

Nationalism stumbling block to ending tensions

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The article in last week's News Letter by Sean Farren regarding the lessons to be learnt from Europe is a distortion of reality.

It gave the SDLP's simple argument - follow the lessons of reconciliation applied in Europe and all will be well. The SDLP is thus portrayed as a modern thinking party wishing to embrace the European methods of conflict resolution. Is this the true situation?

John Hume's often repeated view is that Europe has twice in this century been at war but now Europe has put its divisions aside and its nations are now working together in common interest. He then advises that the same should happen within Ireland.

It is true that borders have become blurred by the pooling of sovereignty among the 15 nations within the European Union (EU). However this is fundamentally different from what is needed within the island of Ireland.

The essence of our problem is that one section of the Northern Ireland community has an allegiance to the neighbouring State and therefore wishes the removal of the border. This desire to remove the border is mirrored by the formal position of the Republic of Ireland.

In short, the problem is one of strident nationalism. Such nationalism has been rejected by all democracies in Europe.

Further, notwithstanding the development of the EU, there are still tensions across some borders and in turn a lack of trust as to the true intention regarding cross-border co-operation.

The EU is clear as to how progress should be made in such cases: borders are to be accepted and respected and any cross-border co-operation should proceed with great caution. Indeed, where such co-operation has succeeded certain traits are prevalent.

Co-operation is among equals who have established a clear need for such activity and there is already in existence structures of government that give a base upon which to build the cross-border co-operation.

Also, new countries wishing to be considered for membership of the EU must resolve similar tensions as exist in Northern Ireland before being offered membership.

Slovakia, which has a large Hungarian minority living in a region bordering Hungary, is not being offered membership of the EU because of such political tensions. The EU expects such tensions to be resolved in line with principles applicable within the EU.

Northern Ireland is the exception. Nowhere else in Europe is cross-border conflict being resolved by way of the methods advocated in the Governments' 'Frameworks Document'. Indeed such methods are rejected.

The SDLP, by referring to Europe, gives the impression of being both modern and moderate, yet the very core of its policy is a form of nationalism that has been long rejected within Europe.

Even worse, both governments, by persistently ignoring the reality of conflict resolution within Europe, are contributing significantly to the lack of political progress. This lack of reality is being constantly challenged due to the current participation of the Ulster Unionist Party in the talks process.

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