

Notes for the discussion on the Implementation Committee

Our view of the peace process

Put simply, our understanding of the GFA was the basis of reforms or construction of a number of institutions that would be able to transcend sectarian division and create a just and equitable society in which no one community could dominate another. The policing and criminal justice reforms, the Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission and the Bill of Rights are the major examples. In political terms, the Assembly and Executive were constructed to safeguard community interests and ensure cross-community consent for important measures.

This settlement accepted the reality of a society characterised by a primary division into two "communities" constituted by common perceived religion, history, culture, national identity and kinship. Parties like ours, that reject a politics based on the perceived interests of one or other communities, helped shape this agreement. We knew, however, that it required backing, for the foreseeable future, from parties that drew virtually all their support from one or other community. In other words, the anti-sectarian agreement had to be supported by an alliance of parties that depended on sectarian support.

It is that alliance which is breaking down. Why?

Sectarianism

Racism used to be defined as "prejudice + power." Maybe we can define sectarianism the same way. Prejudice doesn't necessarily mean "hating" the other side or thinking that they have tails – it means seeing the world exclusively in terms of the interest of your "own" side as against, and in competition with the supposed interests of the other side. Housing is seen as not an issue about homelessness or housing need but about proportions of protestant and catholic and about territory. Unemployment is not about creating jobs per se but for protestants or catholics. Health is turned into a territorial tug of war over hospitals.

"Power" means the ability to pursue and practice these sectarian attitudes in the political arena. It doesn't just mean state or government power. Votes and elected positions give politicians power. And remember – "power comes from the barrel of a gun" – and it doesn't matter whether those guns are legal or illegal.

The current crisis

The success of the Agreement requires those parties that get their support from one community or another to convince their constituents that the new society being built will guarantee fairness and equality to each community. They are not required to stop seeing the world in terms of their own side's interests – you can't wish sectarianism away – but to understand that those interests are guaranteed and protected by the Agreement on the basis of equality. The price of protection of your interests is that the other side's are also protected. The price of not being discriminated against is not discriminating.

Women's Coalition

The success of the Agreement also requires that politicians on all sides progressively relinquish their hold over any source of power other than their elective mandate.

We should not ignore the successes and the extent to which pro-Agreement politicians have co-operated in this hard and complicated peace process. Moreover, such co-operation is the only hope for the future and must be re-built. We think it can be. But we must first look the current crisis in the face.

One would expect bickering over details. One would expect politicians to attempt to squeeze any advantage for their own side out of the detailed process of implementation of the Agreement. The process of competition for votes within each sectarian bloc increases that tendency. What we are now seeing goes further than that. The Women's Coalition now believes that we are witnessing not simply a failure of political leadership but that some politicians are now indulging in **actively sectarian political leadership**.

We are seeing the results in our streets, with nightly violence at inter-faces, refugee movements reminiscent of the 70s and an upsurge of real sectarian hatred. We see pro-Agreement politicians abandoning the broad view and calling the odds on who threw the first stone like veteran street fighters.

This is not just bickering. There are some fundamental problems with the main positions of some of the pro-Agreement parties. We will call a spade a spade.

Unionists have a tendency to present the entire progress of the Agreement as one of compromise and surrender by the protestant community. That is a sectarian position. Unionists also call in aid an abstract constitutional formalism to attempt to maintain symbols which wed elements of the state to the protestant community. To try and impose "British" symbols on the police, to put a sectarian spin on police appointments, are attempts to maintain an identification of the police service with one community. That is sectarianism.

Republicans have a tendency to present the Agreement as a simple, tactical stepping stone on the road to a united, unitary Ireland. In identifying the particular interests of one community with the march of history, Republicans are taking a sectarian position. More important, Republicans say to their constituency – "you can have it all. You can have a reformed and equal Northern Ireland state and meanwhile we will keep in being the most sophisticated and powerful urban guerrilla army of modern times." That is prejudice – ignoring and belittling the interests and feelings of the other side – and a massive exercise of power. To maintain the IRA in being while participating in the institutions of the Agreement is sectarianism.

The way forward

This self-seeking, but ultimately self-defeating form of politics must end. We believe it is now necessary for the pro-Agreement parties to re-commit to the Agreement in a firm declaration around which we can rally and which can lead us all into the Assembly elections next year. We need to re-establish the credibility of the Agreement and disabuse the Anti forces of the notion that one more push will bring it down. We suggest the following as the basis of the main points of such a declaration:

- The Agreement is for all the people of Northern Ireland and in the interests of all the citizens of Ireland and Britain.

Women's Coalition

- The interests of both main communities are served by the Agreement – none of its institutions disadvantage one against the other and we will ensure that remains so.
- We will review the voting mechanisms in the Assembly so as to give all parties and views, whether or not associated with one or other of the two main communities, an equal role in decision-making.
- The Agreement allows that the formal sovereignty over Northern Ireland could pass from the United Kingdom to the Republic of Ireland if a majority of its people so vote. We declare that, whichever state has formal sovereignty, we will maintain devolution of all the powers currently devolved and those envisaged on the basis of existing territorial boundaries. We re-affirm the commitment to equality and fairness in the governance of Northern Ireland, whichever state has formal sovereignty.
- We re-affirm that the forces and institutions of law, justice and order should be independent, accountable and not associated, practically or symbolically, with one community or the other.
- The Agreement was the basis for the end of the historic conflict in this region. If it had remained simply a paper document it could not have fulfilled that purpose. We believe, in different ways, that some aspects of the Agreement remain to be implemented and we commit ourselves to that process. Nonetheless, after two continuous years of successful devolved government, with most of the envisaged institutions agreed and running, we believe that the grounds for violent conflict have now been removed. We therefore call on all illegal armed groups to progressively and rapidly disarm and disband. There is no room nor need for any beyond the legal forces of law and order in the new society we are creating.

FOR DISCUSSION – Brian Gormally