

Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: “A Culture of Consensus”

Politics is about getting things done. Good politics is about getting the right things done. Bad politics produces bad results – little gets done, and often what does get done shouldn't get done. No sane person could possibly argue that BiH has been in any way a showcase for good politics. It has to change, and to do that it has to develop a culture of consensus.

When I took up my duties as High Representative I laid out a comprehensive reform programme – Jobs and Justice – which was endorsed by all the main parties ahead of the last election. Bit by bit this programme is being implemented. Not fast enough. Parliaments and especially governments have to work faster if we are not to fail. But, the work is being done. At Bjelasnica in April, and then at Mrakovica in June the governments agreed on a comprehensive and detailed reform programme which they have promised to complete by the beginning of next year. This builds on the Jobs and Justice foundation. However, I must stress that the economic reforms, though necessary if we are not to fail economically, will not produce jobs immediately. We will lose jobs in massive numbers if we do not reform but more jobs will take some years to arrive, even if we do. It took three years for Hungary to feel the benefit of economic reform so we will have to be patient.

It is too early to judge, but the relative focus which has been applied to enacting Jobs and Justice legislation, and the initiative and drive with which the Mrakovica Action Plan was

launched, suggest that consensus may be supplanting intransigence as the central motif of BiH politics. This augurs well for citizens.

There remain of course influential politicians who are temperamentally or tactically disinclined to sit around a table and negotiate principled compromises – which is in the final analysis how you get things done. Notice that I say *principled* compromise. Compromise is not the same as selling your soul. It's about creating win-win situations. This takes imagination and skill – some BiH politicians are beginning to show those qualities. As a culture of consensus develops, those politicians who resist compromise or who simply do not know how to negotiate win-win outcomes, are going to be marginalised.

In the course of the next six months, I expect to see four crucially important pieces of legislation enacted by the BiH authorities. These are the Law on the Indirect Taxation System, the Law on the Intelligence and Security Agency, the legislative package on defence reform and the Permanent Statute of the City of Mostar.

Why is this legislation crucial? Because without a depoliticised and efficient State intelligence service, BiH citizens will not be safe from illegal spying. Without a law on the armed forces, BiH will not be judged a sufficiently normal country to take its place in European structures, and it will certainly not fulfil the technical requirements for membership in Partnership for Peace. Without a Permanent Mostar Statute the people of Mostar will not reap the benefits of coherent economic development, and that will act as a drag on the BiH economy as a whole. And without the Law on Indirect Taxation, money that should be being spent on schoolchildren and pensioners will continue to be spent on swimming pools, villas and luxury cars for well-connected crooks.

So we need these laws. Let's be completely clear about that.

And to get these laws enacted, we need consensus. In the first half of this year I established a Commission on Defence Reform, a Commission on Intelligence Reform and an Indirect Tax Policy Commission. This week I have formed a Commission to draft a Permanent Statute for Mostar. If the Mostar Commission functions as well as the other three commissions have done, I am confident that we will be able to forge a workable consensus for the future of the city and its people.

The commissions have worked better than many people imagined. They have produced legislation that puts party-political interest in the back seat and focuses instead on advancing the interests of all the citizens of this country. They have put people first. The result is three legal solutions that are modern, practical and fair.

Now it's up to the parliamentarians to enact this legislation. They must subject the laws to rigorous democratic scrutiny – that is their very necessary role. They must also emulate the willingness to forge consensus that has been the hallmark of the work of the commissions. That is how the commissions got results and that is how the parliaments must get results. It is high time the people of BiH began to reap the benefits of a culture of consensus.