

# Where do we go from here?

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The Ulster Unionist Party has strenuously attempted to achieve devolution in Northern Ireland. This means nothing less than people elected within Northern Ireland taking decisions that affect citizens and being accountable for their decisions.

That has been and, I believe, will remain the policy of my party. I do not want to live in a failed community that cannot govern itself.

I am mindful of Mr Blair stating in Belfast on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1998 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.” Yes indeed, but sadly paramilitaries have not given up.

The Prime Minister has displayed much effort, determination and commitment on the world stage in what is a complex, ever changing and shrinking world. His commitment on this world stage to human rights is not doubted.

Only last Wednesday in Switzerland at the World Economic Forum he stated emphatically that one must put “defeating the causes of terrorism along side defeating the terrorists.” He commented further that there is no such thing as “western style democracy” but rather either “there is democracy or there isn’t.”

Fine words on the world stage. But how much greater is his responsibility to ensure that democracy and rights are honoured within the United Kingdom itself?

Our problem is soluble but what threatens to make it insoluble is for government, and others, to pretend we are so unique that our problem can be tackled only by continuing a fudge between democracy and terrorism. Mr Blair refers to ‘global’ terrorism, conveniently detaching it from ‘domestic’ terrorism. To adapt Mr Blair’s phrase about democracy: either there is terrorism or there isn’t.

Paul Murphy was quoted in this paper on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2002 as saying: “if there is going to be democratic devolved government here that has to be done on the same basis as anywhere else in Ireland or the United Kingdom. And I think we have come to that point now, time in a sense has run out.” To the government words and reality are different.

On a positive note, most people do wish to live in peace with their neighbours while recognising the right of those neighbours to be different from a cultural, linguistic, educational or religious perspective.

We have also made progress in resolving our political difficulties. The sensitive issue of North-South relations has been settled. All Northern Ireland Ministers were bound, in law, to act in accordance with any North-South decision agreed by the Executive.

No North-South policy consideration could have been agreed and implemented without first being approved by both unionist and nationalist Ministers. This was settled within the terms of The Belfast Agreement and emphatically not, as argued by the DUP, during the negotiations of autumn 2004.

Also, power sharing between the two sections of the community is accepted as the only way forward for governing Northern Ireland. In short, and it must not be forgotten, the two most difficult political questions have been solved. Procedural adjustments, gained by experience, are not uncommon in any organisation but the fundamentals are accepted.

Where to now? In a bizarre sense the Northern Bank robbery may benefit the peace process. It was a wake up call. It was such a monumental 'slap in the face' to the political process; such an insult to those parties involved in negotiations with Republicans, that it effectively rules out any form of power sharing with Sinn Fein for the foreseeable future.

Local democratic parties are left scrambling around trying to pick up the pieces and discuss second best scenarios. Frankly we deserve better. I fully recognise the valid criticisms levelled at the local political process, such as costs and the lack of responsibility.

The on-going debate about the function of any Assembly, while having merits, sends out the wrong signal. If local political parties are willing to consider and possibly accept a second best assembly, then government will bide its time. This will unjustifiably enable Sinn Fein to again become centre stage.

To sustain an Assembly requires two elements. First, the community generally must have an affinity with the Assembly and have confidence in its function. People may have no liking for individual politicians, or parties, but the community must accept the institution of the Assembly.

Secondly, the Assembly must have meaningful responsibility. Politicians will act responsibly if they are given responsibility. By that I mean authority, decision-making powers and accountability - the essence of democracy – not the mere 'power' to advise or consult.

Though the task facing all democrats is difficult, the solution is clear. Further political risks are required now but the potential outcome is worth those risks. The stark alternative is a limbo-land political environment in Northern Ireland while being effectively governed from afar. In such a scenario all will be losers.

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