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Overview of Post-Electoral Political Situation in Northern Ireland

1. David Trimble is in a difficult political situation, and knows it. He told a mutual friend last evening that the "situation is worse than it appears, and it is changing very fast". The latter was a reference to the apparent talks to coalesce the three anti-Agreement Unionist groups (DUP, UKUP and the Donaldson dissidents in the UUP).

25A

Robinson

2. Robinson lacked the guts in the past to make a serious bid for leadership of Unionism. However, at fifty, he now knows the clock is ticking for his undoubted political ambitions. Moreover, Paisley is a declining figure, and was never less involved in an election campaign. The time may be right now for Robinson to make his political bid for power.

Trimble

3. Trimble is clearly deeply worried about (a) the possible departure of a number of his MPs to a new grouping, and the danger that they might bring some Assembly Members with them; (b) the danger of his not being able, as local MP, to deliver on Drumcree (an obligation that arguably goes with the job) and (c) the possible development of a feeling that Trimble has been fatally weakened, and the resulting impact of this on the "loyalty" of his team in the Assembly.

4. Trimble realises he has made mistakes - his own approach to the Prisoners Bill was politically all over the place, while nominating Donaldson as spokesperson on it was a major error of judgement. Above all, perhaps, he knows that there is no way back for him, nor does he wish one. He has been courageous, and he deserves help and support. He can, of course, do much himself. He apparently intends, for instance, integrating the Parliamentary and Assembly parties, and trying to knock discipline into shape. He should, in my view, also seek quickly to re-establish a high political profile, by, for instance, meeting the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach at an early date.

Trimble/Adams

5. Trimble needs to stop using language that suggests he is determined to delay the coming into being of the (Shadow) institutions envisaged in the Agreement. This is sending all the wrong messages to nationalists, and especially to Sinn Féin. He should also, as far as possible, try to stop lecturing Sinn Féin on decommissioning. The task in this area (especially a "war is over" statement) might best be left to the SDLP and ourselves.
6. On the other hand, Sinn Féin also need to start finding language that will help Trimble. Given the absence of dialogue between them, it is in my view of the utmost importance to find an intermediary who could try and choreograph a way forward between them on sensitive issues (e.g. through reciprocal statements). John Hume would obviously be the right man for this. Unless we organise something on these lines, we will not have the required handle on the situation over the coming delicate period. It would be very valuable if Hume and Mallon could be sounded out on this at today's meeting.

Dermot Gallagher

29 June 1998