

‘Time to respect the majority too’

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In an interview with the News Letter recently, the Secretary of State said: “Nothing will be done which is one inch out of step with the Good Friday Agreement.” Yet the Belfast Agreement is becoming the Skewed Friday Agreement, as both Governments increasingly twist its clauses to the detriment of unionism - in their determination to resurrect the Assembly at any price and to get Sinn Fein back into an Executive. I am deeply disturbed that to achieve this goal, they are wavering in their commitment to universally accepted principles of democracy and they are renegeing on their international human rights obligations.

The Belfast Agreement recognises the legitimacy of Northern Ireland’s position within the United Kingdom by virtue of choice freely exercised by the majority. It also guarantees the welfare of the non-unionist minority by decreeing full respect for, and equality of, the rights of all.

Like other countries in Europe and throughout the world, Northern Ireland has a minority within its boundary which identifies with a neighbouring country in terms of nationality and which aspires to incorporation within that country. Because of this situation in so many nations, the Council of Europe agreed a convention that set an international standard to protect such minorities. The United Kingdom Government has ratified and agreed this Convention, which should ensure that international obligations, in respect of everyone in Northern Ireland, are actually met.

This Convention, while granting rights to minorities, also requires that such minorities respect both the national constitution and the legislation of the country in which they reside. In Northern Ireland Sinn Fein refuses to give such respect in at least one vital regard - policing. Peter Hain and the Governments are very understanding of Sinn Fein’s position. Indeed, in a keynote speech in July, Mr Hain tried to help Sinn Fein by suggesting that it should: “draw a distinction between ‘constitutional’ endorsement of the structures of policing, and support for the practical service of policing.”

In other words, he was saying that the minority, while refusing to abide by a key element of the Council of Europe’s internationally recognised convention, should nevertheless be guaranteed a place in government. At one stroke, the Government has abdicated, not respected, its international obligations by lessening the effectiveness of this important convention.

And it doesn’t stop there. On cross-border arrangements, the Belfast Agreement states that any further development of such arrangements must have the specific endorsement of the Northern Ireland Assembly. But the two governments, in a joint statement in April last, totally disregarded the democratic imperative of this clause and announced that, if devolution were not restored, they alone would develop the structures for co-operation including a step change in advancing North-South co-operation. Once again, this reflects the two Governments’ dismissal as irrelevant the

once sacred text of the Agreement when it does not suit their purposes. They are breaching a core principle or element of the Agreement.

Not surprisingly, Bertie Ahern declared in April that the Agreement provided a legal basis for the peaceful reunification of the island of Ireland; something, he said later that month, that required only steadfast support for the Belfast Agreement.

The United Kingdom Government is required to not undermine its commitment to international obligations, including the protection of its citizens and the provision of democratic politics in Northern Ireland.

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