

This jumping together

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In 'To Kill a Mockingbird', a classic defence of the need for tolerance and trust between groups in society, the hero passes a piece of advice to his children: "To understand the other man's point of view you have to wear his shoes, walk around in his backyard and look at your own world from his perspective."

There is much said about the need for trust in Northern Ireland, but trust needs to be earned. Indeed, trust is part of the process: from understanding should come tolerance; from tolerance should come trust and from trust should come a stable, normal society, in which all have confidence in the political institutions.

This process requires looking at the problem from each other's perspective. Nationalists often define the problem in the context of 'rights' and 'equality' and Sinn Fein in particular repeat the mantra that its community is still short-changed in both these areas.

I fully agree that 'rights' should be both championed and protected and as far as Northern Ireland is concerned there is no more important issue to be addressed than that of how we organise our society with respect to human rights. This commitment to human rights should be an obligation upon all of us in Northern Ireland to subscribe to the norms, which exist already within international human rights law.

While it is necessary that all should be protected by the norms of international rules an equally important element, requires the breaking down of psychological barriers in order that any sense of superiority/inferiority is eliminated. Only then can the process from real understanding to genuine co-operation be fully achieved.

I appreciate that unionists must convince nationalists/republicans that there will be a fair deal for all within Northern Ireland: that they have a stake and an important role to play at every level of government. Equally, unionists must be convinced that every group and political party will work within the institutions of government in Northern Ireland in the context of a peaceful environment.

Some critics of the Belfast Agreement insist that the devil is in the detail, but I happen to believe that the salvation may lie in the small print. The Belfast Agreement stated on page one: "...we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all."

These are fine words and words which I as a unionist am happy to acknowledge and accept. Indeed, these human rights have been determined by international agreement. Some of the main elements relevant to Northern Ireland are: full economic, social, cultural and political equality; freedom of religion; freedom to use the minority language and be taught in that language; and, equal access to education at all levels.

I make one simple comment. I believe that the above rights along with many others agreed by the international community are largely in place already. Consequently, I believe what is lacking are institutions of government to which every party in the 'minority' and 'majority' communities would have an affinity with and both owe and give allegiance.

To that end we helped negotiate and promote a fully co-operative and inclusive government. The inclusive Executive - unionist, nationalist and republican - I believe demonstrated in a maximalist, if not unique, way the principles of accommodation in a divided society.

I note that the Secretary of State has indicated that Northern Ireland could become a "by-word for political failure". He has said that Unionists must convince Republicans that we are "not going to constantly raise the bar" and "make it harder for people to reach accommodation". He seems also to make a blanket criticism of all by saying "people are taking a too hard and inflexible position."

I openly invite the Secretary of State to consider fully the obligations that the Government has undertaken with respect to human rights and then consider is it unionism that would cause Northern Ireland to become a political failure? I think not.

Also, Unionism's demonstrated commitment to inclusivity had not been enough to receive a matching commitment concerning an end to violence. Indeed there seems little understanding that after so many months without matching commitments made and honoured by the republican movement, unionists would naturally lose faith with its intentions and come to fear that the republican game plan is not peace and stability in Northern Ireland. I recognise just as there is a need for inclusive government so also there is a need to know, and demonstrated by decommissioning, that the war is over.

The 'equality' and 'rights' agenda within a divided society must be a two-way process. No party - or government - can be selective in the 'rights' it wishes to champion, nor can it ignore the responsibilities associated with rights.

I have tried always to understand the nationalist/republican perspective of the Northern Ireland problem. I believe that we have negotiated a settlement that, if fully implemented, would benefit all. I invite all, especially the Government and the republican movement, to look at our present difficulty from a unionist perspective.

If you do, then we may have one more opportunity to put aside old enmities and focus on building a healthy society: a Northern Ireland in which the human rights of all sections of the community are protected. The next few weeks will show if by a greater understanding of each other's concerns we can begin finally to put to rest this long out-dated quarrel.

Dermot Nesbitt