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With the Review of the working of the Belfast Agreement about to begin, I was fascinated to read an article by Garrett FitzGerald (Irish Times, 14 August) stating how difficult he sees the task facing unionists.

Dr. FitzGerald said that no democratic politician in either island can, or should, fail to sympathise with the UUP situation in being faced with a proposal that they enter an executive before the decommissioning of IRA arms. How many of us, he continued, who are or have been engaged in democratic politics can say that if faced with such a requirement, we would be prepared to take such a course. He then added, if he in his different circumstances would find that difficult, perhaps to the point of being impossible to accept, can anyone blame members of the UUP for their stance.

This degree of understanding and openness from a former Prime Minister of the Irish Republic is encouraging. For the UUP is being asked by some to do something for which there is no precedent in the democratic world.

Sinn Fein shows no similar understanding. Instead it misrepresents unionism's true position. For example, statements from those who say that 'we don't want a Catholic about the place' are particularly offensive to us. Also, Mitchell McLaughlin said recently that "David Trimble has never, never embraced the idea of political change and being part of that change." This is simply laughable.

The Ulster Unionist Party gives absolutely its commitment to create an inclusive government – unionist, nationalist and republican – for Northern Ireland. For confidence to develop and the process to continue, unionism's commitment needs to be matched by a commitment from the republican movement regarding a complete end to all violence.

This unprecedented commitment to inclusiveness has in my view been too little acknowledged. The inclusiveness was of course built into the Belfast Agreement to which I, and my colleagues, agreed as a settlement of Northern Ireland's longstanding conflict.

Yet our commitment to inclusivity has still not been enough to receive a matching commitment concerning an end to violence. Sinn Fein insists that it be let into government without any certainty that decommissioning will ever take place. At the same time Sinn Fein's associates in the IRA continue to kill, torture and maim people for a range of reasons, all of which are unacceptable and some of which defy belief.

Indeed there seems little understanding that without matching commitments made or honoured by the republican movement after so many months, unionists would naturally

lose faith with its intentions and come to fear that the republican game plan is now to set up an unstable 'mafia' state.

However, I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland wish to live in peace with their neighbours while recognising the right of those neighbours to be different from a cultural, linguistic, educational or religious perspective.

In order that trust can be developed all of the commitments made in the Belfast Agreement will need to be implemented in full. The commitments on decommissioning and forming an executive could be implemented at one and the same time to avoid anyone having to move first. This is known as 'jumping together'. I believe that this is fair and reasonable and I hope that the republican movement can see a way to accepting this proposition.

It is this option of 'jumping together' that leaders of the business community not long ago urged us to accept. We in the UUP have listened throughout this process to those who have exhorted us to take political risks. The size of these risks can hardly be doubted. Unionist support in the referendum in May 1998 was little over 50% in marked contrast to the near unanimity on the nationalist side.

Dr. FitzGerald, notwithstanding his sympathy for the unionist position, advocates that we take the risk he would find difficult if not impossible to accept. He views the present as one of those times when principle must be sacrificed to expediency for the sake of the possibility of creating a stable democratic society in Northern Ireland.

Dr FitzGerald would argue that there are moderates within Sinn Fein who can only deliver peace if their more militant associates can see that the republican movement has achieved a measure of power. Once Sinn Fein is in government it should then be possible to persuade the hard-liners to give up their weapons.

The problem with this hypothesis is that it is only a theory, with little evidence to support it. The IRA has never said it will disarm. It continues to reserve the right to kill and maim those with whom it disagrees.

I am one of those who hopes that an inclusive executive - unionist, nationalist and republican - can be set up, but I have to say that unless all face up more honestly to the real difficulties progress will remain difficult.

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