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TALK BY DAVID TRIMBLE AT NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

I attended a briefing today given by David Trimble at the National Press Club. It was attended by about 12 journalists (including Conor O'Clery, Mark Little and Eamonn Mallie).

Decommissioning

- Mr Trimble began by saying that the cease-fire was holding but that there remained an "undercurrent of paramilitary activity" and went on to cite the incidents of beatings (225 since the ceasefire compared to 195 in the same period before), "the occasional murder" and arson attacks (he counted 84). The issue of decommissioning was, he said, an important one which had to be addressed. Northern Ireland was not South Africa - "we are a democracy". Talks, when they happened, would not be between combatants and therefore "equivalence" was required between the political parties" [i.e. that Sinn Féin should not have recourse to arms]. Trimble referred to Paragraph 10 of the Downing Street Declaration and in particular its reference to "exclusive peaceful methods" which he said signaled the arms decommissioning issue. The paramilitaries, he said, have had plenty of time (i.e. since the Downing Street Declaration) to consider their position but had thus far only offered obduracy.
- Trimble said that unionists themselves would not be involved in negotiations on decommissioning, that that was a matter for the British and Irish Governments (the Irish Government would be involved, he added, because "arms were stockpiled in the Republic"). He went on to say that detonators would form a key part of the decommissioning process as these were extremely hard to come by. He did not, he cautioned, want to get involved in the details and reiterated that it was a matter of building trust and confidence.

3. Maginnis added that they were aware of the sensitivity of the IRA/Sinn Féin about "surrendering" weapons and that the UUP therefore supported the establishment of an internationally based commission to supervise the decommissioning process. He said that the US in Haiti had sought to disarm the factions there for the safety of the wider population, implying that the US appreciated unionist concerns on the decommissioning issue. Maginnis went on to say that the IRA had two and a half tons of semtex, enough, he said, to carry out one Oklahoma bomb every day for the next seven years - "that was the fear facing the Northern Ireland community."

The Twin-track Approach

4. Trimble characterised the twin-track approach as a "fudge" and recounted the unionist version of the canceled summit between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister and alleged that the summit had been canceled by the Irish Government on foot of a threatened end to the cease-fire by the IRA. "It was a sad thing," he said, "to see a government giving way to blackmail."
5. Trimble said that it was difficult to see the current situation resolved in the short term and he could not envisage either the British Government or the IRA/Sinn Féin "blinking" on decommissioning. The twin-track approach, he said, "has hit the buffers" and we have now "run out of fudge". It was necessary, therefore, to find an alternative approach.

Northern Ireland Assembly

6. Bearing in mind the Downing Street Declaration and its call to establish a mandate [presumably the phrase democratically mandated parties, paragraph 10), the UUP were offering "an assembly or convention, call it what you like". Trimble said that this
- would give an opportunity for debate of the issues; Unionists drew a very firm distinction between debate and negotiations. Unionists would have "very significant difficulty in facing these people [Sinn Féin] across the table" in negotiations.
 - would not be an internal settlement and would allow for debate on cross border cooperation, for example: Trimble said there was a lot of rhetoric about the potential for cross border cooperation and this could be investigated by the Assembly (including hearing views for the south) under the terms of the 1982 Assembly Act.
 - represented a challenge to Sinn Féin to come forward with democratic proposals. Trimble argued that Sinn Féin did not have a mandate to be a

peaceful, democratic party (having been elected as part of the IRA/Sinn Féin movement which had espoused the use of violence). Gerry Adams himself, having lost his seat, had no personal mandate, he said. Elections to the Assembly would provide that mandate.

7. Trimble said that there was "a fair degree of support for his proposal from the DUP, the Alliance Party and in Dublin and London". "Hume over-reacted without looking at the details", Trimble said, and he had, therefore, invited Hume to discuss the proposal. In the absence of political progress in the next few weeks or months, Trimble said "this is the only likely way it will be achieved".
8. Conor O'Clery asked about the rejection by both Hume and Adams of the assembly idea which he said was in effect a nationalist veto. Trimble agreed that the British Government would be reluctant to act without a measure of cross-community support and said that he was therefore prepared to discuss the issue with Hume and had deliberately remained flexible about the details. He felt that as the twin-track approach remained "mired deep" nationalists would "appreciate the wisdom of the proposal", particularly when Hume and others had fully turned their minds to it.
9. Mark Little asked whether there was a cross-border dimension to the assembly. Trimble replied that it was an inappropriate question since the assembly was not envisaged as a government institution and would have neither a legislative nor an executive role. He reiterated that the assembly could initiate investigations and debate the issue of cross-border co-operation.

Nationalists in Northern Ireland

10. Maginnis, in reply to a rambling question from Bob Lennon of the Irish American Unity Conference (which placed a large ad in the New York Times regarding Trimble's visit - see Ambassador's report of 30 October) thanked the IAUC for the publicity ("no publicity is bad publicity") and gave an extensive reply on the extent to which the UUP had been prepared to consider the rights of nationalists in a future Northern Ireland structure, including a bill of rights, a committee system based on pro rata electoral representation, weighted majority voting on contentious issues, and the establishment of a "working relationship" with the South.
11. In response to a question from Fr Sean McManus of the Irish National Caucus regarding concerns in the Catholic community that the UUP was not an inclusive party [an incredibly anodyne question given its source], Trimble went on at length about the very broad support which he claimed the Union enjoyed. Citing an opinion poll carried out last February, he said that 75% of those who expressed an opinion, favoured the Union. He went on to claim that polls indicated that in the region of a quarter of the

SDLP membership favoured the Union and that even some Sinn Féin members favoured the continuance of the Union. He felt that the Catholic community did not identify with the UUP largely because of traditional "communal voting patterns". He hoped that there would be progress on this front in the long term and he drew attention to his party conference's theme of the Union as "being the best for everyone".

The role of the Clinton Administration

12. In response to a question, Trimble said that Clinton had a lot of influence with Irish Americans and he felt that "help can be given and we hope that it will be done in a positive way". He said that fundraising had been granted to Sinn Féin by the US Administration on the clear understanding that Gerry Adams would address the issue of decommissioning and that Adams "had let them down on this". He said that at the Conference on Trade and Investment in Washington last May, President Clinton had stated that decommissioning was the next step and that, therefore, he hoped that pressure on Sinn Féin by his Administration, thus far only intermittent, would increase.

Visit by President Clinton

13. In response to a question on likely political developments in the run-up to President Clinton's visit, Trimble said that he concurred with Ken Maginnis's assessment that there was an element of panic about the Administration's efforts to move political developments forward. These efforts "were not well focussed - we hope we can improve their focus". The most positive aspect of the visit, Trimble said, was the fact that it was happening because it would do much to correct the negative perception of Northern Ireland which was largely a product of the media. (The city of Washington, he joked, was more dangerous than Belfast.) He said that he had fed in suggestions for Clinton's programme in Northern Ireland but wished to steer away from what was or was not in the programme. The US had no executive role there and was limited in the things it could do. He said it was not helpful for either the British or Irish Governments to try to time political developments with the visit.
14. Regarding possible announcements during the visit, Trimble said that he hoped London was keeping Washington informed about the lack of progress with Sinn Féin. He understood that there were proposals on investment and economic issues which would be announced.

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