**Consensus only way to bring together a divided society**

**by Roy Garland**

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UUP leader Mike Nesbitt appears to have retracted his earlier view that the unionist sense of Britishness was being chipped away.

He now suggests this is perception rather than reality. (Irish News 25.2.13) If so it is surely time for Mike and Peter to let their people know. Most protesters believe their Britishness is being eroded but if Mike Nesbitt is now right, as I believe he is, protesters should surely be told they are mistaken.

The age-old siege mentality was reactivated through the flag protests. This sense of siege undermines unionist confidence and needs to be lifted. Sinn Fein doesn't help by harping on about Irish unity but unionists don't need to jump to every Sinn Fein tune.

The siege is over, its time to go home. The Irish state's claim to jurisdiction over Northern Ireland is long gone. The Republic is on friendly terms with the UK, yet siege mentality stubbornly persists. Mike Nesbitt admits that unionists have not "moved away from old-style politics".

Orangemen at every single lodge meeting pray for deliverance "from those great and imminent dangers by which we are now encompassed". But surely the job of politicians is to lead their people from such false mentalities rather than trail behind their people's myths.

There is an obligation on unionists who told people that their flag was being "ripped down" to apologise rather than, like Mike, dismissing the issue as "flogging a dead horse". Unionists should admit that their scurrilous leaflet was so misleading and inflammatory it was the catalyst that sparked the futile protests.

As the Good Friday Agreement makes clear, people's identity does not depend on flags, emblems, parades and protests but on how we define ourselves. In a general sense all who live in Ireland, north or south, are Irish and British and much else besides.

But a century ago in the aftermath of partition we were pushed into boxes. It became common parlance for unionist politicians to refer to this place as "Protestant Ulster". This was never accurate but now Sinn Fein refer to themselves as Irish and unionists as British.

Neither did the Irish Republic live up to its name. Irish identity was defined in Gaelic, Catholic, nationalist or even Anglophobic terms. Some attempts were made to remove marks of British culture but British influence has left an indelible mark that cannot be erased.

The people of the Republic always included Protestant, Catholic and dissenter. All kinds of other identities are increasing while anglophobia is being diminished as the Republic becomes more pluralist. Many people in Northern Ireland also want a more pluralist society but lack the kind of leadership that rejects the misapprehensions of protesting minorities.

Like some DUP politicians Nesbitt now advocates "consensus politics" but does little to bring this about. The Unionist Forum is no route out of the sectarian cul-de-sac but is rather headed in the opposite direction, back into the cul-de-sac of old-style politics. He claims to reject sectarian politics but his party is heading in that direction. DUP/UUP cooperation is the route towards more traditional flag waving, them-and-us politics.

UUP politicians blamed the DUP at St Andrews for accepting that the leader of the largest party would be first minister. This, they admitted, would face voters with a divisive choice between Robinson and McGuinness - the elephant in the room that Mike Nesbitt ignores as he sleepwalks towards unionist unity.

Basil McCrea and John McCallister's new party will hopefully breath new life into politics. The emphasis on Northern Irish politics is positive but a Stormont opposition is no panacea. In a divided society like Northern Ireland any form of opposition could reinforce division because it would necessarily be based on some form of majoritarian politics, however modified.

**Peter Emerson of the De Borda Institute has long argued for consensus politics but he demonstrates how this can be done. The present system at Stormont was a necessary short-term expedient but, like majority rule, it has fostered division. De Borda advocates political decisions based on a multi-option preference vote that measures consensus - the option with the highest average preference - this avoids traditional winner-takes-all politics. This points system - the Modified Borda Count or MBC - identifies the collective compromise or at least the best possible compromise.**

**This is particularly helpful when contentious issues are raised and could have avoided the flags issue becoming so contentious. Consensus decisions can bring divergent groups together through a measured consensus between protagonists. Thus the interests and aspirations of minorities are taken seriously and fed into the decision-making process.**