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Speech by David Trimble to Ulster Unionist Council, 21 March 1998

A Further Comment - Article I and Cross Border Links

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Unionism and Article 1

1. It has become axiomatic in Anglo-Irish policy that since a simple (if contrived) majority in Northern Ireland has determined its current status (while bearing in mind that no official Irish documents have ever conceded the legitimacy of the claim that Northern Ireland is constitutionally part of the UK), then a simple majority would decide any future change in that status i.e. 50%+1 voting in favour of unity would be sufficient to bring about a united Ireland.
2. Beyond this question of absolute sovereignty, the notion of consent has been refined to mean that the form of government must have the consent of the governed. Currently, this means nationalist consent to the actual form of government in Northern Ireland. Obversely, in the context of a united Ireland, it would mean the consent of the unionist community to the form of government *within* that united Ireland. Sufficient consensus is the operational version of consent in these terms.
3. There are, then, in effect two forms of consent - a simply majority consent about status and mutual consent about form of government (through sufficient consensus) for either nationalist in Northern Ireland or unionists in a united Ireland. Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and any elaboration of this in a new British Irish Agreement are manifestations of these neat precepts.
4. David Trimble's speech to the Ulster Unionist Council did not signal his direct concurrence with these assumptions. He stated that the Union would continue for as long as the greater number wished it to and that the constitutional future of Northern Ireland was entirely a matter for the people of Northern Ireland. And it might be explained that no unionist leader worth his salt could be expected in explicit terms to proclaim that the unionist community, if outvoted, would acquiesce in the will of the greater number and join a united Ireland. But rather than leave this prospect simply unmentioned, Trimble actually made three points worth considering. These are obviously thoughts for the longer term and offered more in the way of discourse on a possible reading out of Trimble's speech. Some of the points may not, however, be easily dismissed (and as is clear at the end of this note there may be some immediate value to exploring the connection between Article 1 and North-South links). It is a statement of the obvious,

but politics in Northern Ireland is a form of theology and set pieces like Trimble's UUC speech can have a jesuitical depth and cunning worthy of the most tortured Anglo-Irish declaration. If unionism prides itself on any virtue, it is consistency and this is likely to be made abundantly clear over coming weeks.

“the pro-Union people have been determined that they will never be put under the control of a separatist all-Ireland government”.

It is difficult to square this statement with the concept of unity by consent of a simple majority. Taken in itself, it is virtually incompatible with it. There might be some room to consider 'control' as meaning direct control i.e. that while sovereignty would shift, unionists would retain control of sorts of their form of government. But that is a leap of faith based on optimism rather than calculation. In themselves, the meaning of the words seem starkly obvious.

“The Britishness of the unionist people lies at the heart of the matter.”

This is not said lightly. Trimble underscores it by saying that “if nationalists want to understand unionism, let them understand this”. But understanding this has immense consequences. It means that unity is not a simple matter of the mathematics of political demography in Northern Ireland. Even with a 50%+1 majority in favour of unity, how does one accommodate in a meaningful sense the “Britishness of the unionist people” in an all Ireland context? The only way logically to do this would be to allow some form of union to persist even with loss of an outright unionist majority. Logically this would lead inexorably to either repartition or a form of it e.g. a condominium between the British and Irish Governments regarding unionists (inevitably then over designated unionist areas) or a unilateral declaration of independence by a unionist rump in Antrim and Down. Whatever about such speculations, the introduction of the concept of 'Britishness as the heart of the matter' poses fairly searching questions about the logic and assumptions of the current theology of Anglo-Irish relations and the basis on which they ought to develop. It would mean that what is on offer as the mechanism for unity in the longer term cannot be as simple as one might currently anticipate based on Article 1. Ultimately it means that simple political unity and unionism as an inherently British manifestation are forever incompatible.

“It is for the people of Northern Ireland to consent to any change in Northern Ireland’s constitutional status as part of the United King and clearly we do not consent to any such change.”

The phraseology here is very interesting. On the one hand, Trimble is saying that the people of Northern Ireland must consent to any change: normally one would presume that ‘the people’ by any current definition is that represented by a majority. But he adds that by ‘the people’ in this instance he means unionists since “we [the people] do not consent to any such change”. Read one way, this might be explained as meaning that the people consist of simply the current majority and that ‘the people’ in a future Northern Ireland would be a different majority i.e. nationalists. Read another way, however, he seems to be saying that the unionists and the people of Northern Ireland are one and the same - that it is for *unionists* to consent to any change in the status of Northern Ireland. By conjoining the ‘people’ with the current majority, Trimble blurred a crucial distinction between ‘the majority’ (distinct through time onto itself) and ‘a majority’ (capable of shifting) and would have encouraged his audience to have heard these words as an assurance that *their* consent is required for any change.

There is a further caveat: Trimble specifies constitutional change as change in “Northern Ireland’s constitutional status as part of the United King”. There is something niggling about the addition of “as part of the UK”. It is as if future constitution change might not be the obvious alternative of unity but variant of the union.

5. Overall, one must read Trimble’s text with the same care with which it is written. He blurs the meaning of the consent as it is understood by Article 1 (current or proposed) and introduces concepts (Britishness, unionism historically and forever anti-Irish government) incompatible with sovereignty as founded on simple majority; the only logical reading of the subtext is that sufficient consensus is required for unity rather than simple majority.
6. Trimble’s speech can be measured against what we know of unionism historically - he even encourages by his references to 1982, 1912, 1920, 1974 and 1998 as a unionist continuum. If Britishness is the heart of the matter and unionists will forever resile from being under the control of a separatist all Ireland government, what does this say about unionists acceptance of a 50%+1 vote in favour of the abolition of Northern Ireland. Will unionists meekly accept that their state is no longer to exist except as some form of truncated entity within a united Ireland, a super county council catering to their quaint traditions and meaningless identity? A living museum (akin to the Amish, only different), a ‘special’ region of political orphans deserving of regional EU grants and a

special warm place in all Ireland tourist brochures? If their state and their union is to cease to exist, then so ends the expression of their "Britishness" (as opposed to their being a variant of Irishness; enriching the diversity of Irish nationhood is hardly likely to be compensation for them), their identity and their *raison d'être*. Are they, so mindful of their identity as being a product of their past (rather than a product of the dynamic of the present), prepared to end their existence because Catholics have outbred them within the borders of a state whose political demography they originally dictated to avoid such an outcome? Would it not be better to preserve their own existence, admit the miscalculation and seek a new border? This is less fanciful when one considers the historic events mentioned by Trimble himself, reminders of the power of initiative of unionism to create *ex nihilo* their own state through an assertion of force (more often potential than real but effective nonetheless). Bearing in mind Trimble's role now in the talks and then as a member of vanguard his invocation of 1974 as on a par with 1912 and 1920 will undoubtedly be relished by future historians - though whether for irony or consistency has yet to emerge.

Implications for cross border links

7. Alternatively, unionism might seek to be a special region within a united Ireland but retaining its own links to Britain. (Since unity involves the dissolving of the border and since unionism is inherently territorial, the nature of any accommodation for unionism would inevitably be geographic rather than based on declarations of individual identity e.g. it is more likely that District Councils might form the units for determining the unionist region). It is a reasonable enough assumption that in such an historic shift of overall sovereignty (and to lessen the instability threatened without special accommodation for unionism), an Irish Government would be accommodating and generous in the nature of any such special links. Such links might even involve a form of condominium with Britain.

8. There is an operational point worth considering in the context of the current peace talks and which might resolve questions about unionism's commitment to Article 1. If nationalists are being asked, as part of the new dispensation, to accept consent in both senses of the term - consent to Northern Ireland's current status and consent to the form of government - then in terms of parity and fairness, unionists should be required directly and explicitly (i.e. not simply acquiesce in a revised Article 1 between both Governments) to consent to a united Ireland should that be the clearly expressed wish of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland. In short, if nationalists accept the reality of Northern Ireland, then unionists by the same token must accept explicitly the possibility of a united Ireland *including* the unionist community.

9. Moreover, if there is any substance to the idea that Trimble and unionism may currently have a highly qualified view of Article 1 or to the expectation that in the event of an overall nationalist majority in Northern Ireland unionism will seek to retain links with Britain which express its Britishness, there is consequently a direct connection between Article 1 and cross border links - be that border the current one North-South or a future island to island one. In terms of unionism's current dismissive or minimalist attitude to North-South links, an engagement in the talks on the implications of Article 1 may be a useful exploration of the importance of cross border links in terms of identity - for nationalists now and possibly for unionists in the future. What unionists expect for themselves in a future united Ireland ought to be the measure for what nationalists are entitled to now.



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25 March 1998