



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Hints of a Unionist Re-Think?

1. A number of speeches by major Unionists leaders over the past week or so could be seen as an indication that Unionists may be preparing the ground for some form of political movement in the not too distant future. This note sets out the necessary background and concentrates on a speech by the OUP General Secretary, Frank Millar (Millar's is the only full text available to us).
2. There have been indications for some time that the leadership of the Official Unionist Party, in particular, has been concerned that their handling of the campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement was losing support among their voters. In recent weeks there has been an emphasis on the need to come up with an alternative rather than simply continue the "Ulster says No" and the boycott campaigns.
3. Unionist tactics in the aftermath of the Agreement consisted of protest rallies and marches which brought them into conflict with the RUC, a boycott campaign of normal business in Westminister and an adjournment policy in local Councils. The adjournment policy and the boycott of normal business in Westminister have been the subject of much disagreement in the Official Unionist Party and it is clear that a significant number of Official Unionists see it as eroding Unionist influence and credibility in Westminister. There seems to be general agreement in the Unionist media that the Anti-Agreement campaign has now failed.
4. The first indication that the Unionist leadership was trying to reconsider its position came with the setting up of a Task Force in February to establish what consensus exists in the Unionists community for political alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Task Force members are Peter Robinson, Deputy Leader of the DUP, Harold McCusker, Deputy Leader of the OUP and Frank Millar, General Secretary of the OUP. There has been speculation recently that the Task Force would report in May.

5. There are other hints that Unionists are at least preparing the ground for a re-think. It is clear, for instance, that the Unionist political leadership backed away from the original idea of mass rallies on the "Day of Defiance" on 11 April, organised to protest against the new Public Order legislation. Mass rallies would have been controlled to a large extent by the paramilitaries and would probably have been an occasion for violence. The token protests which took place were, clearly, an attempt by the Unionist political leadership to assert itself and to marginalise the paramilitaries. Other indications that a re-think may be on the way surfaced in a series of articles in the "Newsletter" reporting on the work and on the thinking of members of the Task Force. These articles seem to have been "planted" and are probably designed to prepare Unionists for some kind of political initiative.
  
6. Speeches over the past week by members of the Task Force can be seen as an indication of Unionist thinking. The most important speech was made in Enniskillen on 30 March by Frank Millar, the General Secretary of the OUP. Millar is by far the clearest and best long-term thinker in Unionism at present. However, his thinking may be ahead of that of other members of the Task Force and, indeed, ahead of the thinking of ordinary Unionists. His speech should, therefore, probably be viewed with some caution and seem as, perhaps, a maximalist position in the spectrum of Unionist thinking.
  
7. Mr. Millar, in his Enniskillen speech, confronted the division in his own party between "integrationists" and "devolutionists". Millar, a committed devolutionist, came down firmly in favour of devolution. He said "The days of the Protestant Ascendancy are gone and I have more than once acknowledged that no British Government will prescribe or accept a purely unionist panacea for the problems of Northern Ireland..... Recognising that the Unionist demand for integration might continue to prove unacceptable

to London, the Executive Committee identified devolution as the alternative means by which to protect the rights and interests of all the people of Northern Ireland..."

8. The reference to the Executive Committee in Mr. Millar's speech is to a Resolution of the Executive Committee of the Official Unionist Party, the policy-making body of the Official Unionist Party. The Resolution, dated 28 February 1986, is the major policy statement of the Official Unionist Party since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. That Resolution, while paying obeisance to the fact that integration was the Unionists' maximalist position, recognised that integration might not prove acceptable to the British Government and it called for, as an alternative, a "two tier or two stage Conference". Such a Conference would operate as follows:

The first stage: between the British Government and the Constitutional parties in Northern Ireland to consider the Government's proposals for devolution;

The second stage (dependent on agreement at the first stage): between the Governments in London and Dublin and a newly constituted Government of Northern Ireland to agree a British Irish framework within which genuine friendship, cooperation and consultation may be developed and encouraged within these islands".

9. Mr. Millar dealt with the role of nationalists in his speech. He said "our objective remains to persuade the minority community that this province is theirs as well as ours". He added later that nationalists' objections to previous Unionist proposals had been that "SDLP members told me that they had no desire to be part of a rubber stamp administration and were interested only in the exercise of real power. It was on the issue of real power that Brian Faulkner resigned in 1972. It is on the same issue that we must now make our stand and our pitch". Mr. Millar made it

clear that, as far as he is concerned, real power involves the return of security powers to a devolved administration. He said specifically that "the attitude of minority leaders to that issue would be a major factor in determining the success or otherwise of negotiations".

10. Speeches were also made by OUP Deputy Leader, Harold McCusker, and DUP Deputy Leader, Peter Robinson. These were less specific than Mr Millar's and Robinson, in particular, gave no clear indication of his 'thinking'. McCusker, however, stated that "we cannot force our conditions for the Union down the throats of those who live in and represent the people of Britain". He added that "no political realist" believed that the "destruction" of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was achievable and, he said, "...there has to be a replacement". An indication that McCusker may be thinking of some form of devolution with nationalist participation was given by his favourable reference to the UDA document, "Common Sense", containing proposals for devolution on a limited power-sharing basis. These proposals, published about two months ago, received a cautious welcome from the SDLP leader, Mr. Hume.
11. The "Belfast Newsletter" had some interesting comments on these speeches by Unionist leaders. It gave more attention to Mr. McCusker's views than to Mr. Millar's - this may indicate, again, that Millar is going too far too fast. Noting Cardinal O Fiaich's remarks that Protestants were feeling "a little bit at sea" in the wake of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the "Newsletter" said a better description might be that Unionists were "up the creek without a paddle". The article described the view among some Unionists that the Anglo-Irish Agreement can be smashed as a "simple macho view". The article went on to note that the Unionist Task Force will report to the Unionist leadership by the end of the month. It quoted a "Task Force source" as saying that "...the arguments have been strongly in favour of devolution. No other proposition has been seriously

canvassed". It added that the Task Force members are hoping "that their conclusions-cum-recommendations will be included in the election manifesto". At this stage, the only comment that can be made is that Unionists seem likely to propose some cautious ideas on devolution with minority participation. These will fall well short of being acceptable to the SDLP and will be well short of Frank Millar's thinking in his Enniskillen speech. Nevertheless, Millar's thinking remains as a possible indication of how far Unionists might go, eventually, after negotiations.

12. Copies of Mr. Millar's speech and of the Official Unionist Party's Resolution of 28 February 1986 are attached.

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15 April 1987

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