

The problem has taken some time to create. It is obvious that criminal elements in the community who have originated and perpetrated the violence surrounding loyalist parades and in the self-confessed words of Gerry Adams have been working for three years towards that very end. Measured and

consistent action by government is required to stem the flood into further impasse.

The primacy of traditional parades was jettisoned from Ulster's legislation and that principle must be restored. That is the key to the way forward.

In the strength of truth and in the strength

of numbers the Union can be saved. To this end all Unionists of good will must unite. This is the time for unflinching determination and not faithless dithering.



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PARTNERS FOR AGREEMENT

We must stop the serial stalling, says John Hume

Senator George Mitchell brought the multi-party talks to a recess on March 5, to resume on June 3 after the General Election and council elections. They will reopen nearly a year after their commencement on June 10, 1996 and we will still be in the opening plenary with no sign of the start of substantive negotiations in the three strands. So much for the Prime Minister's assurance last year that his endorsement of David Trimble's proposals for elections and a Forum would mean that we would "move straight and straightaway into negotiations".

Mr Major and his ministers also pledged that they would work to prevent any issue becoming a block in the negotiations as a whole. The fact is that parties are being allowed to block progress to the actual negotiations. The UUP will not even allow us to formally agree a comprehensive agenda for the negotiations even though they and the SDLP have submitted identical proposals for that agenda.

There are two issues which they are using to hold back the talks. Decommissioning and the terms of entry for Sinn Fein. Their concern, to prevent Sinn Fein's participation totally contradicts the importance they place on decommissioning. It is clear that real progress on the latter issue would be directly contingent on Sinn Fein's involvement.

The UUP has tried to turn truth on its head by claiming that the SDLP has held

the talks back waiting for Sinn Fein's inclusion. We make no apology for working to protect the inclusive potential of the talks but must stress that this has not involved us in stalling the talks. On the contrary we have consistently proposed moving into substantive negotiations and the UUP have consistently opposed this.

The serial stalling over procedural matters has not emanated from the SDLP. We did not try to get rid of the independent chairs, the rules or other parties at the table. With others, we defended the international chairs and protected important qualities in the rules for the talks including the provision that the agenda will allow any participant to raise any issue of concern to them including constitutional issues.

It is not the SDLP who have stood in the way of agreement on the difficult issue of decommissioning. The UUP have contended that the SDLP is opposed to creating mechanisms for dealing with decommissioning. They have also declared that we want a sub-committee on the issue in order to give ourselves a veto on anything happening. Typically, this is an inversion of the truth.

The SDLP have engaged intensively with the UUP to agree mechanism for decommissioning. The nature and role of the sub-committee we have discussed would not give the SDLP or anyone else a veto nor have we ever sought one. In trilaterals with the Alliance Party and the UUP we have worked to make progress and close gaps between us on decommissioning. The UUP have seemed concerned to avert agreement at this stage and to that end tried to widen the gaps again. The constructive work of four smaller parties to offer a practical resolu-

tion of one of the problems between us has been rejected by the UUP but welcomed by ourselves.

The UUP could have been party to agreements before the election recess on mechanisms for decommissioning—something which they have emphasised—and on the comprehensive agenda for the negotiations, while still reserving their position on the issue of Sinn Fein's entry. Such agreements before the election would have engendered a stronger sense of assurance or purpose about the process to which we are returning in June. Running scared of other Unionist parties, the UUP would not countenance such straightforward and practical agreement.

It is hard to see that they will perform more constructively in June but we will return to the talks and our particular contacts with the UUP in the hope that they do. The presence of a new British Government should be a positive factor as should the fact that the political calendar will be clear of elections for two years. The most beneficial factor of all, however, would be an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire so that dialogue could take place without the distress and distractions of violence or its threat.

The IRA owe a cessation of violence to the people of Ireland. Equally political parties owe real leadership to a community which wants peace and needs to see political agreement and accommodation. There are too many dangerous pressures at work in the community which will not be countered or contained by divisive posturing, idle politicking or avoiding agreements. The task of leadership is not just to stand up to other parties but also to sit down with them, not just for arguments but for agreements. The SDLP is committed to the task of leadership and only wish that our opponents would become our rivals in that regard so that we might then have partners for agreement.



*John Hume is MP for Foyle and
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