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Growing sectarian divisions must be reversed

Alliance Party leader John Alderdice says nationalists must begin to understand the concerns and fears of unionists

RECENT months have seen a depth of sectarian division more widespread and corrosive than for some time.

We must ask ourselves how the positive effects of 18 months of ceasefire could be so quickly and completely reversed. I have often tried to explain to unionists how nationalist alienation in the past led to violence.

This has frequently led to me being accused of justifying that violence. I never have.

I see no justification for breaking the law. A free society can only be built on the rule of law. At the same time unless we understand what is happening we will be unable to do anything except despise those with whom we disagree.

In the same spirit I have condemned in forthright terms the recent behaviour of the unionists and the Orange Order, but I believe that it is important for nationalists to understand why unionists have been breaking the law, engaging in acts of violence and threats, and effectively undermining the basis of the state to which they profess loyalty.

Firstly, unionists see nationalist talk of 'progress' as referring to a dynamic that always moves away from the preferred unionist position.

Partition was the historic compromise as far as unionists were concerned, and any attempt to discuss the question is seen in itself as bad faith. While nationalists, who instead see partition as representing 'unfinished business', espouse a vision of a hoped-for united Ireland, there is no equivalent unionist vision: only a wish to hold on for as long as possible to the current constitutional position.

Nationalists have failed to persuade unionists to share their vision. On the contrary the IRA terrorist campaign has deepened still further the bitter divisions which have blighted relationships on this island for so long.

Unionists believed the 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement to be a fundamental and adverse constitutional change. Garret FitzGerald thought unionists might be mollified by the opportunity for a new power-sharing assembly to claw back power from the inter-governmental conference. Unfortunately unionists reacted negatively and the SDLP consistently made it clear they had little appetite for such a move.

This was exemplified at the talks in 1992 abandoned without any real progress despite the preparedness of Ulster Unionists to negotiate with Dublin. The inter-party talks process was set aside in favour of talks within nationalism whose purpose, as stated by those involved, was to muster the forces of Irish nationalism here and in the USA, to press the British government, to 'persuade' the unionists, towards an eventual united Ireland, probably through an interim joint authority.

The aftermath of the 1993 joint declaration seemed to confirm this. The Ulster Unionist Party accepted it as providing a route to a renewed process of negotiations with nationalism, but instead of responding, nationalism waited month after month for the Sinn Féin response.

There was little interest in the unionist position. Even Sinn Féin's rejection of the declaration did not stand in the way of cooperation within nationalism. The peace process is therefore not seen as addressing the fundamental division between Irish unionists and Irish nationalists, but the division between constitutional nationalism and physical force republicanism.

Why, they ask, is it easier for the SDLP to work with Sinn Féin, with whom they disagree fundamentally on the Downing Street declaration, and historically on the use of violence, when, as they see it, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party do, at least both accept the declaration and reject absolutely the use to political violence? Surely the only possible answer, say they, is that blood is thicker than water.

When the Republican Movement returned to the bombing campaign earlier this year, they utterly betrayed all those who had taken risks for peace by trying to work with them, and strengthened immeasurably unionist hard-liners who had always seen the road of dialogue as treachery. Had republicans had any real desire for a fair and reasonable compromise they would surely have appreciated that the election of David Trimble as a result of Drumcree 1995 was an indication of a retrenchment within the unionist community. To worsen this by a return to the terror campaign strongly suggests that there is little concern to reach an agreement with unionists, but only to outflank them.

The disreputable and self-destructive behaviour of unionists over the marching season is striking, but so too is the impression that some nationalists are no longer interested in working towards compromise, whether on individual issues like the Apprentice Boys day in Derry, or on the wider political picture.

Such a mindset on both sides will result in a return to the nightmare we had hoped was behind us.

The only way to avoid a malignant outcome will be for constructive forces on all sides to come together and forge an agreement acceptable to a sufficient consensus of the community. This will not only require courage and commitment, it will also require a greater understanding of nationalists by unionists, and, as is the purpose of this article, of unionists by nationalists.

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