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An assessment of the UDA's present position

1. The Ulster Defence Association appears at the moment to be in a confused and indecisive state, largely attributable to the controversy surrounding William Craig's proposals for a system of voluntary coalition in times of emergency. Its position as the largest and most influential loyalist para-military grouping remains unchallenged, but internally a political struggle between 'hawks' and 'doves' seems to be in progress, with the former currently in the ascendant.

2. Traditionally, rank-and-file UDA members have looked to Craig for political leadership, and the Vanguard leader has at all times been conscious of the need to have the majority of the UDA behind him. In the last year or so, this mutual respect has been consolidated by the good working relationship which existed between Craig and the politically aware UDA 'commander-in-chief', Andy Tyrrie, a relationship fostered by Glen Barr in his dual capacity as Vanguard Convention member for Derry and as UDA "political spokesman". Accordingly, few people were surprised in September 1975 when the UDA came out firmly in support of Craig's proposal for discussions on voluntary coalition, an initiative on which the leadership had reportedly received prior briefing from Craig. In a statement issued on 10.9.75, the organisation argued that the only long-term solution to Ulster's problems lay in the establishment of a devolved government with control over security, and that it was the duty of loyalist politicians to explore all avenues of possible agreement with a view to achieving this. In the last analysis, the statement continued, the Loyalist para-militants might have to defend the province by force, but the politicians must first exhaust all possibilities of agreement. The UDA backed Craig, therefore, and warned the UUUC leadership that Loyalists who stood in the way of establishing a devolved parliament were guilty of "an act of betrayal against the Ulster people". (It is perhaps significant, however, that, even in this earliest statement, the UDA refrained from defending the specific merits of Craig's scheme, but simply approved the latter's general philosophy.)

On the same evening Craig attended a ULCCC meeting and secured the unanimous backing of this UDA-dominated umbrella body. However, the UVF and eventually the UWC supported the Paisleyite position, thereby dividing Loyalist para-militants on the issue.

Ten days later, Andy Tyrrie singled out Paisley and West for attack and charged that, because of them, "there will be no talks on a political settlement, so we are going to end up fighting". Paisley and West would thus "be to blame for all future violent deaths in the province". Tyrrie added that, if their intransigence led the country into civil war, he would expect "the politicians to do the fighting as well as the working class people". His pronouncement indicated that the UDA regarded civil war as virtually inevitable following the demise of the Convention. On 26.9.75 Paisley responded to Tyrrie's criticisms with a scathing attack on the "brazen effrontery" of a man leading an organisation which, he alleged, had murdered Protestants and Catholics alike and had been found guilty in the courts of "the most diabolical of crimes". The UDA leader dismissed this as a political manoeuvre designed to undermine Craig's position by discrediting the UDA, the latter's main bloc of supporters. Nevertheless, the UDA Inner Council met several times to discuss Paisley's allegations, and hinted that a forthcoming UDA press conference would give adverse publicity to

dealings which the DUP leader allegedly had with para-military bodies, in particular to the financial backing which he allegedly received from them. The press conference did not materialise, however, and the row is believed to have ended when Paisley privately apologised to Tyrrie some weeks later - an indication that Craig is not alone in recognizing the desirability of good relations with the UDA.

By late October, however, Craig's failure to attract any significant new support for his proposal began to make rank-and-file UDA members restless and to raise questions in their minds about their leadership's judgment. The North Belfast Brigade, in particular, is believed to have succumbed to pressure from the Independent Unionist Frank Millar at an early stage and to have tried to get the leadership to reconsider its stance. Tyrrie apparently tried to appease dissidents by conceding that, while he fundamentally agreed with Craig's proposal, he deemed the timing of it to have been unfortunate. It was reported, however, that he still supported Craig "as a personality".

Indications of disenchantment at Inner Council level came in a statement of 29.10.75, which reported a recent unanimous decision of the Council to give full support to UUUC policy at the Convention, but failed to qualify this with an expression of continued support for Craig. Glen Barr denied that the statement was to be interpreted in any way as a shift away from support for the Vanguard leader, pointing out that both he and Craig had frequently declared their willingness to abide by the majority decision and to support the majority Convention report. Nevertheless, the impression received was that the UDA was anxious to distance itself somewhat from unequivocal support. The same impression was gained on 3.12.75 when the ULCCC came out in favour of the majority report, expressing itself "satisfied that the content is in accordance with the express will and desire of the people of Northern Ireland"; perhaps significantly, the statement issued from the ULCCC's vice-chairman, John McKeague, and not from Barr. Clearer evidence of a move back towards the Paisleyite position came on 16.12.75 when the UDA's official spokesman, John Orchin, reiterated support for the majority report and warned Loyalist politicians that it was their duty to ensure that this report was adopted without being "watered down". However, he ruled out the possibility of a strike as a means of forcing acceptance of Loyalist demands.

In December Craig seemed to become aware of UDA misgivings, for his style of arguing changed noticeably. He dropped his friendly attitude to the SDLP and instead accused the latter of making no real effort to reassure the majority of their loyalty to Ulster, calling in particular for a "worthwhile initiative" from them on the policing issue. This tactic, which put the SDLP on the defensive and offered Craig, a pretext, if he wanted it, for retreating into orthodox loyalism, seemed calculated to restore him to favour with the impressionable UDA grassroots. On 15.12.75 Barr tried the same aggressive approach, angrily accusing the SDLP of having, by their refusal to accept the RUC, thrown back the idea of voluntary coalition in the face of Loyalists. The hand of friendship had been offered to the SDLP, he added, but the next time it would be "the iron fist".

Nevertheless, these remarks did nothing to allay discontent within UDA ranks. On 12.1.76 Sammy Smyth (admittedly not the most reliable UDA mouthpiece) was quoted as saying, in response to the recall of the Convention, that the UDA "would not tolerate power-sharing with

Republicans under any guise". The organisation, he said, welcomed any attempt to create an Ulster government, "but we have had five years of all kinds of deals and are not going to tolerate deals and infinitum". Embarrassed by the obvious disparity between these remarks and the pro-Craig stance of the UDA's "political spokesman", the Ulster Army Council (the overall para-military command staff headed by Tyrrie) and the closely related ULCCC (chaired, but not dominated, by Barr) decided to ban all their members from giving press interviews until further notice. Officially the reason for this was that, in "phase two" of the Convention, only the politicians were to be allowed to do the talking: in most quarters, however, this move was viewed as an attempt to silence Barr and thus to offer the appearance of a united para-military front. The ULCCC stressed rather ingenuously that, when it considered the time was right to issue a political statement, such a statement would still be issued through its chairman Glen Barr. And Barr was, of course, still free to give interviews in his capacity as Vanguard Convention member and deputy Vanguard leader. However, the net effect of the ban was to show that Barr was seriously out of line with majority thinking in both the UDA-dominated UAC and the UDA-influenced ULCCC. Throughout February 1976 Barr persisted in trying to win over his para-military colleagues to the Craig line, in particular to the idea of a referendum on the voluntary coalition proposal, but without success. On 18.2.76, at a ULCCC meeting, he asked the committee to support the Vanguard call for a referendum; the matter was debated and eventually a motion was passed in support of the idea, and Barr issued a press statement to this effect. However, on the following day, the UDA, the USC and DOW - three Committee members - issued another statement dissociating themselves from the motion. Barr incurred considerable unpopularity for exploiting his position as ULCCC chairman to enlist support for the policy of a political party to which he belonged. Even Tyrrie - whose friendship with Barr was responsible for rescuing the latter from several previous scrapes - was reported to be very displeased.

As Barr's survival in an increasingly hawkish UDA seemed very doubtful, he resigned as political spokesman on 29.2.76. However, he is still an ordinary member (of the Derry Brigade) and is still ULCCC chairman. A UDA statement on the following day explained that Barr's differences with the UDA leadership were the result of his continued support for Craig's proposals. The statement, issued by John Orchin, went on to accuse Craig of having presented his proposals to the UDA not as a genuine offer to the SDLP but as a confidence trick which would have the effect of misleading and splitting the SDLP. The trick had backfired, however, because Craig had decided that the SDLP were quite acceptable partners in government after all. The statement concluded by reasserting that the UDA and its ULCCC colleagues were unreservedly in favour of the UUUC Convention Report.

5. Barr's alienation from the UDA will make it all the more difficult for Craig to regain the organisation's support for his policies. The direct access to Tyrrie which Craig enjoyed via Barr meant a lot to the Vanguard leader, as was clear from the latter's handling of the dispute regarding Barr's Libyan trip in November 1974. Andy Tyrrie appears to be engaged in a delicate balancing act at present, no longer backing Craig publicly yet at the same time withholding direct support from Paisley. Baird recently claimed that the UUUC had Tyrrie's support, and on 25.1.76 he even suggested that the UUUC be expanded to include the UDA and other para-military groups. Despite

to his courtship, however, Tyrrie appears to be playing a waiting game, refusing to back either horse until he is certain which will win. The question is: how long can he hold out before right-wing pressure inside the UDA forces him to side with the UUUC? In a recent conversation, Craig gave it as his opinion that Tyrrie was no longer in control of the UDA, and indeed the general drift of UDA policy statements in recent months would appear to support this view. The UDA's demeanour following the killing of Sammy Smyth on 10.3.76 may indicate whether or not Tyrrie still exerts on the UDA the strong, calming influence which has been his trademark since 1973.

6. However, even if the UDA appears to be swapping Craig for Paisley at the moment, it should be borne in mind that para-militants are not bound, by electoral or other promises, to practise the consistency expected of politicians, and that therefore the possibility of a move back to Craig at a later juncture must not be ruled out. Secondly, the UDA's traditional impatience with Loyalist politicians as such does not appear to have changed, and in this respect the Paisley/Baird faction have been coming off worse than Craig, the UDA's traditional ally. Friction between the para-militants and the politicians was evident in the Tyrrie/Paisley row and in UDA reactions to the sabre-rattling engaged in chiefly by Ernest Baird in the first fortnight of January 1976. Baird issued dire threats about a "final conflict", and declared that the "final answer" would "come out of the barrel of a gun"; other UUUC speakers implied that, if the Convention report were rejected, it would be impossible to hold back the para-militants. UDA spokesmen were extremely annoyed at these remarks, and stated bluntly that they did not represent the thinking of the para-military organisations themselves. A strike was not under consideration; even if it were, the decisions relating to it would be taken entirely by the para-militants (as in the case of the May 1974 stoppage), for "the politicians cannot have a strike without us". UDA spokesmen also remarked that, if politicians like Baird seemed intent on a civil war, they must be prepared to join the UDA in the front line and fight along with them.

Tension between the para-militants and the UUUC came to a head at the opening session of the Enniskillen conference on 9.1.76, which was intended to underline Loyalist determination to resist interference with the majority Convention report. When Tyrrie, Sammy McCormick and other UDA leaders, who were annoyed that they had not received invitations to the conference, attended it ostensibly as representatives of the UWC (which had been invited), the UUUC leaders reportedly asked them to leave.

Two days later, however, following the referral back of the Convention report, the UAC as a whole decided not to take any initiatives itself but to leave decisions to the politicians for the time being. They were content to have the UUUC leaders and Craig defend their respective positions to them at a special meeting on 13.1.76, at which the mood was stated to be broadly in favour of the UUUC line.

7. The UDA's scepticism about the effectiveness and sincerity of Loyalist politicians has also been reflected in the contacts it is thought to have built up with both wings of the IRA. These have been the subject of much speculation and have in general been strongly denied by UDA spokesmen. However, in November 1975 a UDA deputation -

including Tyrie and Davy Payne (the North Belfast commander, until January 1976) - participated with various UVF representatives in a conference with Provisional Sinn Féin leaders at a Dutch community centre. Ostensibly, the Loyalist para-militants received advice from the Provisionals on the running of workers' co-operatives for ex-detainees, but it seems reasonable to assume that means of halting sectarian violence on both sides were discussed informally. The "Irish Times" of 16.1.76 reported that the UDA/Sinn Féin talks on co-operatives had been continued earlier in the month at a venue in Co. Donegal; however, the UDA denied the report. A month later, Thomas Passmore, the Belfast Orange leader, claimed that UDA leaders had recently met Provisional IRA leaders in Derry to discuss a plan for concerted opposition to the proposed phasing out of "special category" status in Northern Ireland prisons. The UDA also denied this report. On 6.3.76 the normally hardline Sammy Smyth - who stressed that he was speaking as a community worker and not on behalf of the UDA - called for an end to all Provisional violence as a preliminary to public talks with the UDA, no matter how "unpalatable" the idea might be to both sides. In the wake of the Convention, he said, the only groups which still held power were the para-militaries on both sides, and civil war could only be averted by a cessation of IRA violence followed by IRA/UDA talks. He claimed that the UDA was prepared to talk but would first have to secure a mandate to do so from the Loyalist community. Four days later Smyth was shot dead; whether Loyalists or Republicans killed him is still not clear. Nevertheless, even if the proposal he made was unapproved, the general tone of his remarks indicated a realization on the part of the UDA, or at least a section of it, that in the post-Convention vacuum Loyalist para-militants have a chance of upstaging the UUUC politicians and of guiding future events in Northern Ireland. Conceivably, one item on the agenda at UDA/IRA talks could be the possibility of negotiated independence for Ulster, a concept to which Provisional spokesmen have in general reacted positively.

8. The UDA remains the most sophisticated and wealthy of the Loyalist para-military bodies. It is supported financially by drinking clubs and protection rackets in Ulster, as well as by funds raised in England, Scotland and, to a lesser extent, North America. While in normal times it has an active membership of no more than 10,000-15,000, UDA officials claim that in a crisis situation they could muster up to 50,000 with rudimentary training and discipline. Weapons, mainly purchased abroad, are modern and well hidden.

The UDA is by far the dominant member of the Ulster Army Council, which now, following the recent accession of the formerly "too militant" UVF, brings together all significant Loyalist para-military bodies under a single command structure. Andy Tyrie, besides being the most important para-military leader on the Council, continues to play a crucial role in the ULCCC, chaired by his colleague Glen Barr; formerly the UWC's Co-ordinating Committee (which linked politicians and para-militants to the UWC), this could well be the vehicle by which Loyalist para-militants and sympathetic politicians would seize power in a hypothetical UDI-type situation. Tyrie also has reasonably good relations with the UVF at the moment, now that the older and more moderate UVF leaders appear to have re-asserted themselves within the organisation.

The UDA, however, is not averse to sectarian violence. Unlike the UVF, it has avoided being proscribed in connexion with this because those of its members who have carried out sectarian bombings and assassinations

has generally used cover names so that the parent organisation has not been directly implicated. Thus, the "Young Militants", known to be a UDA front organisation, have claimed responsibility for the bombings in Dublin and Monaghan on 17.5.1974; for subsequent bombs in Swanlinbar and Clones and for the bombing of Biddy Mulligan's pub in Kilburn on 20.12.75. Responsibility for the attack on Dublin Airport some weeks beforehand was claimed by the Belfast Brigade of a supposed "military wing" of the UDA. Press spokesman John Orchin tried to pass this off as a "separate entity"; "if it's a military matter", he commented, "they do it themselves and do not have any association with us". Glen Barr also made it clear that, in calling himself a UDA member, he was referring to the "political wing" only. However, the mid-Ulster Battalion of the UDA openly claimed responsibility for the explosions on 19.12.75 in Dundalk and Silverbridge.

9. In all respects, therefore, the UDA is a force to be reckoned with in any future crisis. UDA muscle proved decisive in the UWC strike, and the organisation's para-military capabilities appear at present to be at least at the same level as they were in May 1974. The only question is: under what circumstances would it use this muscle?

A consistent feature of UDA policy has been its interest in the notion of an independent Ulster, either negotiated or seized. Craig's hints to this effect over a number of years have been seen as a conscious reflection of UDA thinking. In July 1975 the UDA broadsheet, "Loyalist News", took exception to Enoch Powell's equation of Loyalism with respect for Parliament, and stressed that Ulstermen's loyalty was in the first instance to "the state of Northern Ireland". At the Amherst seminar in September, Barr and Tyrie insisted that they were "first-class Ulstermen, not second-class Englishmen" and held that the only solution to the conflict lay in an independent Ulster. However, for the first time in the history of these separatist assertions, the UDA men warned their colleagues that an independent Ulster must not "threaten the peace and security" of the province's minority population. Later that month the "Irish Times" reported that the UDA was to hold a closed conference of its officers on October 11 in order to discuss, among other matters, negotiated independence for Ulster. The conference was to debate a document on this issue which had been drafted by UDA officers who attended a three-day meeting in Holland in March 1975. According to the article, these officers considered that neither the UUUC politicians nor Westminster should be trusted but that some form of initiative from the UDA was needed. (However, due to the publicity which it thus received, the conference was eventually postponed.)

The UDA prefers negotiated independence for Ulster with financial support from Britain and (to a lesser extent) from the Republic, with constitutional guarantees for the minority and with a Bill of Rights. However, Barr recently told an officer of this Department that he felt the idea was unrealistic at the present time. There is as yet no evidence that conditions favourable to power-sharing - which Barr judges necessary for the survival of any political structure in Northern Ireland - would emerge in an independent Ulster.

The possibility remains, nonetheless, that the UDA, if given the right opportunity (e.g. British withdrawal), might satisfy their aspirations for independence by staging a 'UDI'-style takeover, in conjunction with the UAC and ULCCC. Much depends on the outcome of the current tension between militants and moderates in the UDA, which is creating a very

condemned picture of the organisation. On the one hand, for example, Tyrrie insists both in public and in private that the UDA has no interest either in staging a UWC-style strike or in fighting a civil war; and the UDA, as part of the UAC, agreed on 12.1.76 to leave things to the politicians for the time being. Yet on the other hand, a UDA statement of only four days previous to that had asserted that support for Loyalist para-military bodies was increasing, and that it was only a matter of time before the Protestant community gave these organisations the go-ahead to engage in full-scale conflict. The only reason "total war" had not yet enveloped the province, the statement said, was because the Protestant community had not yet thrown their complete support behind the para-militaries. In the current situation "the Protestant citizen has no option but to protect himself and his family and ultimately his own area by any means at his disposal including punitive action".

Again, the UDA-influenced ULCCC threatened in February that it would resist "with all the resources at our disposal" the Secretary of State's plan to abolish special category status in Northern Ireland prisons with effect from March 1st. Despite the militant tone on this occasion, the UDA's action in this potentially explosive matter - there are over 400 UDA prisoners in Ulster's jails - ultimately did not go beyond sending a deputation, led by Barr, to meet NIO officials.

The UDA, seems therefore, unusually volatile and unsettled at the moment, making it difficult to predict with any accuracy how it will behave over the next few months.

D. Donoghue

24 March 1976