

Across Northern Ireland the danger signals are again flashing bright red reminding us just how deep divisions remain and how long term could be the achievement of lasting peace and political stability.

On the streets a prolific display of national and paramilitary flags, together with more military style murals and the erection of shrines commemorating each side's 'heroes' represents the depth of those divisions. Territory is being defiantly marked out on an almost unprecedented scale and, as events in North Belfast demonstrate, is actually being fought over.

More ominously, the continued presence of paramilitaries who show no sign of decommissioning and the clear intent of some in both communities to foment as much trouble as possible are raising community tensions to dangerous levels.

The recent election results underscore the persistence of these divisions and the extent fears and expectations associated with them are being exploited. The drop in support for the SDLP and the UUP together with the rise in support for Sinn Fein and the DUP reflect this trend.

While media comments have highlighted the style and presentation of the SDLP's message to explain the party's drop, the results indicate more worrying trends deserving wider consideration throughout the Irish body politic.

The SDLP believed that the Good Friday agreement was creating the basis for more positive community relations and believed that working the common ground of economic and social issues should be stressed. Hence, an election campaign focusing on developments in education, health, agriculture, infrastructure and in new North-South initiatives. Our manifesto reflected the Executive's *Programme for Government* underpinning an appeal to strengthen the political institutions' capacity to deliver even more gains.

Such an approach does not imply, as critics suggest, that the SDLP has turned its back on our Irish identity, much less on the goal of Irish unity. Our manifesto reflected this basic commitment together with commitments to promote Irish culture alongside respect and understanding of other cultural traditions.

Our approach to Irish unity has remained unchanged since our foundation. Unity will only be achieved by and can only persist through agreement. To suggest that unity can be achieved by majoritarian coercion, as Sinn Fein does, is utter folly. If pursued, this approach will produce a Balkan-like situation not real unity between 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter'.

International links and the benefits that flow from membership of the European Union were also stressed. Further development and enlargement is necessary to both strengthen democracy in central Europe and to extend the economic and social benefits of the EU to states in the region.

Sinn Fein's electoral approach was based on the barely concealed suggestions that Irish unity is imminent and that nationalism/republicanism is so triumphant in certain constituencies that it is now the turn for unionists 'to lie down'.

On social and economic matters a populist approach promised everything irrespective of resources available, often in complete contradiction to that party's own rhetoric about prioritising social need.

On EU enlargement Sinn Fein shares the 'enough is enough' attitude and that neither the benefits nor the responsibilities of EU membership should be shared with others.

This mix of narrow-minded nationalism and economic populism has an undoubted appeal, as much in Ireland as elsewhere. Its exclusive message implies there is little room for anyone in a united Ireland but for those subscribing to Sinn Fein's vision of

Irishness. This is a highly dangerous mix which risks the Good Friday agreement by raising tensions and further deepening divisions.

In style and despite Sinn Fein's pro-agreement stance, to some extent in substance, this message is mirrored by anti-agreement unionists. Anti-agreement unionists display the old exclusive unionist message that created the 'cold house' for Catholics and nationalists acknowledged by David Trimble in his Nobel Prize speech. It is a message given practical voice at council level in places like Ballymena, Ballymoney and Larne where unionists have very deliberately excluded the SDLP from any share of senior public office. The community represented by the SDLP is being told it will not enjoy parity of esteem with its unionist neighbours. Reinforcing this message are frequent attacks by loyalist paramilitaries on the homes of nationalist representatives, on Catholic churches and Catholic schools in these same areas.

In this situation it is hardly surprising that our political institutions are in grave danger. Opportunities since the Good Friday agreement to move rapidly to a situation in which violence was not only absent, but so too its threat, have not been taken. Decommissioning has not been progressed by any of the paramilitaries, loyalist or republican.

This failure has increased mistrust between our communities. This failure has made it impossible for Executive members to properly develop the mutual confidence essential to a genuine partnership between our people. Not surprisingly, this mistrust is exacerbating street confrontation.

Above all, the failure to seriously address decommissioning and the threats posed by paramilitaries are direct challenges to the democratic basis of the agreement. The failure challenges the will of the people of Ireland, North and South, who voted overwhelmingly in its favour. Without a resolution the agreement, as we currently know it, is not sustainable.

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