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ASSESSMENT OF THE PRESENT LOYALIST POSITION

1. Following the rejection by the British Government of the UUUC majority Convention report there followed amongst unionists in general, and particularly within the UUUC, considerable confusion on how best to oppose and even whether to oppose direct rule. The dilemma was heightened by the fact that there did not seem to be a strong grass-roots reaction to direct rule and in many instances it was clearly being welcomed with considerable relief. A national opinion poll taken within a fortnight of the ending of the Convention showed that 74% of the population (72% Protestants and 79% Catholics) accepted direct rule. In addition there were indications that the disillusionment of the population with politicians and the political process was almost complete. In the prevailing mood of political apathy the political leaders of the majority community were in some confusion as to how the political process should best continue to express itself. They obviously had considerable doubts as to how they should conduct themselves or in what direction they should lead their supporters.

2. The confusion within the ranks of the UUUC was heightened by the fact that the Westminster MPs, led by Enoch Powell, made it clear that they were not all that unhappy with direct rule. Powell greatly annoyed his Northern Ireland colleagues in the Convention by making speeches on the theme that direct rule made the Union more secure and by one extremely provocative speech in which he proposed the theory that "the UUUC no longer exists". In addition both Molyneux, McCusker, Carson and Dunlop have publicly been extremely critical of Ernest Baird's behaviour and approach to the problem of direct rule and in private McCusker has made it quite clear that he thinks direct rule is a good thing. While Paisley has made the necessary ritualistic noises against the rejection of the UUUC report and while he is currently apparently backing Baird in a campaign to restore devolved government to the Province, those who know him best think that privately he is not at all displeased with the direct rule situation.

3. The result of this split between the Westminster MPs and the ex-Convention members, combined with the other internal tensions within the UUUC itself, has meant that the attempt by Ernest Baird in particular to muster the UUUC in strength against continued direct rule has been to date at least somewhat ineffective. Baird (who is

undoubtedly motivated by a personal ambition to take over the centre of the stage in Northern Ireland from Ian Paisley) had been pushing since the ending of the Convention for the establishment of a United Unionist Action Council to oppose direct rule and to get the UUUC majority Convention report implemented. Baird made it clear from the outset that he wished the Council to be representative of all shades of loyalist opinion and on 23 March 1976 Baird called for the admission of the UDA to the UUUC. In addition from the outset it was made clear that the more respectable para-military groups such as Down Orange Welfare and the Ulster Service Corps were also to be members of the Action Council. This immediately alienated the Official Unionists and eventually Baird was left with a certain amount of egg on his face when in fact the major para-militaries (the UDA and the UVF) declined his invitation to become involved in the Action Council. In the face of this snub Baird seems eventually to have dropped his original idea of an Action Council associated with para-militaries but the possibility of a new Action Council excluding the para-militaries was discussed by the Steering Committee of the UUUC at the end of April and got the support of Paisley, who up to this had been lukewarm about the idea. The Official Unionists have up to the present however indicated that they are not prepared to participate even in the revised Action Council if it involves unconstitutional or illegal activities. However, it should be added that the Action Council as such has never properly got off the ground and if it were to be a success the possibility that the Official Unionists might change their mind is not to be excluded. Despite the hardline resolutions it has been passing the Council has not shown any particular ability at planning, administration or organisation and what precisely the tactics of the new Council will be is not clear at this stage. The Action Council has continued to make threatening statements about giving a lead to the people of Northern Ireland but in fact has never decided on practical means of expressing its dissatisfaction with the policy of the British Government. (The Chairman of the new Action Council is a Mr. Joe Burns of Maghera, former Stormont MP for the North Derry constituency and a Junior Chief Whip under Terence O'Neill. He was one of the first people to abandon O'Neill at the beginning of his downfall.)

4. During the period since the ending of the Convention the Official Unionist Party has found itself in a very uncomfortable position. They have been extremely unhappy with the idea of an

Action Council and have emphasised again and again that all forms of protest against direct rule must be constitutional in character. As a party it has tended to make the issue of an increase in seats at Westminster or an appeal to the House of Lords or the European Court of Human Rights against the British Government's rejection of the Convention report its main line of approach. The moderate element within the Party has clearly been shocked by statements from Baird on the lines that "by remaining law-abiding loyalists are co-operating in their own destruction". While anxious to avoid a total break-up of the UUUC, they are clearly not very happy with the direction that their partners in the Coalition are taking. However, although the Party is apparently firmly set against violent reactions to direct rule and is pledged to act only through legal and constitutional channels, some sources indicate that there is an awareness that events could overtake it (as happened with the UWC strike in May 1974). Commentators were predicting a very early break-up of the UUUC following the Official Unionists' refusal to join the Action Council on 2nd April. However, sources within the Party indicate that because of the pressure from its more hardline partners and the increasing dissatisfaction with direct rule the Party is moving, regrettably if slowly, nearer to Mr. Baird's way of thinking and that Baird slowly but surely seems to be getting his way. The UUUC still meets once a week and the Official Unionist Party continues to participate in these meetings. In the view of John Taylor the likely trend of the Party will be to move towards a strengthening rather than a fragmentation of the UUUC machine. Taylor has also expressed the view that he expects a strong and violent reaction to direct rule by the Autumn and that the British Government are living in a dream world if they think that direct rule can continue for an indefinite period of from three to five years.

5. The prospects of the emergence of some sort of agreement between the political parties in Northern Ireland through continued talks seems at this stage fairly remote. Mr. William Craig, at the beginning of May, called for a resumption of inter-party talks aimed at reaching agreement on a devolved administration in the North. While the public response to his invitation has not been entirely negative, even from his UUUC partners, and there is a tentative proposal that all-party talks might take place in a Belfast hotel in a fortnight from now, it must be considered extremely unlikely that these talks will either take place or if they do, that they will lead to anything. Secret

talks between the Official Unionists and the SDLP at a fairly serious level have been taking place over the last six weeks and while these seem more hopeful there still seems to be little chance of a realistic compromise coming out of them.

6. The discussion of the possibility of negotiated independence has once again become more prominent in Northern Ireland. While it is clear that the possibility of UDI is worrying everybody alternative forms of independence have obviously not been clearly thought out. Serious discussion of the independence possibility is now being actively pursued amongst the Protestant para-militaries and groups like the UWC. A three-day conference on the subject (twice postponed) by the para-militaries is scheduled to take place in Portrush next weekend. Various politicians are also known to favour independence, the most extreme of whom are Baird and Edmund Thompson, the Official Unionist Party representative from Mid-Ulster, who would be prepared in certain circumstances to seize it. The indications are that the debate on this issue is still at a very early stage but the realisation of the economic consequences of independence are now widely accepted. There is a widespread belief amongst the many politicians in Northern Ireland that the British will encourage this independence debate and would be quite happy to see it as the ultimate solution to the Northern Ireland problem.

7. The disarray at present amongst the Protestant para-militaries is a symptom of the confusion and mistrust that has permeated the para-military atmosphere for several months past. The UDA in particular is clearly uncertain of the trustworthiness of some of its colleagues in the Ulster Army Council and is also clearly confused about what policy line to take during the present period of direct rule. Andy Tyrrie seems to be involved at the moment in an attempt to tighten up and separate his organisation from the Ulster Loyalist Central Co-ordinating Committee and from all contact with other para-military groups. In addition he has refused to allow members of his own organisation to participate in the proposed conference on independence being conducted by the para-militaries in Portrush this forthcoming weekend. Sources close to Tyrrie indicate that while there has been a considerable shake-up inside the UDA at the moment he himself is still very much in control and there is no danger to his position. Tyrrie himself is said to favour independence but also

firmly believes that the discussion of the independence option is in its very early stages and it will take a considerable period of time to bring people around to accepting the idea. He has emphasised that independence achieved by violent means would not succeed and that a formula would have to be found for getting widespread support for the idea.

8. The other main Protestant para-military organisation, the UVF, is suffering from severe internal problems at the moment. It is reported that the UVF Brigade Staff based in West Belfast is not in full control of the UVF units outside the city. The East Antrim Brigade in particular was severely decimated last year by arrests and there seems to be a running squabble between the two factions in the Mid-Ulster Brigade. This may explain the recent announcement by the UVF at the beginning of the week that they would observe a partial cease-fire for a period of three months. Commentators are inclined to think that the cease-fire will probably not be any more effective than the Provisional ceasefire and in any event the UVF has emphasised that it will still remain free to act in a defensive capacity.

9. The UWC does not seem to be in a position to organise a further strike at present. The current leader of the organisation, Jim Smyth, admitted privately recently that the Council was completely factionalised and that its organisational capacity was almost destroyed. In addition there is a clear grasp amongst the Protestant para-militaries that a strike at this stage would mean the closure of a number of major firms in Northern Ireland and might have the effect of doubling the present unemployment rate. It is thought in the circumstances that the possibility of a strike in the immediate future is extremely remote.

10. In conclusion, there is considerable confusion amongst the Protestant para-militaries at the moment and it is not envisaged that there will be an immediate tightening of the Protestant para-military machine. The behaviour of the para-militaries in the last few months has been characterised by petty jealousies, personal animosities and the recurring feuds as a result of which their response on the ground to the increased Provo violence in March and April was quite contained. However, many commentators feel that this was both fortuitous and accidental and that no great comfort can be

taken from it. The retaliatory killings over the weekend of 15/16 May show that there is still a frightening capacity for retaliation in this type of circumstance and all the evidence is that the capacity to act quickly means that greater planning and sophistication is now available on both sides.

11. Finally, earlier this week the Reverend Ian Paisley and Mr. Ernest Baird announced that they would mount a campaign of definite action and give a lead to the Protestant people. Implications of the announcement when first made seemed to be quite frightening. It is becoming clearer that the statement by Baird and Paisley was more an attempt to build up support for their Action Council against direct rule than a demonstration that they have substantial support and backing at the moment. In this it seems to have failed. Both the Official Unionist Party and UUUC MPs at Westminster have been critical of the move. Views from Belfast indicate that there is considerable puzzlement in the UDA at the announcement. The vigilante patrols, initially unarmed but eventually probably armed, that Baird and Paisley are proposing would seem to be confined to the south and west of the Province where the Ulster Service Corps (USC), which also calls itself the Ulster Special Constabulary, is the main Protestant para-military organisation. Not a great deal is known about this organisation except that it is composed mainly of ex-B-Specials but it is quite separate from the Ulster Special Constabulary Association (USCA) which was formerly run by George Greene and is largely a welfare organisation (an article on the USC from today's Irish Times is attached). It remains to be seen whether in fact these patrols will have any effect on the situation but most people in para-military circles in Belfast were yesterday reported as sceptical of the exercise, which appears at this stage to be something of a damp squib.

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