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C.C.R.U.

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, JANUARY TO MARCH 1996

Summary

The period was dominated by three main developments - the presentation of the Mitchell Report, the breakdown of the PIRA ceasefire, and the agreement reached between the two Governments

that an electoral process represented a viable way into all-party talks by 10 June. The extent to which these events were inter-linked remained a matter of debate; but their combined effect was an unprecedented flurry of activity in and between the political parties, often involving the two Governments. Sinn Fein lost much of the acceptability the Party had built up during the previous 18 months, while the prospect of elections before all-party negotiations presented the SDLP with a dilemma. The electoral process also emphasised the continuing differences between the Unionist parties. The Loyalist parties moved more firmly into the political mainstream, and played an increasingly important role in maintaining stability within the community in the aftermath of the resumption of PIRA violence.

Political development

2. As the period began, the defection from Conservative ranks of Emma Nicholson reduced the Government's Parliamentary majority to five, and focussed renewed attention on the issue of Unionist support. While the UUP repeated their mantra about continuing to support the Government so long as it acted in the best interests of Northern Ireland, the DUP were more direct, and threatened to bring down the Government if the Prime Minister ruled out the possibility of a Northern Ireland Assembly.

3. The idea of an elected body began to move centre-stage as the Mitchell Commission returned to Belfast early in January, and it was revealed that proposals for some kind of electoral process had featured prominently in the submissions made to it by some of the Northern Ireland parties. The SDLP quickly broke cover to declare that any kind of a local Assembly would be an obstacle to meaningful all-party talks. Paradoxically, both the DUP and Robert McCartney, known to favour the idea of an Assembly, immediately warned that it was totally unacceptable if it was to be used to fudge the

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decommissioning issue. A 'Sunday Tribune' poll on 14 January added another layer of confusion - 68% of Nationalists were reported as favouring an elected body, while only 28% of Unionists did so - an anomaly explained only by reference to the question which had been asked, which assumed an Assembly being used as a means of involving Sinn Fein in talks without prior decommissioning of arms.

4. Sinn Fein revealed its own confusion on the issue. Mitchel McLaughlin's initial contribution to the debate on 13 January was to state that Sinn Fein would seriously consider proposals for a talks Forum, but felt that 45 members would be more appropriate than the 90 which featured in the Unionists' ideas. Two days later, the same spokesman was declaring Sinn Fein's "implacable opposition" to the proposal, while simultaneously denying that any shift in Party policy had occurred. Helpfully or not, a 'Belfast Telegraph' poll on 17 January purported to show that 70% of the Northern Ireland electorate - including 52% of Sinn Fein voters - supported the idea of an elected body "as a step towards all-party negotiations".

5. In view of such findings, the 'News Letter' was not being particularly prescient on 20 January when it speculated that, given the rumours about the Mitchell Commission failing to find a formula to resolve decommissioning, the Prime Minister was considering elections as means of moving on the peace process. Immediately before the Mitchell Report was published a few days later, the Unionist parties repeated their calls for an Assembly (UUP) and a Constitutional Convention (DUP). Nevertheless - and despite the Mitchell Report itself endorsing the idea as a confidence-building measure - the SDLP were reported to be "stunned" and Dublin "furious" by the Prime Minister's announcement on 24 January of an elective process as a viable alternative route to all-party talks in the absence of paramilitary decommissioning. As a row developed about the extent to which the Taoiseach had been informed in advance of the Prime Minister's intentions, 'Irish Times' editorials spoke

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of a dangerous failure of understanding between the two Governments, and the 'News Letter' rejoiced in the fact that, for the first time since 1985, a British Government was not on the back foot in the conduct of Anglo-Irish relations, but was behaving as the sovereign Government of the United Kingdom.

6. Moves were quickly made to repair fences. Despite a four hour meeting (described as "frank") in the first week in February, after which the Secretary of State and the Tanaiste admitted they had been unable to resolve their differences over the elections issue, the 'Sunday Times' on 4 February felt able to report that Dublin and the SDLP were prepared to accept an elective process, provided it led directly to talks. A few days later, Mr Spring, in a surprise move described by the British side as "premature", and attributed elsewhere to motives of pure revenge, called for all parties to join in "proximity talks" to be held in a two-day Dayton-style peace conference. It was indicative of the political fault-lines that the SDLP and Sinn Fein instantly welcomed the idea as a positive development, while Unionists as promptly rejected it, the DUP in particular being unsure whether to regard it as "treacherous and ludicrous", or merely as "crazy and unrealistic".

7. The breaking of the PIRA ceasefire and the massive explosion at Canary Wharf on 9 February, and the threat posed by the subsequent Aldwych bus bomb and other devices planted in the streets of London, brought a temporary halt to developments while everyone tried to assess the significance for the political process of a renewal of terrorist violence. The difficulties were summed up in the dilemma of whether the violence - particularly if it continued and if it spread to Northern Ireland - could be allowed to put a stop to all political progress; or whether accelerated progress towards a political settlement would be seen as proof of the theory that violence brought results at a pace which peace could never deliver.

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8. A consensus rapidly emerged in favour of continuing the search for a political solution. John Hume floated the idea of a referendum on each side of the border to allow the people of Ireland to demonstrate their hostility to violence. The UUP followed up with a plan for a 90-member elected body which would use committees proportionate to party strengths to investigate and debate the political future. The DUP and SDLP met in two hours of "intensive and realistic" talks. Messrs Spring and Trimble agreed in principle that talks between them would be useful, even though they could not find common ground as to the scope of such discussions. At the end of February, following late-night discussions at official level, the two Governments agreed a Joint Communiqué which combined these and other elements into a single package - a period of intensive consultations involving both Governments and the Northern Ireland parties, to be followed by elections leading without pre-conditions to substantive all-party talks commencing on 10 June.

9. The first component of the package - the 10-day period of intensive consultations - began on 4 March with the Unionists and the PUP refusing to use Castle Buildings for talks, and Sinn Fein complaining angrily about being refused admission to the same facilities. At the end, after a process characterised as demonstrating "much talk but little proximity", the Government confirmed that no clear-cut answers had been produced to the problems identified. Three discussion papers were circulated to the parties, other than Sinn Fein, on electoral methods, transition to negotiations, and the possible role of a Forum, but succeeded in identifying little by way of common ground.

10. A more definitive response was elicited by the production, in the middle of March, of the Government's proposals for Groundrules under which the all-party negotiations might in due course be held. Despite personal reassurances from the Tanaiste that Dublin wanted no say in matters pertaining to the internal affairs of Northern Ireland, the UUP continued to see the Groundrules paper as "a

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surrender to Republicanism", while the DUP demanded that it be "demolished and re-written". On the positive side, neither party showed any inclination to make the paper an excuse for breaking off talks; and by the end of March, the UUP were claiming that the Government had indicated a willingness to re-write the paper, incorporating the Party's own radically different proposals.

11. All the parties took the opportunity offered by intensive consultations to promote with the Government their own preferred version of an electoral system. It soon became clear that the UUP and Alliance demands for a constituency-based STV/PR system would prove incompatible with the two variants of a list system favoured by the DUP and the SDLP - a complication in view of the fact that, in the Joint Communiqué, the Government had committed itself to choosing the model which seemed most broadly acceptable. Given their lack of enthusiasm for the elected route to talks, the strength of the SDLP's adherence to their preferred model was difficult to judge, and the crucial calculation was whether the choice by the Government of any different electoral method would cause the Party to quit the field and forfeit the goal of all-party talks by a specified date. With regard to the Unionist side, the imponderable factor was whether the ultimate prize of an elected body would be sufficient to keep both parties in play if one electoral model was preferred over the other. The increasingly Byzantine relationship between the Government and the Unionists - with defeat in the Parliamentary debate on the Scott Report in late February being avoided by a single vote after the DUP abstained and all nine UUP members voted against the Government - further complicated the equation. By the end of March, the newspapers were speculating that a new hybrid electoral system would have to be devised in the interests of squaring the various circles.

12. Despite their avoidance of favouring one party's choice over another, the proposals for a unique elective process announced by the Prime Minister on 21 March gained few immediate friends. Dr Paisley, speaking from the US, suggested that the system had been

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liggered to benefit parties who were otherwise unelectable, and predicted that the final outcome of the talks would be similarly distorted in favour of pan-Nationalism. Equally predictably, Sinn Fein and the SDLP saw the proposals as a sop to Unionists, Seamus Mallon characterising them as a "Monster Raving Loony plan". The Liberal Democrats' judgement - "a dog's breakfast" - continued the flow of culinary comparisons. The Northern Ireland Conservatives rather excitedly referred to "a cobbled-together grotesquerie" with a lineage derived from Frankenstein; and even 'The Times' editorial caught the infection by referring to "an ugly mongrel which was also, somehow, "a happy hybrid". Only Mr Trimble's judgement - the proposals were "entirely novel and artificial" - managed to sound restrained and balanced.

The political parties

UUP

13. The UUP continued to display a certain tenacity of purpose, even if the tactics of Mr Trimble proved somewhat erratic. On the positive side, he shared a table with Mitchel McLaughlin at the Davos Economic Forum in early February. After some hesitation, he also accepted invitations to various functions in Washington during the St Patrick's Day celebrations, again - and post-Canary Wharf - being aware that rubbing shoulders with Sinn Fein guests might be part of the package. Two meetings with the Prime Minister during February were used to promote the Party's ideas for an elected body in Northern Ireland; and a brief meeting with President Clinton, also in February, was used to put across the same message.

14. But against that, Mr Trimble also attracted criticism for other aspects of his leadership. A protracted on-off flirtation with the Tanaiste eventually resulted in a UUP delegation sitting down to a "useful and constructive" dinner in Government Buildings in Dublin in mid-March, but only after several rejections, of varying degrees of gracelessness, and gratuitous references to Mr Spring as "the most detested politician in Northern Ireland".

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similarly, in his speech to the UUP Party Conference in late March, Mr Trimble's attack on the Taoiseach's commitment to peace, combined with suggestions that he "close down the IRA", and cease exporting bombs and social problems to England, caused considerable offence in Nationalist circles. It presumably offered Nationalists little comfort that, in the wake of the Scott Report debate, relations between the UUP and the Government reached an all-time low. A number of meetings with the Secretary of State were described as being either "very frosty" or "lively and forceful"; and John Taylor on 20 March felt moved to publish his opinion that the NIO was working to undermine the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

DUP

15. The DUP enjoyed a mostly positive press during the period. The Party concentrated on progressing its ideas for an elected body, and a series of meetings with both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State to that end were generally helpful. The period also offered the unusual spectacle of the DUP inviting, in late January, the SDLP to discuss the elected body concept so that Nationalists' fears could be allayed; and a series of subsequent meetings with the SDLP in locations as varied as Strasbourg and Templepatrick produced at least superficial agreement that the way forward on elections was via a list system. (The fact that, during the intensive consultations of early March, the SDLP agreed to meet the DUP at a location other than Castle Buildings was a minor diplomatic triumph in its own right.) Even during discussions with the Government, the DUP appeared to be willing to recognise and try to accommodate at least some Nationalist concerns, often to a noticeably greater extent than their Unionist cousins.

16. Relations with the UUP remained, as ever, problematic. In mid-March the two Party Leaders met at Glengall Street and emerged after 45 minutes pledged to concentrate in future on what bound them

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together rather than what separated them. The fact that the newspapers on the same day carried familiar "Paisley lashes UUP" headlines over stories about Mr Trimble's decision to accept invitations to Dublin and Washington; and the fact that both parties remained firmly committed to their preferred (and mutually exclusive) electoral system, gave the impression that there was remarkably little which did unite them. By the end of March, Paisley Junior had inaugurated the DUP election campaign with a speech to the Party's Dundrum branch, warning Unionists against voting for any party with a weak track record on crucial constitutional issues, with specific reference to those who had been "wined and dined" by Dublin.

SDLP

17. In many ways, the SDLP had to carry out the most difficult balancing act of any party. On the one hand, as in early January, the Party had issued stern warnings about the dangers inherent in a political process built around a pact between the Government and the UUP; but on the other, and particularly in the aftermath of Canary Wharf, there were dangers of an entirely different order in making political progress dependent on any proposals proving acceptable to Sinn Fein.

18. The Prime Minister's endorsement of an electoral process on 24 January wrong-footed John Hume, and his attack that day on the Prime Minister was generally regarded as an uncharacteristic misjudgement of the mood of the House. Seamus Mallon subsequently supported his Leader by alleging that, in return for UUP votes, the Prime Minister had lied to the Commons and broken faith with the Nationalist community. Nonetheless, there was no reason to disbelieve reports that Mr Hume was "shattered" by the news of Canary Wharf, nor to doubt his disappointment when an approach by himself and Gerry Adams to the IRA seeking a restoration of the ceasefire was rejected at the end of February.

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19. Such developments severely curtailed the Party's room for manoeuvre. Despite reassurances, suspicions remained that the electoral process was at bottom a Unionist plot to either restore Stormont or at best to act as a drag anchor on effective all-party negotiations. The UUP proposals of late February were dismissed as "fantasy football". But as support for Sinn Fein drained away in both Dublin and Washington, and as Sinn Fein balked at the Dublin Forum report's provisions on consent, and proved unable to take any positive steps despite a date being set for the Grail of all-party talks, it was difficult for the SDLP to shoulder the sole responsibility for maintaining the Nationalist consensus. The suggestion floated at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis towards the end of March that the SDLP might join them in a boycott of the proposed election was tactically inept, and left the SDLP with little choice but to issue a public refusal of the offer a few days later.

Sinn Fein

20. From a political perspective, Canary Wharf marked a turning point in Sinn Fein's fortunes. In mid-January, the Party's first trilateral meeting with the two Governments took place and despite limited engagement, it was announced that the "firm aim" of the Governments remained all-party negotiations by the end of February. Discussions with the Secretary of State at the end of January saw no meeting of minds; but a few days later, Gerry Adams was in Washington being granted extensive meetings with Presidential aides and even with the President himself. Before the middle of February, it looked as if John Hurl and Mary Nellis, as part of the inclusive gathering of District Councillors, would be the first Sinn Fein representatives to enter 10 Downing Street in over eight decades.

21. Not all the signs were positive however. The Party had reacted positively to the Mitchell Report, but specific endorsement of the six principles included in it would well have caused difficulty for some shades of Republican opinion. And while Sinn Fein's failure to endorse the Irish Forum for Peace and

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Reconciliation's Report could be explained away - the acceptance of certain consent provisions would not only have been tantamount to endorsing the Unionist veto, but would have given away valuable negotiating territory before talks even began - such a stance undoubtedly added to existing doubts as to the capacity of the Party to fully embrace the basic principles of democracy.

22. After Canary Wharf, such difficulties became insignificant. In the immediate aftermath the Dublin Government cut off relations with Sinn Fein at all levels. London and Belfast followed suit. Gerry Adams himself was left in the invidious position of either admitting ignorance of the IRA's plans (which cast doubt on Sinn Fein's capacity to speak authoritatively for militant Republicanism) or of admitting knowledge (and standing accused of hypocrisy and being complicit in the campaign of violence). The line that his condemning the PIRA outrages in London would diminish his authority with the very body over which he was seeking to exercise a moderating influence sounded increasingly thin, particularly when rallies throughout Ireland unequivocally demanded a restoration of peace, and when even President Clinton spoke of the "cowardly IRA".

23. Although in due course, Sinn Fein's isolation was moderated a little, politically the Party remained marooned. Both Dublin and Belfast agreed that meetings with Sinn Fein could take place at official level, but a meeting with British officials on 26 February was no substitute for inclusion in the rounds of intensive consultations shortly to be undertaken by all the other parties. In March, Adams was granted a visa to visit the US once more; but his reception at the St Patrick's Day festivities was noticeably cooler than before, and reports of his being cold shouldered by Edward Kennedy and publicly snubbed by Hillary Clinton can have done little for Sinn Fein morale back home. The withdrawal in early March of an invitation for the Party to attend the Fine Gael Ard Fheis was another sign of rejection. Reports from Sinn Fein's own Ard Fheis at the end of March spoke of confusion and uncertainty among the delegates, with a majority thought to be in favour of making

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progress via the political road, but uncertain about the implications of such a stance for the ultimate validity of the armed struggle.

Loyalists

24. Both the UDP and PUP gave a welcome to the Mitchell Report, with the latter in particular regretting that the Prime Minister's electoral proposals had effectively taken the pressure off Sinn Fein to respond in detail to the Commission's more challenging suggestions. The two parties differed in their enthusiasm for the electoral process, with the PUP accepting the risks inherent in the democratic process, but the UDP doubting their ability to gain representation in all-party negotiations. Both parties resolutely maintained that their political significance had to be measured against standards other than the size of any electoral mandate they might or might not gain. A breakaway group calling itself the Ulster Loyalist Action Force announced its presence in early March by threatening the execution of PIRA and Sinn Fein figures; the CLMC itself issued a statement in the middle of the month threatening to give PIRA "blow for blow" if hostilities resumed in Northern Ireland; and riots took place on the Shankill Road in late March in protest at the RUC carrying out "unwarranted" searches. But overall, Loyalist discipline was maintained and all the political parties undoubtedly benefited from the breathing space thus gained. Graffiti on the Shankill Road, however, directed against David Ervine served as a reminder that preaching moderation in a time of tension sometimes carried a personal cost.

Other parties

25. The Alliance Party continued to respond positively to all new developments, but as usual had difficulty in persuading others to do the same. The intensive consultations of early March produced hitherto unknown encounters as small groups such as the Greens, Workers' Party and Democratic Left talked to each other and to the

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larger parties. Robert McCartney had a number of meetings with Government Ministers, and while continuing to offer his own iconoclastic vision of political progress, seemed anxious to avoid being sidelined.

[signed CGM]

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DIARY: JANUARY - MARCH 1996

- 22 January Report of the International Body sent to the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach.
- 24 January Prime Minister announced that there would be elections in Northern Ireland.
- 2 February Sinn Fein rejected the report of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.
- 9 February Statement from PIRA ending the ceasefire. Bomb at Canary Wharf, London.
- 28 February Joint Communiqué issued by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach.
- 4 March Consultations with the political parties commenced at Castle Buildings.
- 15 March Consultation paper issued - Groundrules for Substantive All-Party Negotiations.
- 21 March Prime Minister's statement and Government paper issued - The framework for a broadly acceptable elective process leading to all-party negotiations.
- 23 March Sinn Fein Ard Fheis, Dublin.
- 25 March Consultation paper on electoral mechanisms issued - Methods of Allocating Seats.

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