



**Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry 'Implementation of the  
Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland'**

**Ulster Unionist Party Response**

**July 2013**

## **Introduction**

We thank the Committee for their interest in the Armed Forces Covenant, which we consider to be of critical importance.

With your indulgence, we will offer our observations from two viewpoints: the pragmatic and the principled.

Before that, we wish to comment upon evidence given by Northern Ireland Office Minister of State, Mike Penning MP, to this inquiry, regarding the input of Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive. The impression was created, at least in certain media reports, that Executive Ministers had failed to accept an invitation from Mr Penning to engage with the grouping he has established in Northern Ireland to discuss the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant.

Our Executive Minister, Danny Kennedy MLA, is unambiguous that he received no such invitation; he and my Party are equally clear that such an invitation would have been most welcome.

## **Background**

The Ulster Unionist Party has a long and unbroken tradition of serving our country in uniform. Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, James Craig, later Lord Craigavon, served with the Royal Irish Rifles and Imperial Yeomanry; one of our current MLAs, Danny Kinahan, held commissions with the Blues & Royals and Black Watch. Innumerable members of our Party in the hundred-odd years in between served with the Army, Navy, Royal Air Force and with the Ulster Defence Regiment during Northern Ireland's "Troubles".

In recent history, several senior members took a specific interest in the Armed Forces Covenant and its non-adoption in Northern Ireland. At a briefing at the Party's 2011 Annual Conference, we were challenged by a modern military hero to give proper meaning to our support for the armed forces and veterans.

We accepted that challenge and set about our research.

## **The Pragmatic**

We have spoken to a wide range of "stakeholders" concerning the desirability of introducing the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland. These discussions include: multiple meetings with Minister of State Penning; a briefing hosted by Brigadier Thompson at Thiepval Barrack, Lisburn, to which he invited an impressive range of armed forces support services; testimonies from injured veterans; our own call for evidence; a number of other planned engagements; accepted invitations to others' events, e.g. Army Benevolent Fund engagements.

The message we have received is that interest is, frankly, not universally welcomed, especially at some levels. Officials argue that over 90% of the services afforded by the Covenant are already in place in Northern Ireland; indeed, it is further posited that in some ways, Northern Ireland is ahead of Great Britain in provision. On that basis, there has been encouragement to "back off".

On the one hand, the Ulster Unionist Party has no desire to disadvantage any member of the armed forces or any veteran by making an intervention in a manner that would do damage to this state of affairs. It is, however, a short-term position, with no underpinning legislative safeguards and consequently, on the other hand, we are determined not to be guilty of failing to take a strategic view.

We mention one specific regarding current provision: we understand the UDR & Royal Irish (Home Service) Aftercare Service is unique within the Ministry of Defence family in its provision for qualifying veterans. We commend the Aftercare Service as an exemplar, but also challenge your Committee to assess the impact on provision for both qualifying and non-qualifying veterans should the Service be wound up in the future, be that after the current budgetary period, the next one, or the one after that. The Ulster Unionist Party believes the impact would be potentially catastrophic without the underpinning legislative support of the Armed Forces Covenant.

## **The Principle**

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once famously described Northern Ireland as being "as British as Finchley". The Ulster Unionist Party accepts the spirit of that assertion. The statement does not negate our belief in, and support for, a devolved legislative administration; neither does it do away with the need to recognise certain basic equalities, not least the fundamental belief that a citizen of the United Kingdom who volunteers to serve his or her country as a member of the Armed Forces deserves equal treatment, be they in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Personnel put themselves in harm's way; the chances of being harmed, and the degree of that potential harm, are not dictated, or influenced, by their home country within the United Kingdom. Why then, should they be denied access to the Armed Forces Covenant on the arbitrary consideration of where they happen to be stationed?

Remember, the absence of the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland does not mean Northern Ireland-born personnel are denied access to the Covenant. It means Northern Ireland born personnel are denied access to the Covenant only when they are resident in Northern Ireland.

Equally, personnel from England, Wales and Scotland who may have enjoyed a lifetime of access to the Covenant may find that comfort cut off by the simple fact of being billeted in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is the case that personnel of the same Regiment, with camps in Scotland and Northern Ireland, for example, have experienced apartheid within the United Kingdom.

Matters may be in hand at present. But it is our clear impression that this is due to "back channels", based on relationships developed on a one-to-one basis between those promoting the interests of Armed Forces personnel and veterans, and those supplying statutory services who are not negative to the concept of supporting a "back channel".

The Ulster Unionist Party does not accept that "back channels" are suitable routes for those among our citizens whom we should value as peerless for their service, commitment and sacrifice for our country.

In short, unless it is acceptable to dismiss the Armed Forces Covenant in Tewkesbury, Blaydon, Bootle, Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, Jarrow, Vauxhall, Filton and Bradley Stoke, Amber Valley, Brigg and Goole, then it is essential to adopt it in North Down, North Antrim, Upper Bann, South and East Belfast.