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Monday, March 23, 2009

'Spirit of unity' vital to resist dissident threat



Alliance Party leader David Ford receives a warm welcome during the party's annual conference at the Dunadry Hotel in Templepatrick on Saturday.
Photograph: Colm Lenaghan/Pacemaker

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GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

NORTHERN IRELAND must harness the "spirit of unity" to smother the threat from dissident republicans and to prepare for a long-term shared future, Alliance Party leader David Ford has told his party's annual conference in Dunadry, Co Antrim.

Mr Ford said that in recent weeks Antrim made the headlines for the wrong reasons over the murders of British soldiers, Patrick Azimkar and Mark Quinsey by the Real IRA. But in Antrim local Catholics quickly joined with local Protestants to say to the killers "whatever you do we stand united against you".

When PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll was murdered in Craigavon it prompted an outpouring of grief and a "determination that there would be no going back", he told delegates at the conference at the Dunadry Hotel on Saturday.

Mr Ford said that Sinn Féin's initial response to the killings in Antrim was inadequate but that later Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness spoke out firmly locally and in the United States.

"His condemnation of the murders and the murderers was unprecedented for a republican leader in modern times. I acknowledge that the clear and unambiguous statements made by him, and a number of his colleagues within Sinn Féin, that people should co-operate with the police, and help bring the killers to justice, marked a courageous and difficult step," he said.

"While we sometimes have had, and doubtless will continue to have, passionate, robust disagreement, the response of Sinn Féin to events of the past fortnight has done an enormous amount to dispel the doubts which many of us still had about their total commitment to peaceful means.

"Let me echo the words of Martin McGuinness and John O'Dowd, and appeal to people who may know something, anything, which may bring those killers to justice. You must help put these murderers behind bars."

The question was whether people wanted their children to grow up free from fear, in a peaceful society rather than a militarised one, or whether they wanted their children to grow up hearing of "murders on the morning news, of travelling to school through road blocks, of being stopped and searched, of seeing our towns and cities bombed".

Mr Ford said that when DUP leader Peter Robinson became First Minister he had profound doubts about whether he could represent everyone in Northern Ireland. "When Peter Robinson responded to the killers, he chose to speak for everyone in Northern Ireland who was angry to see their dreams of peace shattered in a pool of blood on the streets of Antrim," he said.

"He spoke for everyone – regardless of their religion, or background, or national identity – who felt their blood boil at the callousness of people prepared to murder so casually. He spoke for everyone whose sense of common humanity was outraged by the vicious and brutal squandering of the lives of men who were far too young to die," added the Alliance leader.

"It would have been easy for Peter Robinson to make a partisan speech. He chose instead to make a statesman-like speech."

Mr Ford said the politicians and the people must seize the opportunity to do two things – to avail of the spirit of unity to neuter the dissident threat, and to build a shared future for everyone in the North.

Tackling dissidents included all politicians supporting PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde if he felt he needed "a small number of military surveillance experts" in that battle.

"We must seize the current opportunity in building a genuinely shared society. Despite all the difficulties, we must create shared territory, shared institutions, shared social space and shared values," he added.

"Building a shared society in Northern Ireland should be in everybody's interest. The reaction in Antrim two weeks ago proves that the 'two communities' thesis is not only a perverse myth but is actually a complete falsehood. It is a lie. Our people hold a variety of political and religious opinions and are becoming more diverse in lifestyle and ethnicity. But the murders in Antrim and Craigavon have made them more united than ever."

He added, "For all of us, only a society that is truly made up by one community can face the economic and technological challenges of the 21st century and succeed. This last fortnight, our political leaders have met the challenge of standing together against violence. Will they now meet the challenge of standing together to build a shared future?"

There is continuing speculation that when devolution and justice powers are devolved to the Northern Executive that the justice ministry will go to Alliance. "Devolution of justice would demonstrate that Northern Ireland is a stable society, building a shared future for all our citizens," Mr Ford said.

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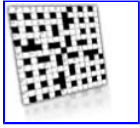
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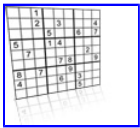
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