

Debate on "Events of last Friday"

Monica, this is too long for a five minute speech – you need to cut some of it and not go off it if you want to get all the points across. Can I put it out to press before you give it? (with Check against delivery), I think we might get good coverage....

Concern about what happened last Friday? The truth of the matter is we have a lot of concerns about a lot of things that went before last Friday, and I suspect we are not alone in that.

The Women's Coalition has serious reservations about the games which have been played with the Agreement. Many different people, on different sides, have been playing games. It is entirely possible in the events of Friday and others which have gone before that there is wrong on both sides.

The questions we have go far beyond who sanctioned a raid in this building and why they found what they found? We ask why are the police not winning the support of the whole community, and why are republicans not taking responsibility for policing? Why are security sources still leaking like a sieve? Why are punishment beatings still going on, many of the victims being teenagers, and why is the anti-social behaviour which triggers them not being tackled in a legal, constructive and effective way?

Perhaps one of the most serious questions we need an answer to is this: why, if parties are committed to peace, committed to the Agreement, why have they not been in dialogue day and night, particularly in times of crisis? Why have they not brought their problems to the table, rather than pretended that all the problems were someone else's responsibility?

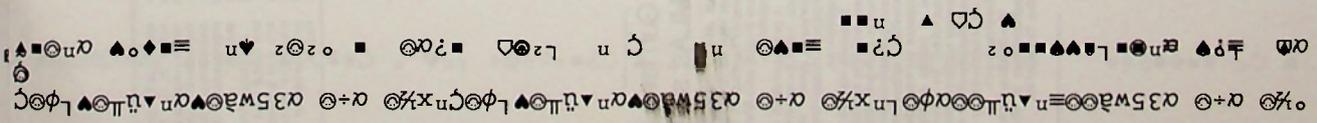
We have called for more than three years for an Implementation Committee, which would help all parties overcome difficulties, even in their own camp, we hailed its introduction as a new start for the Agreement, but some failed to take it seriously, failed to even come to the table. Now people are saying it was never going to work – it has never had a chance!

If everyone says they know what caused this breakdown of trust, and breakdown of the institutions, if they can say what the problem is, then they should be taking the action to overcome it. We have the capacity to sort this out ourselves, and so far we have chosen not to.

We believe it is time that we have the political maturity to accept the responsibility for our actions. This means sorting out our own problems in Northern Ireland. And if we can't sort them out, we shouldn't expect someone else to come in with the much-talked about 'rabbit and hat' scenario and rescue us.

It is not inevitable that the Assembly will collapse, it is the result of actions and decisions taken by people in the room as well as in other places, and made long before this week, as well as were we now find ourselves. I hope that the Unionists will stay in government and look for other ways of holding people accountable for their actions – like the legal process and the ballot box.

If the peace process is to survive, there is work to be done on all sides to re-build it. Rest assured that in the eyes of the public and history, we will share the blame for the problems in



the peace process, why will some of you not take your share of responsibility for the rescue mission?

Let's be honest, it is not the Assembly or the Agreement which has failed. It is political parties which have failed to trust each other, and to be worthy of that trust, because they have been secretive, aloof and looked after their own interests.

If this Assembly is suspended or plunged into limbo by resignations from the Executive, we must be clear what this means.

If we allow the institutions to be disrupted, we open up an all-too dangerous political void. We have seen time and time again that anti-Agreement and violent forces are all too willing to step in and fill the vacuum, starting a bloody downwards spiral that we maybe can not stop. I urge the governments and parties to concentrate on what fills that void.

But let's be clear that this will not be the end, but the beginning to a new and difficult phase of the peace process. There is no question but that we must find a way through this most serious of crises.

The option of returning to the direct rule, violent stalemate of pre-1994 is not an option. If the future looks bleak now, how much bleaker would it look with no ceasefires, and nothing to encourage paramilitaries to hold back, no framework for moving forward on policing, on human rights, on how to govern Northern Ireland, never mind the social and economic issues that we have taken forward in the last few years.

The losers in this will not be the security services, the IRA, the Ulster Unionists, Sinn Fein or any other political party, it will be the people of Northern Ireland. We have an obligation to make it work for them, all of sections of them, and when it stops working, to find ways to make it work again. No matter what difficult steps must be taken, no matter what must be given up, no matter who has to say, "we've contributed to this mess..."

Re-negotiation of the Agreement is a pipe dream, because there is no better agreement for any community – wouldn't we have got it in 1998 if it were possible? Peddling the belief that there is a better agreement is not only deceitful but dangerous. What we need to revisit is the obligations of being a guardian of that Agreement, because it is here that we have not passed the test.

We assume, since the Agreement is a treaty by two governments, that any suspension will be on the basis of negotiation between the British and Irish governments. This will apply also to any measures put in place after suspension.