The best way forward for the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Commission x Antrim: Elections and suspensions. The ballot box may now be used.
plans; and the UUP abandons its unlawful bar on Sinn Fein ministers. This scenario, regretfully, does not seem imminent, and would still require careful moves to restore the first and deputy first ministers.

Failure would present the governments with three choices: they could leave negotiation to the parties; suspend the institutions, while postponing negotiations; or have fresh assembly elections before new negotiations. The first won't work, yet. Suspension should be ruled out because the Suspension Act is a break with the agreement; and it would be unconstitutional for the Irish government to recognise it. It might fatally terminate the assembly, and encourage renewed paramilitary warfare.

What about fresh elections? The argument put against them is that they will strengthen Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist party. But that very fear should create incentives for the UUP to accept a package now that would stave off elections. But accept the premise. Sinn Fein and the DUP would do very well under fresh elections only if they run or: moderated platforms - in which we could anticipate IRA initiatives on arms and DUP statements on how they would not destroy devolution.

And what if the DUP and Sinn Fein became respectively the majority unionist and nationalist parties? Well, the rules for election of first and deputy first minister would force them to choose between accepting their respective nominees, or accepting moderate SDLP and UUP nominees, or having fresh elections.

It's a risky path, but it's a path within the agreement, and has fewer hazards than suspension. So, Mr Blair and Mr Ahern should declare at the negotiating tables: either do a deal today and tomorrow, or do a deal on your own; or prepare for assembly elections. Election after election is superior to suspension after suspension. It's also democratic. Whether it would work remains to be seen. But it would be odd if democratic politicians underestimated the legitimacy and political authority that flow from the ballot box.

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