

IN an exclusive News Letter interview, UUP leader David Trimble speaks to political editor Mervyn Pauley

David Trimble was in frank mood yesterday as he assessed the shape of things to come - and called for a reshaping of the existing talks process.

He refused to see a black side to the voting down of London-Dublin proposals for parallel decommissioning of terrorist arms, insisting the situation had been "defused" and was not the major setback some politicians made it out to be.

"Tony Blair is not calling it a setback. He is being positive about things. There are some people who are misreading the situation," the Ulster Unionist leader said. "It was not a make-or-break issue."

In a wide-ranging interview, he attacked NIO "inflexibility" and spoke of grassroots pressure on the Sinn Féin leadership. And he claimed his party, by refusing to walk away from the Stormont talks, had thwarted the Provos' ceasefire plan to wrong-foot unionists in the propaganda war.

He confessed he did not know whether the talks would stay on track and whether progress could be made. "What I will say - and this is very important - is that the Provos thought they were going to have us on the hook last week."

"There was a distinct air of 'set-up', and what was being set up was the entire unionist community. The Provos pulled a fast one with their ceasefire, expecting there would be the usual kneejerk reaction of Unionists losing their temper, shouting their heads off, and that the world consequently would say 'Oh look, there's those republicans making a positive move and there are the unionists behaving like that - the real problem is unionism'."

"That is what the Provos were setting up. It was obvious they were trying to wrong-foot unionists with their ceasefire. They thought they could rely on a kneejerk reaction which they could use to tell the world the real problem was unionism."

"There was an avalanche of negative publicity in Britain and the world waiting to hit unionism and we prevented it. Kneejerk reaction by all unionists would have resulted in an avalanche of hostile publicity and we would have been struggling then."

"This week has been quite different. Indeed for unionism most of the publicity this week has been positive, and that has been due entirely to the good sense of the Ulster Unionist Party."

Mr Trimble, who was not at the talks for Wednesday's joint paper vote, pointed out that he had said beforehand it was not a make-or-break issue. This was why he did not cancel prior appointments to be there.

The disadvantage of timeta-

bles, he said, was that they acted as a fetter. Wednesday's vote was not conclusive and wasn't regarded by the Government as conclusive.

He said he was still waiting for clarification from Tony Blair on points the party put to him.

"Downing Street say it is going to take longer. That did not surprise me. When we adopted the timetable I said the idea of a structure was good but I know from experience that the dates were over-optimistic."

Could the talks, under existing rules, move into substantive discussions on the three strands in September? "Yes, but it will not necessarily be September 15. None of us has got a crystal ball and we have to see how things develop."

"But when we talk about going into three strands bear in mind that this structure can be quite flexible as to how it is designed and that is one issue Government is now looking at - how to adjust the structure in such a way as to make it comfortable for people who are reluctant to get fully involved."

He believed it was possible to make the existing process work. "But it will require a bit of imagination and more flexibility from government than the Northern Ireland Office has shown," he insisted.

"There tends to be in the NIO tremendous inflexibility. A lot of the problem on this issue has been caused by the failure of the NIO to consult properly with people in advance. There has been a degree of mismanagement there."

Assuming the talks went ahead on September 15, would he and his team be there if Sinn

Féin was also there? "That goes back to what I said about the need for flexibility in structures because it would be possible for the talks to proceed through a mixture of bilaterals and trilaterals and so on."

"There is no need for talks to proceed simply through plenaries. That is one factor to bear in mind."

"The other factor is that there is a long way from now to September and we'll see how things develop, particularly on the Sinn Féin front. It is clear that Sinn Féin is under pressure because people in the ranks are realising that they are coming into a process which is only going to lead to what they would call a partitionist solution."

"Everyone is talking about a settlement. Not an interim arrangement but a settlement, and a settlement on a partitionist basis which they will have to accept. And they will have to accept that when their leaders sign off on this they are signing off on the history of the whole republican movement."

"There are people in the republican movement who do realise the significance of all this. Let's just wait and see. There is a lot that could happen between now and then."

I put it to Mr Trimble that his talk about moving to bilaterals and trilaterals suggested he might be thinking about ducking sitting down with Sinn Féin? "No, I am just pointing out there are possibilities here," he retorted.

"I'm not saying we will never sit down with Sinn Féin. It depends on Sinn Féin and the principles in the Downing Street Declaration. Is there a

commitment to peaceful means and the democratic process?

"That is what this process is actually about and what the six Mitchell principles are about. Many people say the Shinners will sign up to these and will not mean it - that they will be totally insincere. And I've a strong suspicion that is the way things will go."

"But I think there are other parties to this process, not just ourselves, who will insist on genuine commitments."

He said his call for more NIO flexibility underlined the need for reshaping of the existing process. "As far as the PM is concerned I am quite sure he is open to a more flexible approach. As usual our difficulties are not in Downing Street - we have more problems in Stormont Castle than Downing Street."

"I'm waiting for clarification of some issues and what comes from that. I hope there will be positive developments there and also in terms of the structure of things."

"And I expect to see positive developments from Sinn Féin, too, in terms of a commitment to peaceful means and the democratic process. Now none of these may happen - we may find the Prime Minister will come back to me and say 'Sorry, I can't do anything for you in terms of the clarification you sought'."

"The NIO could continue in its inflexible attitude to structures. Sinn Féin could turn out to be completely dishonest but yet the Government ignore that dishonesty. And so it could turn out that come September we look at it and say 'Sorry, it can't be done'."

Mr Trimble, asked if he regretted the withdrawal of the DUP and UK Unionists from the multi-party talks, said: "I'm not sure to what extent the DUP have pulled out. At Downing Street on Tuesday Mr Paisley was talking about bilaterals, so let's just wait and see."

"We have seen situations before where the Doc has stormed out and yet, lo and behold a day or two later, he is still there, only in a slightly different form."

On the loyal orders' call for a unionist unity convention, he said: "I'm quite happy to talk to the loyal orders...I'm going to engage on widespread consultation within the party and within the community and that, of course, will include the loyal orders as a significant influence within the community."

"I'll also be prepared to talk to other unionists. The problem with structured arrangements is that some people think they are the whole world. They spend all their time, and force us to spend time and energy, sitting around staring at our navels rather than confronting the real world."

"I am well aware of the need to consult the grassroots and talk to other unionists and I'm going to do that. But the idea of thinking you solve problems by ignoring the real world is not the way to go."

Upbeat Trimble
Says problems
Must be faced