

There is a route out of the crisis

The present political crisis is caused by a combination of two things. On the one hand there is the continuing anti-Agreement campaign waged by politicians, terrorists and, probably, elements in the security establishment. On the other hand, there is a serious breakdown of trust amongst some, at least, of the pro-Agreement parties.

Unionists don't trust Republicans' commitment to democratic institutions while the IRA is still militarily capable and apparently still active. They may have little hard evidence and are proclaiming people guilty before so proved, but the trust is anyway gone.

Republicans – and many other nationalists – do not trust the Unionists' commitment to the Agreement and sharing power with them. They believe that more hoops are constantly being created for them to jump through.

Republicans also doubt the good faith of the British Government and especially its security establishment. They believe that elements, at least, want to see a disarmed and co-opted Republican movement that would be unable to resist a rowing back of the historic reforms brought in by the Agreement.

The NIWC's trust in the good faith of all of these parties has also been severely shaken by the games that it appears they have all been playing. But trust can be rebuilt. There is a way out of the grave situation that has been created.

The British Government has the primary responsibility. In the first place, it should not suspend the Agreement institutions. If any party wishes to destroy them, so be it. It should not be protected from the political consequences of its actions by the Secretary of State.

Secondly, the Government should move to reassure everybody of its political commitment, and the practical commitment of every organ of the state, to the reform process. That means, amongst other things, going ahead with the promised new policing legislation and reining in its security services. Here are some things it could do to build trust:

- Make all security briefings open, on the record and fully attributable – any other briefings by officials or security personnel to merit instant dismissal
- Declare that the only role of any agents employed by any security agency within the ranks of any paramilitary organisation is to gather evidence of criminal activity with a view to prosecution
- Declare that the use of payments, threats or any inducement to children to give information about criminal activity is contrary to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and contrary to government policy; the Chief Constable, the Policing Board and the Police Ombudsman should echo that view.

On the basis of that solid platform, Republicans should be able to convince their constituency that the forces of the state will offer them objective and effective protection. The consequence of that is the redundancy of the IRA. The organisation should cease any activity oriented towards violence or its potential resumption and it should decommission its arms. Sinn Fein should join the Policing Board. Our

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communities need and deserve accountable policing; Sinn Fein have to be on the Policing Board to ensure that. We believe that huge step should be understood as the mark and symbol of the standing down of the IRA – far more effective than any rhetorical declaration.

Unionists should begin to fight for the Agreement. They should start counting what they have gained from the Agreement rather than harping on about what they have lost. The UUP as a party seems to have got itself hamstrung by its anti-Agreement wing and it seems likely to bring down the institutions in the short term. But there are plenty of pro-Agreement individuals within it and we would like to see them supporting this road out of crisis and emphasising that re-negotiation of the Agreement is a pipe dream. All Unionist and Loyalist politicians should help reduce tension and violence by ceasing the dangerous rhetoric of defeat, disaster and doomsday. Those who predict violence and disaster help bring it about.

The Irish Government should add its element of reassurance by declaring that it would favour power-sharing, devolved institutions for the current territory of Northern Ireland even if a vote ever went for a United Ireland.

All of these moves together could haul us out of the crisis. They could lay the basis for a new level of trust between the pro-Agreement parties and the two governments. They could deal with the major issues of conflict that have prevented a full embedding of the Agreement in our society.

With these steps taken, pro-Agreement parties and individuals could face the necessary, coming elections with confidence. In the end we have to put our trust in democracy, in the verdict of the people of Northern Ireland. We know that the Agreement is the only way forward. Our task is to make it work effectively and so demonstrate that to the electorate.