

Good Friday 1998 dawned cold and wet as news of an historic agreement filtered out from Castle Buildings, Stormont to a waiting world. Neither cold nor wet dampened the sense of excitement and achievement felt that day by myself and SDLP colleagues after almost two years negotiating that agreement.

The agreement was a profound watershed in relationships between Ireland and Britain. It did so by addressing all of the fundamental political and constitutional issues at the heart of the conflict stretching back at least to partition.

The agreement affirmed that unity must be achieved with the democratic consent of the people of Ireland, North and South. The agreement outlined the new institutions to heal divisions within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between Ireland and Britain. Thirdly, the agreement set down how controversial matters such as prisoners, policing, human rights, criminal justice, would be dealt with.

Given the SDLP's clear stamp on much of the agreement, Good Friday 1998 was also a day of great pride for party members. It was the climax to John Hume's oft repeated claim that negotiations not force was the way forward. It also justified the political risks John Hume had taken in making those negotiations possible.

After three years there is pride in what has been achieved. But progress has not been as rapid as we would have liked. For more than half that time the political institutions were not working as intended as negotiations continued to bring them into operation.

Despite delays and interruptions the Executive is now working through a detailed Programme for Government. That programme stresses social need, economic development and reconciliation. Local ministers are already making significant changes. In education, major reforms are expected for secondary schooling. In health change is on the way for hospital and GP services.

My own recently announced package of support for third level students directs more financial assistance at low-income students. The package also makes many more third level places available in the North reducing the need to go elsewhere.

Minister for Agriculture Brid Rodgers' handling of the foot-and-mouth crisis is demonstrating just how effective a local minister can be. First Minister David Trimble and Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon demonstrate together political partnership in action.

On the all-Ireland level, the North-South Council is taking ambitious social and economic initiatives benefiting people throughout the island.

But major difficulties remain. Decommissioning has bedevilled progress and still remains to be properly addressed. Promises made by the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries have not been

honoured. The most recent IRA promise early in March that it would re-enter talks with General de Chastelain does not appear to have been acted upon.

David Trimble continues to prevent Sinn Fein ministers from attending North-South meetings. Policing issues remain to be resolved and British army installations are still in place where their removal was promised.

In the Assembly bitter exchanges explode. The ridiculous row over Easter lilies revealed just how deep and bitter feelings remain, especially between Sinn Fein and the unionist members.

The resulting tensions and divisions could spill over into the local and Westminster elections now expected on 7 June. Should election results reveal a significant increase for anti-agreement unionist candidates pressure will mount on David Trimble and his pro-agreement colleagues within the Assembly. Such pressure would not augur well for the future of the agreement.

Talk of renegotiating the agreement, as Sinn Fein seems to be suggesting, only feeds uncertainty and gives succour to anti-agreement unionists. Instead, the obligation for pro-agreement parties is to ensure the agreement is fully implemented. That includes a special responsibility on paramilitary linked parties like Sinn Fein and the PUP to use their influence to progress decommissioning. Further delay will be difficult to understand in light of promises made not just once but now three times, to start taking the necessary steps.

A resolution to policing issues is very close and should be possible within weeks of the election. The huge number of applications to the new policing service indicates a widespread desire to make it representative of the whole community. The SDLP looks forward to the day when members of the police patrol every street and every road in the North confident that they are fully accepted and supported.

British army posts must continue to be removed as part of the confidence building process. Finally, all ministers must be allowed to attend North-South meetings free from any future threat to their participation.

Above all, the spirit of reconciliation so evident on Good Friday 1998 must also become daily more evident and the temptation to indulge in sectarian point-scoring resisted. The real message is that lasting peace, prosperity and ultimately unity requires building on the Good Friday agreement. Without it none of these aims will be achieved.

*Sean Farren, SDLP (North Antrim), Minister for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment.*