

Denis Kennedy offered some interesting observations on the state of the peace process in the previous edition of *Magill*. His assertion that the British and Irish governments have indulged Sinn Fein to an extent that the IRA continues to operate as a functioning paramilitary and criminal organisation despite this being anathema to the Good Friday Agreement, is certainly a credible and popular thesis given the Northern Bank robbery and the murder of Robert McCartney.

However, scapegoating the SDLP for the electoral growth of Sinn Fein as Kennedy does is merely a convenient way of ignoring unionism's failure to come to terms with the demands placed on it by the Good Friday Agreement.

Moreover, whilst there is little doubt that recent events have undermined public confidence in the political process in Northern Ireland, moving away from the inclusive approach that brought us the Good Friday Agreement, that Denis Kennedy clearly advocates, would only make matters worse.

However, Kennedy's argument that the SDLP "*made the fatal mistake of engaging in competitive nationalism with Sinn Fein*" is superficial and misguided. The SDLP's message, almost unique among the parties in the North, has always been 100% support for the Good Friday Agreement. The party continues unashamedly to adopt this position.

The Agreement is a contract between unionists and nationalists. Yet, almost from the moment the Agreement was signed (if not before then, if you consider Jeffrey Donaldson's premature exit from the talks) unionists have been pre-occupied with a civil war between the pro- and anti- sides.

It is to be regretted that the benefits of the Agreement to unionists have never been fully articulated because of the internal competition within unionism. The reality remains that for all their anti-agreement posturing the DUP were as content to work the institutions the Agreement created as all the other parties were.

In fact, the DUP's position throughout the last number of years has been wholly dishonest. On the one hand they rail against the Agreement as a sell-out of the unionist position, yet on the other they engaged with the structures it created.

As for Sinn Féin, rather than fully live up to the obligations and commitments they signed-up to more than seven years ago, they have consistently put their own interests ahead of the interests of the entire community in Northern Ireland. Their negotiating priorities focused on such issues as the release of Garda McCabe's killers, amnesties for IRA members 'on-the-run' and wiping clean the records of those convicted of paramilitary activities, presumably including murder, abduction, armed robbery etc. etc.

It has been the exclusive nature of the way negotiations have been handled every time there is a crisis in the peace process that has contributed to the current mess in which we find ourselves. For this, the British and Irish

governments bear direct responsibility. They are the mangers of the process. Yet, they are the ones who have allowed recent negotiations to boil down exclusively to the loudest competing voice with nationalism and unionism.

By reducing the entire process to fixing an agreement between Sinn Fein and the DUP, the governments have totally undermined the democratic mandate of the majority of all Irish citizens, North and South.

Indeed since the Assembly Elections of November of 2003, the two governments have indulged these two sides to such an extent that the DUP won substantial changes to the Good Friday Agreement last November in order to claim they had achieved an entire renegotiation. At the same time, the IRA has continued to exist up to its neck in major crime, punishment beatings and murder, despite such activity being repugnant to the philosophy of the Agreement.

Notwithstanding this back-drop the two governments continue to seek a settlement between these two sides whilst at the same time offering more and more concessions to each that further undermines the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement.

Denis Kennedy's answer to this state of affairs is to exclude Sinn Fein from the entire process and for an accommodation to be reached between the SDLP and unionists. But, attempting to marginalize Sinn Fein will only make them stronger. In fact, exclusion would be a godsend to Sinn Fein. It would allow them to play the victim when the real victims in the North are people like the McCartney family and many others whose Good Friday Agreement is being wrecked by paramilitary activity.

The SDLP has consistently stated that it would support the exclusion of Sinn Fein from the political process in the event of the IRA ceasefire breaking down. But the ultimate call on the status of the IRA ceasefire is not the SDLP's to make. That is down to the two governments, who have not since 1998 ruled that that is the case.

Whilst I recognise that many unionists will now only accept Sinn Fein's bona fides once the Provisional Movement ends their criminal activities and until paramilitarism is a thing of the past, asking us all to wait until that happens before progress can be made is akin to nationalists placing a veto on the entire process until the secular wing of the DUP triumphs over the sectarian bigots who populate its ranks.

There are also extremely strong, and valid, reservations within the nationalist community about the DUP's own relationship, past and present, with paramilitarism.

In this context, the SDLP continues to advocate an inclusive approach. Yes, Sinn Fein has failed to come-up to the mark in delivering a total end to paramilitary activity, and yes, unionists have failed to wholeheartedly embrace the institutions and structures created under the Agreement. But the failure of

individual parties to meet their commitments must not mean that the Agreement itself is made fail.

Therefore, as the governments move towards putting the process back on track, they must learn from the mistakes they have made in the past. They must not allow negotiations to be conducted on the basis of trying to concoct a deal exclusively between Sinn Fein and the DUP, but by ensuring that these parties commit themselves to the principles of the Agreement that have been allowed to slip.

Those who through their continued relationship with paramilitary or criminal groups and who fail to cooperate with the new structures of policing and justice must be told that they are therefore excluding themselves from playing a meaningful role in the creation of an agreed Ireland.

Similarly, those who wish to opt out of or change the all-Ireland institutions must not be allowed to participate in a semi-detached way in any new Executive.

These must be the starting points for any new negotiations.

Realistically, however, the SDLP recognises that the current stalemate may endure for some time. In the meantime we must ensure that the people we represent do not lose out because of a lack of democratic accountability.

The SDLP has tabled proposals to both governments that would see the Assembly recalled and an Executive appointed comprising of ten civic administrators drawn from outside of party politics to do the job of Ministers until such a time as the parties themselves are able to agree a cross-party power-sharing Executive. This would allow the Assembly to function as well as the North-South and British-Irish councils. In effect it would breathe life back into a political process that is in real danger of becoming moribund.

Failing this, the British and Irish governments should, at the very least and without delay, end the 'care and maintenance' status of the North-South bodies. To do so they should allow existing bodies to develop and expand their work, outline further areas of north-south co-operation and where necessary create new bodies to oversee closer integration on key economic and social interests in both parts of the island.

Ultimately, the only response to the present crisis is the full restoration of the agreement, an agreement that was endorsed by the largest popular mandate ever given for any political proposition in both parts of Ireland.