

# Mafia state is not what society needs

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The Northern Ireland problem is not insoluble. Real progress is truly possible, but progress must be based on international 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.

Our central problem is one of conflicting national identities, just as it is for a hundred million people in a host of countries across Europe, for example: Italy, Slovakia and Romania not to mention Bosnia or Kosovo. This is not to say that the special characteristics of our own divided society will not be recognised. They have and they will.

Unionists have responded to this problem by agreeing to a strong form of partnership government involving an involuntary coalition 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.

Here in Northern Ireland, most people 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.

However, it is well beyond the universally accepted norms of democracy for a political party to participate in government when its paramilitary wing has done no more than declare a cease-fire and thus retains the option of returning to violence. The Northern Ireland community is being asked to accept what no other region is being asked to accept anywhere in the democratic world.

Further, the danger for Unionists and indeed for everyone in Northern Ireland is that we could see established a 'Mafia state' in which well armed private armies use their power to intimidate, assault and even kill those who get in their way, while at the same time raising vast funds through criminal activity.

Unionists accept the international norms for a divided society. Indeed we have interpreted them in a maximalist fashion, going further to accommodate diversity than in any other European country. While we have moved to the centreline of international best practice and beyond it, the republican movement still remains short of this centreline.

If Sinn Fein doubts our sincerity about including its representatives in Government then it is wrong. David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party have given their commitment and we mean to keep it.

There is an easy way for Sinn Fein to test our resolve. The Belfast Agreement required the commitment of all participants to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. If Sinn Fein and the IRA will honour this commitment, by commencing a process of credible and verifiable decommissioning, we will honour our commitment. Moreover, we could do it at one and the same time to avoid anyone having to make the first move. This is a fair offer. We hope Sinn Fein will accept it.

The Prime Minister would lack a clear moral framework of the kind that he is displaying in Kosovo if he were to ask Unionists to form a government without decommissioning. Without a clear moral framework Government policy for Northern Ireland in recent weeks has veered first one way and then the other.

The Prime Minister states we lack vision. We have a vision. It is clear, and our message is simple. We want to see the same rights, same stability and same principles of government, including structures of government to accommodate minorities, that operate everywhere else in the democratic world.

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 democratic values, the protection of democracy against the threat of violence.

We wish to see a real and honourable accommodation based on The Belfast Agreement and accepted standards of democracy. I ask the Northern Ireland community to support our endeavours at this difficult time.

For our part, we have been, are, and will remain committed to universally accepted standards of human rights and democracy. We have no desire to seek to define these in any restrictive manner.

To date the argument of power - the threat of the bomb - has held centre stage. It is now time for the power of argument - political democracy - to take over.

**Dermot Nesbitt**