IRISH NEWS LETTER

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Dear Editor,

In his article about the UUP’s recent post-Haass proposals document (14 March) Brian Feeney gives no quarter. Indeed his effort could be best described as a rant rather than an analysis

The descriptions he quotes from his conflict resolution expert, Dr Gabrielle Rifkind, and which he applies to the UUP – no vision for the future; identity fixed in the, sometimes, imaginary past; and obsession with victimhood could be attributed just as easily to Sinn Fein, the DUP and indeed the SDLP, more so than to the UUP.

It was the UUP which negotiated and put its mark on the Belfast Agreement in 1998, making enormous concessions, including cross-border bodies, prisoner releases and the consequent winding-up of the RUC. Its history in government is not marked by the intransigence of the current two governing parties, albeit the UUP wants to stick to the agreement it negotiated rather than the next illusory one. And remember Sinn Fein hardly participated in those previous talks.

Dr Haass and Professor O’Sullivan were actually brought over because our two governing parties could not agree on how to deal with the issues of the Past – issues largely raised by Sinn Fein and Alliance. The pair was faced with two essentially Unionist concerns, flags and parades, and one shared, that on possible new arrangements to address the fact that although governing structures had been decided in 1998 there was no system whereby contentious ‘ethnic’ issues could be addressed.

On flags, had the Alliance Party not broken its own policy of working for consensus at Belfast City Hall we would not be where we are. But that party made no concessions at Haass, rather the opposite, when it rejected his final draft in two areas. Indeed it proposed to make matters worse by pursuing a policy of requiring licences for street bunting.

As politics here, in Sinn Fein’s view, are a (peace) process, every issue, has to be viewed through its prism of rewriting (or unwriting) history. The majoritarian governance of Stormont up to 1972 having been swept aside, a new joint majoritarianism became its replacement, as a hopeful prelude toward processing Sinn Fein majority rule throughout the island. Brian Feeney does not refer to any of that. Perhaps he knows the south, in particular, won’t wear it.

It is amazing that he does not even stop to consider that the Troubles started because of marches being banned, as in October 1969 in Derry, and as in January 1969 at Burntollet when a march was impeded, yet he has no concerns about Orange parades experiencing the same treatment today. If Haass had a purpose however it was to cut the Gordian knots of City Hall, Woodvale and perhaps even Drumcree, and in one imaginative fell swoop break the impasses our system has perhaps inevitably produced.

It was not to be but not for want of trying by the UUP. Indeed the here and now was hardly discussed.

What Dr Feeney importantly does not address are the genuine concerns in human rights and equality terms, which the UUP has now outlined, over many of Richard Haass’s proposals, not least the proposed Historical Investigations Unit (HIU).

The HIU was not, as you might think from its title, an organisation to be staffed by Professors of History and their hard working research assistants. The draft makes it clear it is to be, in effect, an **alternative** police investigatory and enforcement body.

It was to combine the functions of HET and the Police Ombudsman. It however was not to be comprehensive, or even simplify matters, since coroners inquests and civil suits were excluded, not to mention criminal case reviews. Legacy litigation was not to be contained or curbed.

What HIU would have become was a parallel police force of the past, with normal police powers being extended to non-criminal aspects of public life such as alleged misconduct or maladministration by police or civil servants. It would therefore be a force with superior powers to the PSNI. Not an attractive prospect, which is why the UUP resisted Haass on this issue, and will continue to do so, if the concept is pursued.

Does Brian Feeney not have any civil libertarian concerns over such retrogressive changes? Indeed where are the university law school voices on the matter?

Yours sincerely

Jeffrey Dudgeon (UUP Haass negotiator)

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