

The odds against the Hain Assembly, so-called because legally it is not the Assembly elected in November 2003 but the creature of the recent Northern Ireland Act, transforming itself into a fully operational assembly with its executive and with the North-South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council also back in operation can hardly be lower.

The DUP continue to suggest that they will need more time than is available between now and midnight on 24th November [2006] before they might be in a position to decide on Sinn Féin's bona fides. Reports from the International Monitoring Commission may or may not guide its decision, but ultimately the DUP is determined to play the arbiter not just for itself but for the rest of us as well.

For Sinn Féin those bona fides should never have in question, their electoral mandate being the only test it recognises for qualifying for its participation in an executive – support for policing arrangement not having any urgency, nor any role in furthering confidence that Sinn Féin truly is committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic politics.

This arrogance from both parties has all the ingredients for log-jamming the Assembly. The only hope of avoiding that log-jam and gradually moving towards a positive outcome is by exposing their arrogance and by demonstrating the greater good that will be served by restoring the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. This in essence will be the SDLP's approach.

The SDLP has never accepted that it was the institutions of the agreement that failed but rather the failure of parties to live up to their obligations under the agreement that led to suspension.

Since the essential task before the Assembly is, therefore, to achieve full restoration of political institutions as soon as possible, all efforts must be directed to that end.

This means that the SDLP will not use the Hain Assembly to raise false hopes and expectations that decisions can be taken over matters for which the assembly has no authority. Expectations that the Assembly will immediately change Direct Rule decisions or be able to direct additional funding to any project would not be deliverable and so will not be advanced.

But if progress towards restoration emerges opportunities to prepare for government would be strongly encouraged by the SDLP. Engagement with all of the social partners would then become essential and the basis laid for what didn't prove possible under our previous experience of devolution, namely the creation of a genuine social partnership to address economic, social and community relations matters.

Northern Ireland has suffered from the absence of such a partnership while the South has continued to flourish from the benefits of its social partnership and many people rightfully ask why not here. They also see the potential for enhanced North-South co-operation and shake their heads when they also see the North-South bodies languishing on a 'care and maintenance' basis. These and the other challenges of tackling sectarianism, eliminating poverty and deprivation, have not been addressed with the commitment and determination they require because there has been no

determined political leadership and no coherent programme for government directing them.

The aim over the coming weeks must be to make the Hain Assembly the shortest lived assembly in our many experiences of assemblies so that we can move as rapidly as possible towards the prize of a genuine partnership between the children of the Planter and the Gael, not just in the North but throughout the whole of Ireland.

Unless we get to this point we will have denied this generation of the most meaningful opportunity in our history of influencing and directing positively relationships between our communities and of shaping the economic and social destiny of the people who elected us.