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Ignore the prophets of doom

The electoral gains of Northern Ireland's DUP and Sinn Féin do not threaten the Good Friday agreement, says Brendan O'Leary
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Cool heads are required. The Westminster general election in Northern Ireland has led to panic-stricken commentary. The Belfast agreement can be fully implemented within three weeks, if the re-elected Labour government and the Irish government do what is required.

The result in seats was six, five, four and three respectively for David Trimble's Ulster Unionist party, Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist party, Gerry Adams' Sinn Féin and John Hume's Social Democratic and Labour party. The result in percentage vote-shares was 26.8, 22.5, 21.7 and 21 in the same order of parties.

These figures do not mean there has been a huge surge in support for the "anti-agreement parties". That would imply the DUP and Sinn Féin are resolutely anti-agreement. The DUP is formally against the agreement but its leadership does not want the agreement's institutions to collapse - ignore correspondence to the contrary. It wants the Assembly, participates in the executive and its pro-devolution - it just does not want Sinn Féin in government.

Peter Robinson MP, its astute campaign manager, kept Ian Paisley out of the limelight until the election counts and would be privately horrified if Mr Trimble, first minister, were to precipitate another suspension - and the likely collapse - of the devolved institutions by enforcing his post-dated resignation letter.

The DUP fought on a pro-devolution platform and to renegotiate the Belfast agreement. Its vote share is significantly less than the 29 per cent who voted against the Belfast agreement in the May 1998 referendum. So it has no mandate to demand renegotiation of the agreement - though it has every right to participate in the negotiations to have it implemented. Tony Blair, the prime minister, must be courteous with the DUP but he has no need to make any concessions.

Mr Trimble required his UUP candidates to fight under a common, pro-agreement platform but one insistent on decommissioning. The party had a mixed performance. It lost its dramatic over-representation in seats compared with votes it had achieved in 1997. But its leader can take the credit for its survival, for its poll-topping status and for helping it win a higher share of the vote than in the 1998 Assembly elections.

Mr Trimble will, rightly, want satisfaction on decommissioning from the two governments and Sinn Féin. Mr Blair will be right to seek to help him. Mr Trimble will also want an end to the scale and pace of policing reform. But here Mr Blair will not be right to help him - not least because the successful resolution of decommissioning will take the heat out of police reform.

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Sinn Féin fought on a platform to have the full agreement implemented. It celebrated doubling its number of Westminster MPs, with a further increase next time - a reasonable expectation - and talked of becoming the biggest nationalist party in the next Assembly (a feasible scenario). In short, it accepts the agreement and is flourishing under it.

Sinn Féin had a double success. It was part of the "No to Nice" campaign in Ireland, rejecting the militarisation of the European Union and the dangers to Irish neutrality. Sinn Féin is poised to make a significant breakthrough in the next general elections in Ireland. But to do so it will need to bury the remaining militarism in its own movement - opposing militarism abroad while the IRA holds arsenals at home is not consistent.

Sinn Féin's leaders know this. The decisive moment on decommissioning has arrived. The party can deliver on IRA decommissioning provided Mr Blair delivers on his obligations of May 2000. In particular, that means implementing police reform as set out in the Patten report.

The pro-agreement nationalist bloc of the SDLP and Sinn Féin took nearly 43 per cent of the vote, showing that the DUP's hopes for a return to unionist "majority rule" are outdated.

Both the SDLP and Sinn Féin emphasised their resolution to see policing reformed, consistent with the Patten report. The SDLP lost ground among young nationalists partly because it was seen as softer on police reform and on other issues - although the SDLP did most of the legislative work to overturn the mismanagement of the Patten report by Peter Mandelson. Mr Blair is aware that more needs to be done for the SDLP and Sinn Féin on these issues.

For Mr Trimble and the agreement's survival Mr Blair needs decommissioning by the IRA. To increase its popularity, Sinn Féin needs the IRA to decommission. It has shown its own militarists the dividends of peaceful politics. But it needs full police reform for its constituency. So does the SDLP. With a start to meaningful decommissioning, Mr Trimble's UUP can take credit for its stance, the DUP's demand for re-negotiating the agreement will seem redundant and the normalisation of Northern Ireland can be secured.

The writer is professor of political science at the London School of Economics. He was an adviser on Northern Ireland to the Labour party between 1988 and 1995

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