Respecting dignity is key to ending conflict

There is a timely visitor to our shores this week, Dr Donna Hicks is a Harvard academic and conflict resolution professional on a week-long visit North and South, sponsored by the Irish Institute at Boston College and the US State Department. Her schedule in Dublin includes a seminar in DCU on ‘Alternatives to Political Violence’ and a meeting with some TDs and senators in Leinster House.

Her thesis and the subject of her recent book, ‘A Matter of Dignity’, makes the compelling case that “dignity violations” create alienation, separation and aggression in all forms of discord, from wars to family or boardroom disputes.

Having worked in conflict situations for over 20 years all over the world, she identifies dignity as key to avoiding and resolving conflict. In Belfast she will meet senior politicians, the PSNI and community activists.

There was relief all around to see real political progress last week on the union flag controversy. Our long experience with republican street violence tells us that political condemnation or a heavy-handed security response is futile. The violence unleashed since the flag was lowered over Belfast City Hall was an instinctive response to a dignity violation. At the heart of the loyalist unrest was pure undressed and unarticulated political grievance.

It was frustrating, therefore, to hear routine condemnation of the violence by Sinn Fein and a cavalier retort that unionists had to get used to the new dispensation. Of all parties they should know better.

Clearly, the move to take the flag down from City Hall was not one that should or could be achieved by brute democratic force, by majority vote.

Sinn Fein and the SDLP should have enough political nous to know when to stop pressing the advantage on the “equality” agenda, particularly when the union flag is involved. It was like waving a red rag to a bull to provoke a group that is already disaffected. Resorting to partisan instincts, the DUP and Sinn Fein presented it as another nationalist “victory” with the Alliance cast in the role of traitor.

Once roused, it proved impossible to stem the white heat of loyalist anger. Two months of mayhem later, wise counsel has prevailed at community level including, crucially, the paramilitary groups agreeing to take the quarrel off the street and into a structured political dialogue. Had the right mindsets been in place the unfortunate episode could have been avoided.

Senior nationalists should have predicted the exposure of a raw nerve and that it was confrontational to lower the flag by brute majority vote. Clearly political leaders were complacent.

In the peace talks, the SDLP and the Irish Government were forever mindful of not frightening the horses in moderate unionism by pressing an aggressive nationalist agenda. We were dealing with a fractured and nervous UUP and the smaller loyalist parties. Outside the camp barked the DUP, with unrelenting receptionist scorn, criticising every small advance by David Trimble and all the while gaining votes for the DUP.

The Irish and British officials worked tirelessly “saving David” from the slings and arrows fired from inside his own ranks and outside from Ian Paisley and the DUP.

The late David Irvine of the PUP and Gary McMichael of the UUP played a vital role, ensuring that loyalist sensitivities were included in negotiations and the final settlement. However, with the premature death of Mr Irvine, the PUP lost its thought leader and the peace process a vital player. If he was alive, the loyalist community would not be so rudderless and alienated.

The vicious rhetoric which passed between the rejectionist DUP and the UUP right through the peace process and for years post-Agreement has left a powerful legacy of grievance among loyalists. For them, seeing Sinn Fein in government is hard enough to take, let alone a perceived erosion of their nationality by gratuitous flag lowering.

A big part of showing dignity to another is restraint. Sinn Fein’s weekend call for a border poll on Irish unity suggests that lessons have not been learned from recent events. Even if a majority vote is achievable on that question within a generation, it is folly to trumpet it now. Although unionists remain a majority in Northern Ireland they are a minority on the island. They need reassurance that when the worm has turned their dignity and allegiance will be protected.

So as Belfast dusts itself down, all parties in the Northern Ireland Executive must revisit that “care for the other” which was so essential in achieving the original peace. To backslide into tribes where each pursues a separate agenda is contrary to the notion of a shared future. As Donna Hicks says: “Peace will not flourish anywhere without dignity. There is no such thing as democracy without dignity, nor can there be authentic peace if people are suffering indignities.”

The move to take the union flag down was not one that should be achieved by brute democratic force.