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We need a new process to reach decisions

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By Roy Garland The Monday Column

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THE furore over the Belfast military parade showed that old divisions are alive and well beneath the surface.

Had the Stormont executive been working properly less heat might have been generated but sadly things

remain deadlocked.

It is easy to blame politicians because it is after all their responsibility.

But it is we the people who trapped the politicians mainly by voting for those parties that seem least reconcilable.

Peter Robinson once said that Ulster Unionists were so incompetent that even had they a good deal they couldn't make it work.

He claimed he had a better deal but is now having major difficulties and the chickens are perhaps coming home to roost.

However, despite grandstanding, Mr Robinson and Nigel Dodds insist they are determined to make things work for everyone.

Of course Sinn Fein need movement on a range of matters to demonstrate that political progress is being made in their direction. But the DUP people are not yet ready and they can't take electoral risks for the sake of principle.

The result is deadlock and precisely at this time a military parade was announced for Belfast.

This demonstrates that the Brits "have not gone away, you know" and Sinn Fein probably had little alternative but to protest lest they be seen to acquiesce and feed the angst of dissidents.

In contrast loyalists see troops on the streets of Belfast as reassuring. British military traditions are fairly central to unionism.

Loyalists have also been moving away from more sectarian themes to ones that express pride in British military traditions that are regarded as non-sectarian.

Thus old murals are being replaced with scenes from historical battles like the Somme.

On Friday young loyalists placed a huge slogan in Irish on the mountains above Belfast

welcoming returning soldiers with Faugh a Ballagh (clear the way), long associated with Irish British soldiers.

The slogan was quickly removed and republicans were blamed.

But PUP councillor Hugh Smyth insists that Faugh a Ballagh should offend no-one and that its removal reflects "deep-set hatred of anything British".

Many people right across the community are fed up with the old contentions. They want to move on to better

things.

Thousands have demonstrated welcoming the returning soldiers.

Paradoxically, this would have been less likely had republicans not protested.

Neither tradition has a monopoly on truth and differing historical traditions represent different experiences and interpretations of the past.

Central to the peace process was the idea of promoting respect for different traditions.

People have the right to criticise and to protest but not to trample underfoot.

The Republic of Ireland is showing a different way.

There the old unionist tradition has faced decline and is now almost impotent.

But the dominating Irish nationalist ethos is beginning to dissipate and tributes can now be paid to British soldiers from both traditions without causing offence.

Members of each tradition need to feel safe.

It was for this reason that the system bequeathed to us at Stormont included a veto on each side.

This could have worked with good will on both sides but magnanimity is in short supply.

Politicians have responsibility for something they can't always deliver on because they lack the means due to the mutual veto.

Thankfully, Mr Robinson says he will stick the course and will not run away when the going gets tough.

Our ancient conflict, which was partly over the very existence of the state itself, meant that democratic norms had only a limited hold.

Scratch the surface and we find deep antagonisms alive and well and democratic norms only skin-deep.

Either we devise a new means of reaching collective decisions or we change the context through some form of voluntary coalition capable of bringing us together rather than driving us apart.

A new form of voluntary coalition could surely be constructed in which political parties would need to form alliances with others from different traditions.

This would draw people together in mutual respect and tolerance rather than drive them apart.

Politicians would have to appeal to the centre and to members of other traditions to gain power.

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