

Republicans must show their democratic intent

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The Prime Minister, writing last Friday in *The Times*, said that it is now time to resolve our problem. I agree and understand his eagerness to make progress on devolution in Northern Ireland. We all share that eagerness. His deadline of the 30th June reflects a desire for the devolution of power in NI to start at the same time as in Scotland and Wales.

Indeed both the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach display much effort, determination and commitment in this difficult task. Both Governments have brought a freshness and openness to many aspects of our problem.

I believe that the Northern Ireland problem is not insoluble. Real progress is truly possible, but progress must be based on universally accepted standards of democracy. As long as all sides subscribe to the same principles of democracy, which apply everywhere from Alaska to Greece, I firmly believe that we can navigate a path through the present political impasse.

The Ulster Unionist Party, under the leadership of David Trimble, has responded positively by agreeing to a strong form of partnership government among four parties from both traditions. We have recognised the Irish dimension by agreeing to six new cross-border bodies plus arrangements for wider co-operation between existing government organisations.

To build confidence in the Nationalist community we have agreed to set up a new Human Rights Commission and an Equality Commission.

Unionists accept the international norms required to build bridges within a divided society. Indeed I believe we have interpreted them in a maximalist fashion, going further to accommodate diversity than in any other democratic country. We have moved to the centreline of international best practice and beyond it.

From a Unionist perspective, we believe the Republican movement still remains short of this centreline. I accept that Sinn Fein now participates in both the Dail and Stormont. This represents a positive development.

Our position is not one of Unionism making more demands upon Republicanism than are made upon us. Nor is it merely about the implementation of the Belfast Agreement. It is much more fundamental than that. It is about an issue that goes to the very heart of modern society: protection against the threat of violence. We wish, as all do within this divided society, to feel secure that violence is over for good.

I am very mindful of the Prime Minister's statement in Belfast on 14th May last year when he stated that he believed "most people would be ready to accept even the

hardest parts of the Agreement if they had genuine confidence that the paramilitaries were really ready to give up violence for good.”

The majority of the Unionist community - if not the whole community - has by and large accepted what is for them perhaps the hardest part - prisoner releases - but remains to be convinced that paramilitaries will keep their bargain to end the violence for good. Indeed it is likely that most opposition to the Belfast Agreement centred on prisoner releases. Using the Taoiseach’s words, I too believe no one voted for an armed peace.

The Prime Minister believes that the essence of the current impasse is this: Unionists won’t believe that Republicanism is committed to peace unless the IRA starts to decommission first; Sinn Fein won’t try to get decommissioning until the Executive is formed first, including Sinn Fein Ministers.

Our sincerity about including Sinn Fein representatives in Government is absolute. David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party have given their commitment and we mean to keep it.

There is an easy way for each to test each other’s sincerity. If Sinn Fein will honour its commitment given last Friday to both Prime Ministers, by securing a commencement of a process of credible and verifiable decommissioning, we will honour our commitment. Moreover, we could honour these commitments at one and the same time to avoid anyone having to make the first move. I believe this to be a fair resolution of the impasse.

I am sometimes told that the IRA will never decommission. I answer: the Republican movement has never had an opportunity to be in government. We must not squander this opportunity to make possible now the never thought possible.

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