

Prospects for a breakthrough by the 24th November hang in the balance with most commentators inclined to predict failure. But there is still time and while there is, there is still hope.

The Preparation for Government Committee meetings that have been taking place since early July have been a unique experience for all participants. Never before have we had such a lengthy and comprehensive period of discussion between all of the parties.

All contentious issues have been aired. Hard things have been said, accusations of ill-will and of worse have not been uncommon, things said have been misinterpreted, and offence has been taken and so on. But alongside that there has been some good humour and without over stating what has been achieved some advances have been made, notably all-party agreement on an economic blueprint.

But if we are to build on what we are slowly and at times painfully addressing we need to take every opportunity to build confidence that all will deliver on commitments. Simply stating what others must do without taking every opportunity to build confidence in each other is the failure that most characterises the current process.

Indeed it's almost as if Sinn Féin and the DUP, despite their separate pro-restoration rhetoric, have been conspiring together to place obstacles in the way of restoring political institutions

Sinn Féin, a party that so stridently claims its ultimate objective to be uniting Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, has failed to contribute to that confidence imperative by refusing to

sign off on some of the committee's reports and by not engaging in Assembly debates. Sinn Féin's non-participation in these debates, however powerless the Assembly is to require action on its recommendations, only reinforces DUP hostility to restoration.

On the other hand the DUP continue to heap pre-condition on precondition, at least twelve in its first submissions and more recently, and all the while refuse outright to indicate when or if they will ever sign up to the political institutions.

The three-day meeting in Scotland will, in all probability, be the ultimate test as to whether agreement to restore can be reached by the 24th November.

If there is no devolution, politics cannot be allowed to grind completely to a halt on the 25th November. Difficult as the climate will then be parties will have to make the best of yet another failure to develop a partnership administration and create opportunities for all-island development.

Indeed whatever happens by the 24th November the Good Friday Agreement will remain the bedrock for any progress that can be made thereafter. The Agreement provides us with a set of guarantees as to constitutional human and civil rights that makes it impervious to whatever transpires. It must, therefore, remain the bedrock for whatever progress can be achieved in those circumstances.

The two governments must continue to take the lead in implementing the Agreement and, in particular, in developing a radical renewal of the North -South agenda. They must make clear that even if devolution is blocked, no party can be allowed to block change nor

any party allowed to turn the clock back or take us back to pre-Agreement politics.