



VIEWPOINT

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Make or break time

POLL POSERS: Parties should note the results

THE governments' proposals for the Stormont talks have passed their first big test by being accepted as a basis for negotiation by all eight parties at the table. It is a considerable tribute to all those concerned, from Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, in late-night long-distance phone calls, to the civil servants involved in the draftsmanship and, of course, the local politicians.

No party has got all that it wanted, but everyone has got enough to feel that negotiations which were at a full stop have been given a new lease of life. There is an essential balance in the propositions, contributed by the addition of the intergovernmental "Council of the Isles", which had been lacking from the 1995 framework documents.

Politicians both inside and outside the talks are already putting their own particular spin on the governments' proposals, to show how well or how badly they fit into their scheme of things. Before they commit themselves, however, they would be well advised to take a closer look at the results of the Queen's University poll which we are publishing. The answers to questions which were approved by all the parties and posed before the recent violence show there is more tolerance in both communities for the proposed initiatives than is generally supposed.

For example, an elected assembly is acceptable to 80pc of Catholics, despite Sinn Fein's objections, and North-South bodies dealing with all aspects of government business are "tolerable" to 50pc of Protestants, as well as 96pc of Catholics. People are looking seriously at the alternatives to political stagnation and violence, and concluding that give-and-take is an acceptable way forward.

The most controversial features of the governments' proposals are centred around the concept of the "North-South Ministerial Council", regarded as essential by the nationalist parties and marginal by unionists. The proposition is that each side "will consult, co-operate and take decisions on matters of mutual interest", in a body accountable to the two legislatures, but the possibilities for disagreement are endless.

The spectre of a north-south body with executive powers was the main reason why unionists rejected the original framework documents — and their opposition would be just as strenuous today. Clearly the governments have tried to allay their fears of a slippery slope to Irish unity by eliminating the e-word, and insisting that all decisions will be made by agreement, but they have kept nationalist hopes alive by proposing "implementation bodies" for council policies at an all-island level.

The positions of the unionist and nationalist parties seem to be mutually incompatible, at this stage, but it will be up to the politicians to find some accommodation in the Strand Two talks, beginning next Tuesday. The north-south element, so important to both communities, could be the making or breaking of the whole peace process, and great care must be taken if a satisfactory compromise is to be reached.

The situation will not be improved by clumsy intervention from southern politicians — in their anxiety to keep Sinn Fein on board the peace train — and Mr Ahern provided an unfortunate example in his declaration that the council would be "a stand-alone body with executive powers".

The history of failed initiatives in Northern Ireland is littered with such remarks, delivered by politicians who wanted to show that they had obtained more for their side than the others. The real debate, in which Sinn Fein will hopefully play its full part, is between the parties here, who will have to live with the consequences, good or bad. Leadership qualities, in both communities, are about to be sorely tested.

BIRTHDAYS

Peter Barkworth, actor, 69; Martin Bicknell, cricketer, 29; Richard Briers, actor, 64; Martyn Davies, TV weatherman, 42; Faye Dunaway, actress, 57; Ruel Fox, footballer, 30; Jack Jones, singer, 60; Warren Mitchell, actor, 72; Trevor Nunn, theatre director, 58; Paul Terry, cricketer, 39; Allen Toussaint, R&B musician, 60.

SKETCHY PROPOSITIONS LEAVE PLENTY OF ROOM FOR INTERPRETATION

THE propositions are vague before they are anything else. In the nature of the problem, this is inevitable. On the most delicate points, necessarily they say little or nothing.

In setting out to reconcile the irreconcilable, a talent for fudging is the first essential. But the resourceful drafters should be warned that theirs is a hazardous art.

They should bear in mind that the Agreement of 1985 now facing burial, failed, not because of what it did say, but because of what it did not.

The Propositions, though commendably brief, are so sketchy that the rival parties have found it possible to read into them interpretations diametrically opposed.

So, as negotiations begin and the train at last begins to move, the red lights flash ahead. What the two sides on board are reading into the Propositions is so different that both cannot be right.

Unionists claim that the hated frameworks are now dead. They would be rash to assume any such thing. The frameworks ostensibly were the work of both governments. In essence, they were the product of Foreign Affairs in Dublin, out of Hume-Adams.

The authors of the frameworks will not let go so easily. "Well done, Mo," was Hume's congratulatory to the Secretary of State after publication of the Propositions on Monday. Does the leader of the SDLP know something the unionists do not?

The fact is that, as talks resume, the devil will lie concealed in the dynamic as well as in the detail. The future nature of the new constitutional animal awaiting birth will depend upon which of its limbs has the greatest dynamic for growth. As physiologists advise, a limb flourishes with use; if you do not use it, you lose it. At best, there is atrophy.

The Devil is also in the dynamic...



WAUGH ON WEDNESDAY

Accordingly, faced with a new north-south body (which will find plenty to do that is obviously useful) and an amorphous Council of the Isles (which could find plenty to do but may not), the question of which body will have the greatest potential for development is no contest.

The very suggestion that the Council should be limited to two full meetings a year reduces it at once to the level of the social junkies in desirable watering holes already indulged in by

parliamentarians from Westminster and the Dail.

No doubt this detail, strangely out of place in such a brief document, was insisted upon by Dublin as a means of downgrading from the start the unwanted cuckoo in the nest.

The British-Irish game is always one of manipulating majorities. Dublin's consistent intent is to lever nationalists north of the border from beneath the unionist majority. Unionists enlist the British connection as counter-balance.

The danger of the north-south body for unionists arises from the fact they cannot expect always to command the field automatically in a power-sharing Stormont assembly elected by PR.

Where policy questions of delicate aspect arise on the north-south agenda, and with delegations of equal size, Dublin is aware that the north-south body will have an overall and inbuilt pro-nationalist majority.

The Assembly will decide: but the danger of conflict is clear; and unionist assemblymen will not be rendered more flexible by the knowledge that they will no longer have a legislative underpinning of the Union: it will be at the mercy of the next vote.

But such cursory scanning of these bare Propositions suggests that there is still everything to play for in the talks; even if the path to settlement is still obscured in the gloom. A new modus vivendi may be the best we can hope for.

Eric Waugh

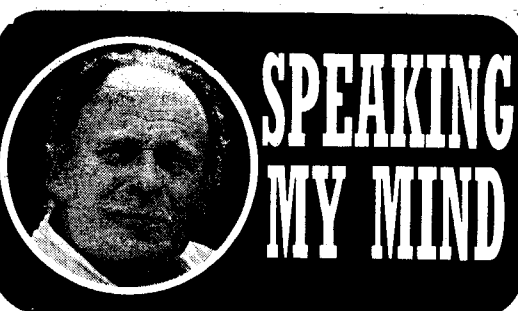
The Talks and Terry Enright

NOBODY could fail to have been struck by the genuineness of the tributes paid to the late Terry Enright over the past few days by Protestant community leaders and prominent members of the PUP.

On radio and television, Jackie Redpath, May Blood, David Irvine and Billy Hutchinson, among others, delivered in turn, not the usual ritual condemnations of violence but personal expressions of loss, and of anger at the evil affront of the men who cut him down.

There was no mention of "understanding" the killers' motives, of coded suggestion that some perceived imbalance in the political situation had prompted the killing and would have to be redressed to prevent more of the same.

Mr Enright was evidently selected at random by the LVF, on the basis of "any Taig will do". But he was unusual in that he was well-known to many on "the other side". The project he was involved in for the Upper Springfield Development Trust encouraged cross-community action, and was regarded as a model



SPEAKING MY MIND

of its kind by community activists across Belfast and beyond and by various funding agencies.

By all accounts, Mr Enright brought a whole-hearted commitment to the enterprise, a belief in what he was doing which went well beyond the requirement of mundane duty. There has been acknowledgement of this in the accolades showered on his memory this week.

But did the things he was involved in which have attracted such plaudits, and the attitude

these indicated, have any political significance?

In an interview on Monday outside Castle Buildings Billy Hutchinson explained that he and Mr Enright didn't share a political vision.

What they shared was a belief that disadvantaged communities, and particularly young people within them, deserved a better, brighter future and that it was worthwhile putting effort and energy into trying to forge such a future.

It was obvious what he meant. But it raised the question: isn't the vision of a future in which young working-class people grow up contentedly and able to realise all the potentialities within them, isn't this a political vision? Or at least, shouldn't it be?

Shouldn't the political process include these issues and considerations, too? Isn't it precisely one of our difficulties that the political process shuts out any such transcendent vision?

You can think the sort of thing which Terry Enright thought outside the car park, but you can't bring it into the Talks.

There has been a great deal of wry comment on the fact that it took aeons, until the small

hours of Monday morning we are told, to draw up an agenda for the talks. But there has been a solid consensus throughout that the only issues to be included would be those which divide us.

The issues which have potential to unite us — and more than potential as Terry Enright's life showed — poverty, the oppression of the old, of the young, of women, the exploitation of wage-labour — all these aspects of our existence are rigidly excluded from the Talks.

But why so? Intriguingly, it was Billy Hutchinson and David Irvine who, when pressed during recent difficulties for examples of the "confidence-building measures" which had not been forthcoming, mentioned school closures and joblessness in their areas.

There is a line of thought here which, if followed, might lead us farther forward, and along a better road, than we are likely to reach by butting heads over cross-border bodies.

Taking this path might be an apt tribute, too, to Terry Enright.

Eamonn McCann

WRITEBACK The page where YOU have YOUR say

Time to put exam body to test

TO THE POINT

CONSTANT CONTACT: I was born and raised in Belfast and I am now living in the United States. All of my family, however, with the exception of my children, still live in Belfast or the suburbs.

I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate keeping up with the news, stories and even the weather at 'home'.

Even though I have been gone 33 years, it's still 'home' to me. Thank you for the Telegraph's online service and for the ability it affords me to keep in touch. HEATHER GASS, Atlanta, Georgia.

DATE SET: This is to give advance notice of an Eve of Millennium party to be held on December 31 in the year 2000. We will then celebrate the first day of the first month of the year 2001 — the first year of the new millennium. GALILEO, Helen's Bay, Co Down.

SELECT AREA: I would like to point out at the time of Chaim Herzog's birth in Clifton Park Avenue in the Cliftonville area it was not a back street as stated in an article regarding a plaque in honour of the former Israeli president (Belfast Telegraph, January 6).

This part of north Belfast in 1918 was a select residential area — a pleasant place in which to live. EX-CLIFTONVILLE, Lisburn, Co Antrim.

MCCANN CHALLENGED: I must protest at the blatant anti-Protestant views expressed by Eamonn McCann in his article (Belfast Telegraph, December 31) in which he said that the killing of Roman Catholics was part of the Protestant ethos fostered by their view of being the elect of God.

I remember this same Eamonn was one of the original street agitators when the civil rights campaign took to the streets and started the unrest which has led to 30 years of mayhem and murder.

Such comments are rich coming from a man with such a history. VERITAS, Ballymena, Co Antrim.

DESPITE the ending of the cold war, the demolition of the Berlin Wall and more accessibility to MIS one great bastion of secrecy remains — the Central Council for Examinations and Assessment.

I would like to hear its reasons for age discrimination against children sitting the transfer test.

There can be no concrete evidence to prove that children who start school on the same day, attend

school for the same number of years and sit the exams at the same time benefit from being five or six months older than someone else, yet the CCEA still awards younger children extra marks.

Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, those mature students taking degree courses should be heavily penalised over their younger counterparts.

A number of primary school

heads have told me that any papers they have sent for re-marking have always come back unchanged.

Does this mean that the CCEA never makes mistakes? I think not.

One has only to look at its record over the last three years — the disaster of the extra paper that had to be set because the transfer test contained questions "culled" from practice papers, the GCSE debacle of the geography exam question "...

refer to the map" when no map was included and the wrong exam results being sent to universities last year.

In industry those responsible would have been shown the door yet the CCEA still refuses to let anyone question its practices.

It is time for the CCEA to be more open and publicly accountable.

CONCERNED PARENT, Belfast 6.

House buyers need not fear

I AM writing in response to the Belfast Telegraph report headed Doorsteps May Go in new Building Rules (January 3).

First, I object to the report's negative attitude to the proposed introduction of changes to the building regulations which, in my opinion, will benefit everyone; and not, as the article implies, represent something which could somehow adversely affect houseproud Ulster home owners.

New house buyers have everything to gain and nothing to lose it and when design standards are raised.

Second, as someone who has played an active role in the long-running campaign for improvements to the accessibility standards

required by legislation, I would like to record my disappointment at the published "guarded welcome" given to the proposed changes by Disability Action. Any improvements to accessibility should be both welcomed and encouraged.

Third, I wish to refute as absolute nonsense the notion that providing a level threshold, wider doors, better circulation space and a ground-floor extended toilet cubicle could raise the price of a typical two-storey house by £1,000.

This is just scaremongering! Accessible housing like this has been built in Holland, at no extra, cost since 1982.

KEN EWART, Centre for Universal Accessibility, University of Ulster at Jordanstown.

Strabane's Wee Man not big hit

COULD the BBC not get a more appropriate stand-in for Gerry Anderson than Hugo Duncan?

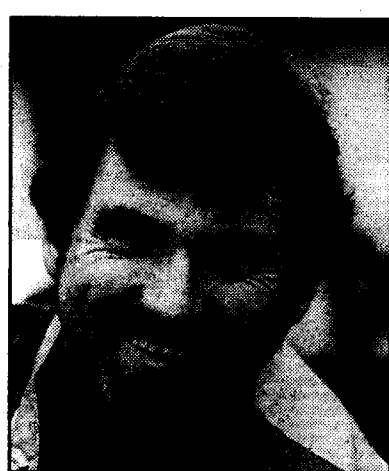
In truth, if the clock and his record requests were taken away from Hugo what would he be able to talk about?

Is it really fitting for a top-level presenter like Gerry Anderson to be replaced by someone whose style is completely divorced from Gerry's?

Would Sean Coyle (Gerry Anderson's producer at Radio Foyle) not be more appropriate?

Sean has the ability to be creative and adaptable, as evidenced by the witty South of the Border, Daniel O'Donnell and David Dunseith impressions, etc.

We all realise Gerry talks a lot of nonsense, but at least it "seems" to be intelligent, interesting, varied nonsense.



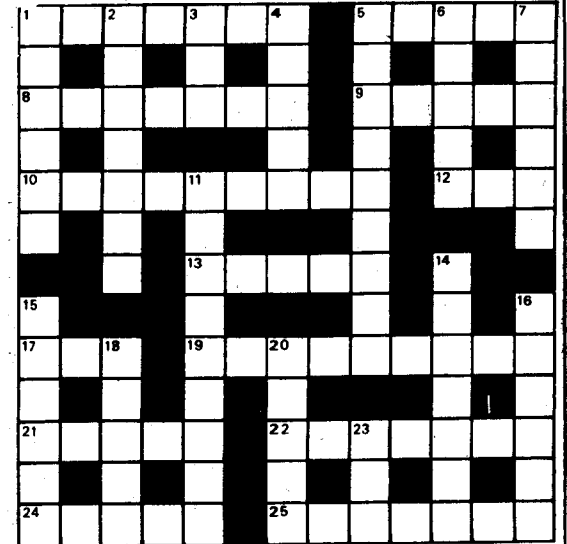
When Hugo replaces him on the radio, I switch off immediately. AVID LISTENER, Newry, Co Down.

CROSSWORD

CRYPTIC CLUES

Across

- 1 One will do well to come into another's place (7)
5 Get to care about hospital (5)
8 Performance that might be lit with care (7)
9 Gateway might only be found after parking (5)
10 Get through a net Peter put out for it (9)
12 There's nothing we take in but misery (3)
13 Start at Edgbaston with a leg-break one better than birdie (5)
17 It's the me that's involved in the good life (3)
19 John painted an officer of the law (9)
21 Fine coffee from Palermo — champagne, too! (5)
22 In one version, coal-working is the one named (7)
24 100 cards given to deserter on returning (5)
25 Militaristic as trap prepared by the North (7)



No 1377

- 4 After Gamma dealt it a different way (5)
5 Try again to get cheque paid if it will stand for it (9)
6 Let Lola go out West (5)
7 Long to have rank he can achieve (6)
11 Cutting then can't turn round the right (9)
14 Collection of ministers I can't be responsible for (7)

QUICK CLUES

Across

- 1 Be successful (7)
5 Get to (5)
8 Musical Performance (7)
9 Support for power lines (5)
10 Get through into (9)
12 Grief, misery (3)
13 Bird of prey (5)
17 The "I" self (3)
19 Police officer (9)

Down

- 21 Fine coffee (5)
22 One whose name is put forward (7)
24 Fortune-telling card pack (5)
25 Hardy, rigorous (7)
5 Stand for (9)
6 To let, grant (5)
7 Have a longing for (6)
11 Cutting, incisive (9)
14 Select inner group of ministers (7)
15 Written permission (6)
16 Lower in dignity (6)
18 Take place (5)
20 5th or 7th of the month once observed among the Poles (5)
23 Bird once grumbled about the first half (3)

Answers to 1376

Across: 1 Field, 4 Herself, 8 Treat, 9 Contact, 10 Cat, 11 Stopwatch, 12 Aide, 13 Linn, 18 Provender, 20 Arc, 21 Tobacco, 22 Prior, 23 Extends, 24 Cissy. Down: 1 Fete champagne, 2 Elected, 3 Detest, 4 Hector, 5 Renown, 6 Exact, 7 Fetch and carry, 14 Italics, 15 Beacon, 16 Odious, 17 Tropic, 19 Orbit.

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