Unionists envisage an Irish Government office in Belfast; a joint British-Irish parliamentary body; participation, as part of a United Kingdom team, in discussions with Irish ministers about "non-transferred functions"; and "ad hoc" meetings between Irish ministers and Northern Ireland representatives drawn from a new assembly.

Such an assembly would have an external affairs committee, responsible for monitoring the North's dealings with Dublin, London and the European Community. However the scale of powers to be devolved is unclear.

Ulster Unionist Party sources describe the assembly as an administrative authority (Mr Molyneaux favours the Strathclyde Regional Council model), but DUP sources say the assembly must have legislative powers, and an inbuilt capacity for future growth.

There would be no executive (the unionists previously rejected "executive power-sharing") but rather a business committee comprising chairmen of departmental committees appointed in proportion to party strengths. The principal of proportionality overcomes unionism's previous rejection of power sharing "as of right".

Whatever it is called, the principle of partnership has been embraced. No serious unionist believes any power will be devolved on any other basis. The unionist draft offers minority

representation "at the highest level".

Whether the SDLP will see it that way is another matter. The SDLP deputy leader, Mr Seamus Mallon, in a recent interview in *The Irish Times*, insisted that a new administration in the North must have security and revenue-raising powers, and authority to deal on its own behalf with the EC. And high-ranking SDLP members generally have shown no belief in Mr Molyneaux's more modest proposals as sufficient to constitute "a solution".

Herein lies the potential for unionist division. Some regard Mr Mallon's plan as a barely concealed recipe for a federal Ireland. But other unionists, and some members of the Alliance Party, are responsive to his broad agenda, provided a federal Ireland is not.

The DUP fully supports Mr Molyneaux's calls for proper legislation and a House of Commons select committee on Northern Ireland, but they regard these measures as axiomatic, and largely peripheral to the search for a replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Moreover, devolutionists in both parties see (at least) a potential conflict between Mr Molyneaux's antipathy to the Hillsborough treaty, and his even longer-standing antipathy to devolution.

A purely administrative assembly would afford very limited scope for North-South co-

operation. If the assembly's chairmen were restricted in fiscal and policy terms by decisions taken in London, Irish ministers would naturally see east-west dialogue as the more profitable.

If security powers were not transferred, the Irish Government would still require the right to make representations and proposals about the security and confidence issues which account for at least 80 per cent of the work of the Anglo-Irish Conference.

Could this be rendered less objectionable to unionists by the extension to an assembly of comparable rights? And what is the unionist formula to by-pass the exclusive-to-Northern Ireland input from Dublin?

Mr Molyneaux has previously speculated about an extension of the consultative process, giving Dublin the right to make representations about the Irish community in Britain. Would the Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, want to?

Or would he look more kindly on an alternative, favoured by other unionists, whereby Britain would gain reciprocal rights to make representations and proposals about matters internal to the Republic?

Against all expectations, the unionist leaders have put themselves in a position to find out. But scepticism still prevails. Their real challenge will be to cause further surprises.

Tomorrow: Frank Millar looks at the British Government's position