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Viewpoint: Uncomfortable reminder of the past

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

There is widespread disappointment rather than surprise that Sinn Fein wants to use International Womens' Day, next week, to honour IRA member Mairead Farrell, who was killed in Gibraltar 20 years ago, at Stormont.

Predictably, the DUP has reacted by planning a celebration of the role of the SAS, evening up the score, but the losers are all the people of Northern Ireland.

Less than a year after the political compromise that put Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness into government, this is no time for their parties to go head to head over controversial historical events. It is natural that they should disagree about a foiled IRA bomb plot but there was no necessity for the commemorations to be planned for the Long Gallery at Stormont, in a shared space.

Clearly the two parties are appealing to some supporters who have reservations about the deal on devolution. Dissidents have never accepted the compromises necessary for power-sharing and so, first Sinn Fein, and then the DUP, are saying "Don't worry; we haven't changed."

Since the republicans raised the issue, by choosing the venue for the commemoration, they deserve most of the blame. They could have the ceremony anywhere else but they chose Stormont to have the maximum effect.

They have succeeded but only in emphasising the differences between unionists and republicans, and in angering people of all political persuasions and none. An unarmed Ms Farrell was killed by the SAS when an IRA bomb was intercepted. She can be honoured by republicans, for giving her life for their cause but unionists could not and should not be expected to respect her contribution.

At the same time, nationalists of all kinds have no respect for the SAS, who operated a clandestine campaign against republican paramilitaries - often by questionable means - which resulted in many deaths and injuries. The proposal of Jeffrey Donaldson, MP, that they should be honoured, in retaliation to the Mairead Farrell event, is also divisive.

Since the return of devolution, all participants have been showered with praise for swallowing their pride and accepting their roles in a unique power-sharing government. It would be tragic if all the good work were to be sacrificed and long term prosperity endangered by a failure to deal sensibly with the past. Politicians must be sensitive to opposition opinion and seek accommodation even when Sinn Fein campaign to "neutralise" the images in public buildings.

All eyes should be focused on the international conference in May that hopes to attract investment and jobs. Arguments over the merits of controversial actions, 20 years ago, have no relevance today.

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