

Ulster Unionist leaders climb down over talks

THE BROOKE initiative for Northern Ireland was rescued from collapse last night after an unexpected climbdown by the Unionist leaders James Molyneux and the Rev Ian Paisley, who emerged from a meeting with the Prime Minister to announce that they were prepared to take part in talks next Monday.

The Unionists made two key compromises over the ultimatum, given to them by Peter Brooke, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. They said they had reluctantly agreed to accept an independent chairman for the talks, who could be "someone like Jimmy Carter", and to hold part of the talks with Irish ministers in Northern Ireland.

The outcome of the meeting has, however, introduced new complications into the already complex process of bringing all sides to the conference table. The two Unionists did not give a direct answer to the ultimatum issued by Mr Brooke, and have not specifically agreed to abide by his terms.

The new position was spelt out by Mr Brooke, who said yesterday: "They made it clear that subject to the determination of the identity of the chairman, and agreement about the standing orders and rules under which that chairman would operate, and subject also to the decision about which specific location in Northern Ireland would be selected, they were prepared in principle to work the procedure which I laid out."

By David McKittrick
and Colin Brown

Mr Brooke had made clear on Tuesday that his terms were non-negotiable and that he required an answer to them by yesterday. The Unionist position clearly leaves a number of potentially contentious points still unresolved.

Mr Paisley made clear that their shift of position came because the Unionists did not want to bear the blame for the breakdown of the initiative. "If anyone closes the talks, it won't be us. Our political opponents wanted to put us into a position where we would be running away. We are not running away," Mr Paisley told a press conference at Westminster.

Although Mr Brooke welcomed the outcome, the talks remain fraught with problems. Mr Paisley said the idea of an independent chairman, who would be neither Irish nor British, was "a farce". He said as soon as a name came out of the hat, the Press would examine in detail "his moral mystiques, his political mystiques" and everything he had ever said about the IRA.

The Unionist leaders remain hostile to interference in the progress of the talks by Gerry Collins, the Irish Foreign Minister, and said that their faith in Mr Brooke as an honest broker had been "brutally shaken" by his ultimatum.

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Unionists seek way out of isolation

David McKittrick,
Ireland Correspondent,
analyses the role of
Unionist leaders in the
Brooke talks on
Northern Ireland

EVEN BY the lights of their own aims and objectives, the performance of Unionist politicians as negotiators in the Brooke talks process has, by almost universal consent, been counter-productive and erratic.

Within weeks of the parties gathering at Stormont buildings in Belfast, the Unionists were isolated to an extraordinary extent. The other interested parties — the British and Irish governments, the SDLP and Alliance — quickly agreed that most of the talks should take place in Northern Ireland.

The Unionists alone took the position that they would not talk to Irish ministers anywhere on the island of Ireland unless there was an advance commitment that Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution would be changed. The others regarded this as unrealistic.

The signs are that most of the Unionist population found the insistence that talks could not be held in Northern Ireland incomprehensible, and considered it close to ludicrous that the process could falter over the venue.

It was apparent for some time that the Unionist position was far away from that of the other parties; it was also reasonably predictable that Mr Brooke would eventually come down publicly against them. He did so with his ultimatum on Tuesday.



The Unionist leaders James Molyneux and the Rev Ian Paisley outside No 10 Downing Street yesterday after their meeting with John Major Photograph: Glynn Griffiths

By his action he left the Unionists with two choices. The first was to reject the proposal, thus bringing the talks process to a halt. There is little doubt that they would have taken full blame. One Conservative MP, Peter Temple-Morris, said yesterday: "If these talks are going to fail it will be solely, utterly and completely the fault of the Unionists."

Unionist sources made no secret of the fact, on Tuesday night

and yesterday morning, that they found the Brooke terms unacceptable. By the time James Molyneux and the Rev Ian Paisley met John Major yesterday afternoon, however, the line had changed.

The Unionists had previously made six different suggestions on venues; all those were rejected, and they came away without an assurance on Articles 2 and 3. Yet they emerged to say they now ac-

cepted what was on offer, thus agreeing to meet Dublin ministers in Belfast — a strikingly abrupt change of course.

It has always been apparent that although senior Unionist leaders have spent many years in politics, they have very little experience in the art of negotiation. Even before the venues issue arose, one nationalist remarked that most at the table would be skilled negotiators, but added: "I'd be very wor-

ried that the poor old Unionists would be way out in the cold — so far out that they wouldn't realise how far out they were."

There are many, including some prominent Unionists, who suspect that some Unionist leaders do not want the talks to succeed and will be satisfied if, at some future date, they tail off in failure. But it seems the realisation dawned yesterday that rejection at this point and on this particular issue would lead to

almost universal condemnation, and that in effect the Brooke terms amounted to an offer which could not be refused.

This mechanism may be useful in the further crises which no doubt lie ahead. At the same time, however, one of the legacies of this episode is an even deeper mistrust than usual among the parties involved, and a souring of the atmosphere which will take some time to dispel.