

UUP is committed to inclusive process

The Irish News - 26th July 1999

Political opponents have often misrepresented Unionism. My Party colleagues in the Assembly and I wish to see normal politics being practised. As Unionists, who are trying to secure political stability, we believe that some comments from our political opponents are particularly unhelpful.

For example, statements from those who say that ‘we don’t want a catholic about the place’ are particularly offensive to us. Also, Mitchell McLaughlin said at the weekend that “David Trimble has never, never embraced the idea of political change and being part of that change.” He added that he believed that Unionists have come to the point where “as far as Republicans are concerned ... they will never ever enter into a power sharing executive”. This is simply not true.

In September 1995, when David Trimble became leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, a review of party policy was carried out. In November, at a special meeting of our Party Executive, it was agreed that all constitutional parties should have “a role at each level of responsibility in proportion to party strengths”. This has been, is and will remain our Party policy. The Ulster Unionist Party stands ready to embrace change.

Real progress is therefore possible, but for progress to be made it must be balanced. Only by balanced commitments from both communities will each be able to translate commitments in a balanced way into action.

It was for one reason – the protection of democracy against the threat of violence - that we could not support the formation of an Executive Committee within the Assembly on 15th July. We advised the Government right up to the last minute that it would be unwise to try and form an Executive. However, it persisted, thereby precipitating an unseemly and farcical exercise. I regret very much the resignation by the Deputy First Minister, Seamus Mallon, whom I have come to know and respect.

However, we must be positive and look forward not backward. The commitment of the Ulster Unionist Party is to create an inclusive government – Unionist, Nationalist and Republican – for Northern Ireland.

I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland 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. I believe Tony Blair is mistaken in thinking our problem is “one of the last examples of religious conflict in the world”.

We remain resolute and determined to solve the problem. Tony Blair asked for two commitments; a commitment to inclusive government matched by a commitment to

decommission. We readily give our commitment to having an inclusive government. We need others to give their commitment to decommission.

During the forthcoming review, we must focus on the two issues of devolution and decommissioning. While I cannot guarantee success, I can guarantee that we in the Ulster Unionist Party will try our very best to secure a positive outcome. I fully appreciate the disappointment felt by the whole community that we did not reach a successful outcome on 15th July; I do not remember a time when more constituents contacted me to express their views.

I note the recent IRA statement indicated a “definitive commitment” to the success of the peace process and that “in the current context” the demand for decommissioning would fail. Unionists are not, however, reassured. The IRA statement indicates that the root of the conflict is the “British involvement in Irish affairs”. Sinn Fein has stated that by removing the causes of conflict, conflict should be finished forever. Sinn Fein added, “it must be for all of us a thing of the past.”

Seamus Mallon has indicated that commitments require balance on the other side. I say honestly and openly that to make progress this balance, which I believe is at present lacking, must be clearly evident. The Ulster Unionist Party gives absolutely its commitment to inclusive government and equality. For confidence to develop and the process to continue, Unionism’s commitment needs to be matched by a commitment from the Republican movement regarding an end to violence.

From such commitments will come full and balanced implementation. In honouring commitments, we could do it at one and the same time to avoid anyone having to move first. I believe that this is fair and reasonable and I hope that the Republican movement can see a way to accept this proposition.

David Trimble has made it clear that the process cannot work without Sinn Fein, and equally it cannot work without decommissioning.

Dermot Nesbitt