
Statement by Minister Flanagan on Northern Ireland

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Check against Delivery

Dáil statements on Northern Ireland

Opening statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan T.D.

Ceann Comhairle,

I am pleased to commence the statements on Northern Ireland today.

I wish to take the opportunity to update the House on the Irish Government's engagement in Belfast with the Northern Ireland parties and the British Government over the last three weeks, and to consider how all participants to the process can move on from here and make sure that devolved power-sharing government is re-started at the earliest possible opportunity.

This imperative is an obligation of the Good Friday Agreement, and something which is plainly in the interests of all of the people in Northern Ireland.

First, I want to acknowledge in the House the sad passing of Martin McGuinness last week, and extend again my sympathies to his wife Bernie and his family at this time. As I have said elsewhere, while Martin and I come from very different political traditions, in his embrace of the politics of peace, he made an immense personal contribution to the peace process founded on the Good Friday Agreement. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Ceann Comhairle,

As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, both Governments have a role to play in supporting the effective operation of the devolved institutions, and in upholding both the letter and the spirit of the Agreement as a whole, in the interests of all in Northern Ireland.

Following the Assembly election on 2 March, I spoke with party leaders in Northern Ireland and with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach also spoke with Prime Minister May. Both Governments agreed that an intensive effort would be required by all, in accordance with their roles and responsibilities, in order to get the power-sharing Executive up and running again.

To that end, on 6 March, the talks commenced in Stormont Castle, the Headquarters of the Executive Office; two areas for immediate discussions were focused on:

- (a) addressing outstanding issues, including the implementation of past agreements and addressing the legacy of the past; and
- (b) the formation of a new power-sharing Executive.

Both parts of the discussions were understood and accepted by all involved as essential and inter-dependent.

I have spent much of the last three weeks participating in the talks at Stormont Castle, on behalf of the Government and officials from my own Department were there for the entire duration, as well as their colleagues from the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Justice and Equality.

In the discussions, all political parties showed a willingness to engage on the key issues. All five parties made a meaningful contribution, showed a serious intent in their engagement and the tone of the interaction was cordial and respectful.

In addition to the relatively routine governance issues relating to the establishment of an Executive, the talks also addressed more challenging matters arising from unimplemented commitments of previous agreements. These included issues such as the Irish language and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Despite three weeks of intensive engagement in Belfast, it did not prove possible before Monday's deadline for the political parties in Northern Ireland to reach agreement on these issues nor on the establishment of a power-sharing Executive.

This absence of agreement on the establishment of an Executive is extremely disappointing, most importantly for people in Northern Ireland who look to the Assembly for representation and governance.

In this challenging context, it is very important to reaffirm that the Good Friday Agreement remains the agreed template for the political process in Northern Ireland and the Government is fully committed to ensuring that its principles and provisions are fully respected. In this regard, we will be consulting very closely with the British Government in the days and weeks ahead.

I want to acknowledge the positive engagement and courteous cooperation of the

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Brokenshire who worked constructively with me during the course of these recent talks. While there may be areas where our perspectives differ, both Governments are united in the objective of seeing effective devolved power-sharing government up and running in Northern Ireland, consistent with electoral mandates and in accordance with the Good Friday Agreement.

Ceann Comhairle

While it was disagreement on a number of key issues that precluded an overall agreement between the parties on forming a new Executive, I am confident that all parties are committed to the integrity of the devolved power-sharing institutions. These are a vital part of the interlocking institutions established by Good Friday Agreement which also accommodate the wider North/South and East West relationships.

Effective operation of the North South and East-West institutions is particularly crucial in the context of Brexit. The absence of agreement on establishing an Executive is deeply concerning in that it creates a vacuum in devolved government in Northern Ireland, in the very week when the Article 50 notification is presented by the British Government to leave the European Union.

This has profound consequences for the island of Ireland which as a Government we are facing up to, as indeed are individuals, businesses, groups and communities across the island, North and South. The Government's All-Island Civic Dialogue is also a central strand of our approach to preparing for and managing the impact of Brexit and further such consultative dialogue is planned in the days and weeks ahead.

The Government will continue to advocate very strongly for Northern Ireland's interests to be protected as we continue our preparations and get ready to commence our participation in EU-UK negotiations as a committed EU Member State. However, there is and can be no substitute for an Executive speaking with one voice on these critical issues.

In this context, I should acknowledge that, during the course of the recent talks, there was wide measure of agreement between the parties on the need for the Northern Ireland Executive to articulate a strong common position on Brexit.

The North South Ministerial Council has had a strong Brexit focus over the past year working to identify impacts, risks, opportunities, and contingencies for the island arising from the UK departure and, last November, agreed a detailed set of common principles to guide future work between the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. I want this collaborative work to continue but it can only do so following the formation of an Executive.

Northern Ireland's needs must also be articulated in London, as its negotiators prepare British compromises. I also believe it will have a powerful impact on other EU leaders for them to hear directly from the leaders of Northern Ireland. This is best done by a cohesive and inclusive power-sharing Executive.

Ceann Comhairle,

During the course of the last three weeks some encouraging progress was made in a number of areas. These included the preparation of a proposed budget for the Executive and a draft programme for government, but I want to specifically mention the work on dealing with the painful legacy of the past.

I am very conscious that victims and survivors are long overdue some evidence of delivery on these matters and determined efforts were during the last three weeks by the two Governments and the parties to further develop and agree the detail of how the Stormont House legacy bodies might be implemented.

The Government remains committed to positive and proactive engagement with the British Government and the parties in Northern Ireland on the delivery of the Stormont House institutions and the reform proposals of the Lord Chief Justice on legacy inquests.

Ceann Comhairle,

When it was clear that an agreement to form an Executive would not be reached, I held a further discussion on Monday morning in Belfast with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

We agreed on the imperative of continued devolved power-sharing government for Northern Ireland, which is at the core of the political institutions of the Good Friday Agreement.

I strongly welcome the Secretary of State's confirmation in the House of Commons yesterday that the British Government does not want to see a return to direct rule. It is important to be clear that there is no statutory provision at Westminster for direct rule, following its removal - supported by the Irish Government - as part of the St Andrews Agreement, more than 10 years ago.

Following the intensive discussion of recent weeks and despite the failure to meet Monday's deadline, I remain firmly convinced that all the parties in Northern Ireland want to see the devolved institutions back up and running. The only route to that goal is through continuing respectful dialogue that recognises the need for both honouring previous commitments and for honourable compromise now.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has statutory responsibility for the next steps, has now indicated that a short additional window of time may be available to find an agreed basis for the re-establishment of the Executive.

In the immediate days ahead, I expect to be touch with the Secretary of State to finalise the details for these additional and finite discussions.

In these urgent circumstances and with time in short supply, all concerned must redouble efforts to achieve the re-establishment of power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, which is so plainly in the interests of all its citizens.

The Government will continue to play its part in meeting its commitments under the Good Friday Agreement, in encouraging others to meet theirs' and in seeking to facilitate a climate of compromise and accommodation that is always required if any negotiation is to succeed.

ENDS
Press Office
29 March 2017