

President Clinton's visit comes at another critical stage in the evolution of the GFA. The critical issues remain decommissioning, policing and the recent unionist veto on Sinn Fein ministers attending North South Council meetings. Failures in progressing these issues threaten the full implementation of the agreement.

Loyalist and republican paramilitaries need to acknowledge the uncertainty caused by failure to genuinely engage on the arms issue. Paramilitaries associated with pro-agreement parties have accepted obligations to achieve lasting peace and political stability by co-operating with the International Independent Commission to achieve the 'total disarmament of all paramilitary arms'. Given their history the difficulties posed by this commitment are understandable.

But having accepted this commitment there is an equally understandable expectation that they deliver. The IRA itself stated in May of this year that it would re-engage with the IICD to, in its own words, fulfil its commitment to 'resolving the arms issue'. The IRA's restatement of its desire to put "arms beyond use" is welcome. But the vagueness about what how it intends achieving that objective and whether it will re-engage with the decommissioning body are unhelpful. The republican movement have an obligation to clarify what it really means.

Dialogue with the decommissioning body would in itself be a confidence building measure and a sign of serious intent to resolve the arms issue. Failure to live up to commitments on decommissioning only breeds distrust and fuels suspicion. Worse, failures threaten the very agreement itself.

A police service enjoying the allegiance of both communities is a core element of the agreement. The service must be one in which nationalists and unionists serve side by side comfortable that their identities are being afforded parity of esteem. It must also be a service rooted in an ethos of human rights and democratically accountable to the whole community.

The SDLP is continuing to work positively for that outcome. Key unresolved issues include ensuring (i) that independent inquiries take place into such controversial murders as those of Pat Finucane, Rosemary Nelson and Robert Hamill; (ii) that a properly developed and detailed implementation plan is agreed to guide the process of change; (iii) that the powers of the new Police Board will not be inhibited in any way either by the Secretary of State or the Chief Constable.

Failure to provide guarantees on these issues would also produce a crisis endangering the whole of the agreement. The SDLP is working with both governments to achieve these guarantees so that a new widely accepted service can exist.

Equally Unionism needs to completely abandon its self-select approach to the working the new institutions. The difficulties experienced by David Trimble in holding the pro-agreement wing of his party together need to be better appreciated by others. So too the difficulties faced by paramilitaries in making progress on decommissioning. That appreciation will not be achieved by a less than wholehearted approach by any pro-agreement party. It certainly won't be achieved through vetoes no more than through failures to progress decommissioning.

The comfort offered to all by the Good Friday agreement only exists when it is operated in its. Protecting that integrity requires progressing all aspects in parallel and in ways clearly seen as fulfilling our respective responsibilities. In other words unionists must be convinced that the nationalist community is fully committed to implementing all aspects of the agreement. Just as nationalists need to be convinced that pro-agreement unionists are as fully committed to its implementation as they say they are. Words alone will not suffice for this confidence to be built.

The need to resolve outstanding difficulties is clear. The Executive and the Assembly is working well and is serving the people of Northern Ireland well. Within the last six weeks we have agreed a Programme for Government and a budget which will be put to the Assembly for approval before Christmas. We are delivering on issues vital to the continuing development of a competitive economy which will benefit all the people in this part of Ireland. The North-South Council is developing a range of programmes covering key economic, cultural and social issues, including tourism, trade, education, agriculture, inland waterways and language. New East-West structures will facilitate the development of new co-operative arrangements between the islands.

The will of the majority of the people, North and South, is clear. They want the agreement to work. They recognise that despite everything, local politicians working together can make a real and positive difference. There would be so much to lose if the whole process were to falter at this point. It is for this reason that the message of hope and support which President Clinton's decision to visit us for a third time will assist in resolving our outstanding difficulties.

Ends

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