

Solutions lie with basic rights

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After two years of relative peace, community relations are at an all-time low in Northern Ireland. Some blame the Drumcree incident and its aftermath, but Drumcree was itself merely a symptom of a deep malaise. Also, many are confused and angry at the way in which the political process has been handled. How has all this come about?

Over recent months the Northern Ireland 'problem' has been increasingly internationalised. The International Body on arms decommissioning is one example. Also, four Nationalist residents' groups recently urged the Irish government to "internationalise" their complaints over Orange Order marches.

In all of the calls for internationalisation one dimension - human rights law - has been almost totally overlooked by all, including both governments, yet this is fundamental to a resolution of our problem.

International human rights law - in particular the protection of minorities - has been determined by international consensus within a range of bodies including the United Nations and Council of Europe. Just as each citizen should abide by domestic law so each sovereign state should abide by accepted principles of international law.

Both conditions must apply for there to be stability. To undermine, or interfere, in the political independence of States is in violation of one such fundamental principle.

Both governments' proposals for political progress (The Frameworks Document) wrongly refer to the Northern Ireland problem as unique. There is a whole body of international law to cope with such problems. Why have both governments not referred to all fundamental principles contained in such law?

Though often misrepresented, the Ulster Unionist Party bases its approach squarely on the principles of international law and practice. It responds positively to international consensus on the treatment of minorities. The UUP says yes to participation in government at all levels by all constitutional parties and yes to full co-operation with Dublin on matters of mutual benefit to both jurisdictions.

Were all participants in the Talks process to abide by the international consensus as to how to solve our problem of a divided society, progress would be made. Indeed it will only be by such a commitment on the part of all participants that progress will be made - and it could be made quickly.

Current lack of progress results from both governments, and Nationalist politicians, trying to pressure a unionist community not only against its will but, more importantly, against fundamental international principles devised to resolve conflicts such as those in Northern Ireland.

Most people in Northern Ireland wish to live in harmony and peace while recognising the right of others to be different from a cultural, linguistic, educational or religious basis. To achieve such a situation requires the acceptance of majority democratic rights alongside the rights of minorities.

The London government appears to recognise the democratic right of a majority through its espousal of the principle of consent. The Dublin government and constitutional nationalists pay lip service to this principle but continually undermine it by seeking to pressurise the majority.

Much debate has focused on the Mitchell principles for arms decommissioning but there has been little public debate on, or analysis of, the equally important aspect of the principles upon which future government structures are to be based and how minorities should be accommodated.

Indeed the key litmus test for the success of all-party talks will be the institutions of government created and it may be argued that it will matter less how or when decommissioning of arms takes place.

It will never be possible to find a widely acceptable solution to the problems of our divided society without a basis of agreed principles. These principles will have to be derived from international human rights law, which balances majority rights and secure borders with minority rights and democratic inclusion.

Until these principles are publicly debated and widely agreed it is naïve to expect much progress from the political talks.

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