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The Volunteer Political Party

The ban on the UVF was lifted by the Secretary of State on 5th April 1974 and the UVF announced at the time the formation of a new political party called the Volunteer Political Party (VPP). Its membership, according to its launching publicity, was confined to UVF members and it was therefore unlikely from the very beginning to become a mass movement. Relations between the established loyalist politicians and the VPP have always been very bad. The VPP initially sought affiliation to the UUUC and the turning down of this application increased friction between the two groups. An indication of this distrust was the support given by the UVF to the then UWC Chairman, Harry Murray, when he called for an end to internment, in defiance of the majority of Loyalist politicians. The VPP made very little impact on the political scene even after it was decided to field Mr. Ken Gibson as its sole candidate in the October Westminster elections, in the West Belfast constituency. This led to further friction with the UUUC because of the vote-splitting this would cause.

The VPP issued its election manifesto on the 27th September 1974. The main points of the manifesto were as follows:

1. Rejection of both a united Ireland and U.D.I. solution to Northern Ireland's problems.
2. A degree of local government or autonomy for N.I. similar to what is being proposed for Scotland and Wales.
3. It called upon the Catholic community to vote for parties which will work for Ulster and with which they can co-operate in any future assembly.
4. The immediate release of all internees who are members of organisations which have called an effective ceasefire.

5. Rejection of the Diplock Report and a call for two-thirds remission of sentence for those convicted of offences connected with civil disturbances.
6. Opposition to any untrained voluntary home guards.

The VPP fared very badly in the West Belfast constituency in the October election, securing only 6% of the 44,526 poll. The possibility of a Protestant working class political party emerging to challenge the established Unionist political parties, took a severe blow with this result.

Glen Barr (UWC and Vanguard) campaigned for Gibson in defiance of UUUC rules and was in effect working against UUUC candidate John McQuade. This was the cause of considerable friction between Barr and the UUUC (especially Craig).

After his defeat in the Westminster election, Gibson, on 15 October, called on the British Government to abandon thoughts of Convention elections in 1975 because of the polarisation vote for the twelve M.Ps. in the general election. He suggested that the Government should set up a consultative body to include the twelve M.Ps., six senior officers of the UVF and the UDA and any other body interested in the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland. This statement was at variance with one issued earlier in which Gibson had said that VPP would contest 14 seats.

In mid-November it was announced by the UVF that the VPP would not contest the Convention elections. They interpreted the low poll as showing that ordinary people did not want the UVF outside its military role. There was also fear that the formation of the VPP could have caused propaganda branding UVF members as "communists and atheists" and the party was not well enough equipped to counter "black" propaganda and political skulduggery of the UUUC. The VPP would not be disbanded but would be preserved as a "ginger group within the para-military parties" and Gibson and a number of

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brigade staff members would provide political advice and counsel for the organisation.

Later in November the UVF criticised Glen Barr for his Libya venture and for going "begging to the Arab communist fraternity for assistance to break the link with Britain", and continued charges made by the UUUC of being under communist influence were countered by the UVF with a reward of £500 to anyone who could prove them to be true.

The Irish Times of 6 January 1975 carries a story by David McKittrick in which he writes of the recent formation of a joint committee of Loyalist politicians and para-military leaders to co-ordinate their approach to the Constitutional Convention and its aftermath. The committee is to discuss both political policy and para-military action in the event of its failure. The politicians and the para-military groups have thus for the first time a formal opportunity to have a say in each other's affairs. The establishment of this committee is seen as a compromise between the para-military demands for a political voice and the politicians determination to keep them out of the political decision-making process. The para-military organisations are not to interfere in candidate selection or endorsement and they will not oppose UUUC candidates. Some para-military men might, however, be chosen as candidates.

The committee comprises fourteen members, seven from the UUUC and seven from the United Loyalist Central Co-ordinating Committee of para-military groups. It is not known how many of the latter might be UVF-VPP.

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