

Good mood music but we must play together

WE STILL HAVE good sounds coming out of Stormont, including positive debates about suicides and fuel poverty, but our leaders need to start conducting the orchestra if we are to make sweet music.

Firstly on A Shared Future, the First Minister made positive noises about the need for "a future based on tolerance, equality, mutual respect and respect for the rule of law" (see p11).

In his first Question Time after the summer break, Dr Ian Paisley also gave a welcome commitment "to promote the interests of the whole community and move towards the goal of a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society".

Separately the Deputy First Minister talked about building "a society where there is respect for all cultures and traditions". He claimed the theme, 'Bringing an end to sectarianism and racism', represented the vision which he and the First Minister have set for themselves.

"Our aim has been to show the importance that the Executive places on tackling all forms of intolerance and the need to include all people in our society, regardless of their background. I believe that message and our commitment to it is having a significant impact," Mr Martin McGuinness said.

Building a shared society may be in the minds of the two top Ministers and they may even have discussed the subject but it hasn't filtered down to others.

In our cover story (pages 12-15), Manus Maguire says commitments have yet to be delivered and we need a comprehensive and serious approach to transform interface areas and the people who live in them. Robin Wilson argues that "little is being done to bring reconciliation any nearer" and Caroline Maguire writes that "our political leaders have not yet made a real commitment to A Shared Future strategy".

So where does the truth lie? It seems clear that Mr McGuinness is getting ahead of himself. His personal commitment to a good relations plan is timely and deserves applause but it is not true that the Executive has taken a position on it. Indeed Dr Paisley tacitly accepted that we are in a policy vacuum, promising to

bring forward proposals to the Assembly and to the OFMDFM Committee later this year.

The creation of a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland sends out the crucial signal that we can leave old divisions behind but we need a strategy and action plan to capitalise on this initiative and build good relations from the bottom up – and we need it quickly while the momentum is still flowing in the right direction.

Of course the voluntary and community sector cannot leave it to the politicians. We have always been to the fore in promoting good relations across religious and racial divides. Now is the time for us to be far bolder and more imaginative about what we are doing. One Small Step can become One Bigger Step.

We might be getting used to the DUP and Sinn Fein working together but it was unthinkable until very recently. If they can do it, so can we, in neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland. We can organise to bring people together and start dismantling the mental peace walls that have been built up over many decades. As well tackling the urban interfaces we must erase the invisible lines in rural areas which local communities are reluctant to cross.

A second and related issue is the anti-poverty strategy. Here too, the mood music has been good and many Ministers have referred to the need to end poverty and exclusion. However, *Lifetime Opportunities* was published last November, nearly a year ago, and the Executive collectively has not yet taken a view on it.

It is deeply disturbing that the target date for decisions has been missed and that the Executive may not discuss the issue until the end of the year, by which time the Programme for Government and draft Budget will already have been published. Yet, some of the poverty reduction target dates are just two years away and we need to develop policies and actions to make progress.

So the tunes from the First and Deputy First Ministers are welcome but hard decisions are more important. We need the two conductors to get together, finish the scores quickly and get everyone playing together.



Managing Editor:
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Frances McCandless
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gps colour graphics

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61 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast BT15 2GB. Tel: (028) 9087 7777. Fax: (028) 9087 7799. Email: scope@nicva.org