

THE MOOD OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND PARTIES

THE UUP

At the Party Conference in October the UUP were buoyant. But as the position of HMG has been clarified (or inferred from leaks), the optimism has proved difficult to sustain. The UUP rank and file are growing increasingly suspicious of HMG's motives, and the Irish Press publication of the Irish version of the joint framework document, and revelations about the extent of Government contact with Sinn Fein, have made things worse. John Taylor recently warned that the "understanding" with the PM would have to be reviewed if it did not begin soon to produce concrete results. He claims that the UUP are working with the Government but not trusting it: and that support is only being given because the alternative of a Labour Government would be worse.

Taylor is voicing the fears of many in the Party who see the nexus with HMG as potentially beneficial, but also possessing a significant downside in terms of increasing UUP vulnerability to DUP attacks. The effect of such comments is to increase pressure on the Government to weaken its determination to secure an all-encompassing peace deal with Dublin; and, as many Unionists believe, Sinn Fein too.

Jim Molyneaux is promoting the idea that political progress can best be achieved by the creation of "accountable democracy" delivered by a local Assembly, with the issue of relations with Dublin postponed for an indefinite period. To that end he has recently emphasised the impossibility of achieving movement on Articles 2 and 3, and of his belief that large numbers of people from both communities in Northern Ireland would welcome such a limited deal. There are signs that the UUP are increasingly falling in behind him on this vision of the way forward, which is enhanced by the expectation that an announcement of a NI Select Committee is imminent.

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THE DUP

The DUP are in good heart, with Dr Paisley turning in some vintage performances. They are profoundly suspicious of any of the proposals for political development currently being revealed, and believe (with some justification) that the bulk of the Unionist population shares these fears. They feel it is only a matter of time before the UUP, whether wittingly or not, acquiesce in some act of treachery, leaving the way open for the DUP to reveal themselves as the true defenders of Unionism. A motion at the Party Conference on Saturday called for a campaign to educate the Unionist population in the realities of the situation, and regain the leadership and trust "which has been lost through Unionist compromise and British betrayal". There was also talk of a "Save Ulster Campaign", although privately some younger members of the Party hierarchy are expressing doubts about the enthusiasm of many of their supporters for the inevitable demonstrations and marches this would involve.

Distrust of the two Governments is based on the suspicion that acceptance of the Hume/Adams agenda is at the heart of any process they are developing. The issue of talks with Sinn Fein is particularly sensitive, and the revelations about the extent of HMG's contact with the Provisional movement have deepened suspicions. A range of other issues - the review of the organisation of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland, speculation about revised operational instructions to the security forces, and the number of arrests of Loyalist suspects after Greysteel - are prayed in aid of the Party's belief that a process of betrayal is in train.

The Party insist that it is not enough to guarantee that constitutional change can take place only with Unionist consent - Unionists must have the power to consent or not to political developments along the road to a settlement. This implies an awareness of the danger of self-exile from the political process.

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Publishing their own proposals - "Breaking the Logjam" - may have given them some moral standing as a Party which wants to discuss progress, albeit on their own terms. This probably accounts for their recent complaints that HMG and the Irish Government are intent on excluding them from the political development process.

THE SDLP

Following their Party Conference last weekend, at which unequivocal support was given to John Hume's efforts to bring about peace through dialogue with Gerry Adams, the SDLP remain convinced that peace can be attained. Although surprised by recent revelations of HMG's contact with the Provisional movement, they are supportive of any efforts to bring Sinn Fein in from the cold. Hume clearly continues to believe his dialogue with Adams could produce a satisfactory outcome. His speech at the weekend offered the simplistic view that it should be easy for HMG to sign up to the agreement he had reached with Adams. Some in the Party recognise more clearly the constraints on HMG, and have been reassured of its seriousness of intent in seeking peace, as demonstrated by recent disclosures.

It has been evident for some time that Hume sees little prospect of achieving anything through inter-party Talks (a view others such as Eddie McGrady and Joe Hendron do not share). Hume's dialogue with Adams and subsequent hyping of peace has undoubtedly alienated Unionists. The SDLP have remained ever willing to join whatever talks process is in train, but are not seeking to lead one. They remain, however, hostile, to a NI Select Committee, arguing that it both intrudes on to the territory for discussion in any inter-party Talks, and that it is evidence of a deal with the UUP stretching back to the summer. They are nonetheless likely to take up their seats on any such Committee, while in concert with Opposition spokesmen and the Irish Government, stressing their grave doubts about the utility of such a move.

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THE ALLIANCE PARTY

The Alliance Party remain deeply committed to the inter-party Talks, and have in recent meetings with both Prime Ministers made clear their desire for the two Governments to take the lead in this process.

They have not been swayed from this position by recent events, and whilst broadly welcoming progress on the road to peace, would enthusiastically sign up to HMG's analysis that the search for a political settlement is complementary to, and therefore just as important as, the search for lasting peace.

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