
Statement by the Taoiseach, Statements on Northern Ireland, Dáil Éireann, 17 January 2017

Check against delivery

Introduction

A Cheann Comhairle,

I welcome the opportunity to open this debate on Northern Ireland.

At the outset, let me state that the current situation there is most regrettable. We are heading into a potentially very divisive election at a time when we face one of the gravest challenges on these islands, in the form of Brexit.

The absence of a fully functioning Northern Ireland Executive at any time is regrettable. That it should occur at precisely the moment when everyone should be focused on preparing for the Brexit negotiations and managing its impact is particularly troubling.

I certainly regret the circumstances which led to the decision of deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness to resign his office and the subsequent impasse between the parties in the Executive which gave rise to yesterday's announcement of Assembly elections by Secretary of State Brokenshire.

It is clear that the dispute within the Executive over the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme was a significant factor in the breakdown of relations in the Executive.

The detail of that scheme is essentially a devolved matter and, as such, is not for comment by me or this Government.

But it is also clear that it was not the only factor in the breakdown, and the need to protect the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement is a matter of grave concern to us.

The effective functioning of the institutions established under the Agreement is vital. And the principles of partnership and equality which underpin them must be respected by all parties.

My Government maintains its deep commitment to the Good Friday Agreement.

As **co-guarantor** of that agreement, we have worked assiduously, together with the British Government and with the political parties, to advance political stability, reconciliation and economic prosperity in Northern Ireland.

We have engaged fully and constructively in the North South Ministerial Council, we have ensured full participation in the British-Irish Council, and we have worked intensively on a bilateral basis with the various parties in the North.

Last Tuesday, following Martin McGuinness's resignation, I met with Deputies Adams and MacDonald of Sinn Féin to explore how the difficulties might be addressed. I also spoke by phone with both Martin McGuinness and Arlene Foster.

Later that evening I spoke with Prime Minister May. We agreed that our two Governments would do what we could to help the parties over the coming period and that we would keep in close contact.

Since then, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Brokenshire, worked together to see if a way forward could be found. In parallel, there have been very close contacts at official and diplomatic level.

Unfortunately, a way forward could not be found before yesterday's deadline and the date for Assembly elections has now been set for 2 March.

I spoke with Prime Minister May again yesterday evening and we repeated our desire to see the institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement operating effectively, and in particular to have a fully functioning Executive in place as soon as possible following the election.

As that election campaign gets underway, I call on all parties to enter into it in a calm and respectful manner, and avoid the type of rhetoric which has, in the past, proved so divisive.

More than ever, this is a time for responsible and positive leadership. When these elections are over - whatever the results - the parties will be required to work together, and with the two governments, to chart a way forward for Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement

In their work, it is vital that all parties recall, and adhere to, the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and its express commitment to **"partnership, equality and**

mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.”

We should not forget, or cast aside, the enormous progress that has been made. It hasn't been easy, and it has required courage, commitment and compromise.

But, last year we marked the eighteenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. We welcomed the coming of age of an agreement that has underpinned a process of significant positive change in Northern Ireland and has provided a framework for peace and reconciliation.

There have been many challenges and frustrations which we have faced collectively.

At all times the government has worked with the British Government, and with the parties, to ensure that the political process could move forward on the basis of the institutions, principles and procedures of the Agreement.

In the more recent years, again in a spirit of overcoming challenges, setbacks and disagreement, we collectively put in place the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 and the Fresh Start Agreement in 2015.

In 2016, following the last Assembly elections, and in the wake of the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were entering into a new era of maturity in devolved administration.

I am also very well aware that there are significant aspects of the Good Friday Agreement that have yet to be implemented. We have at all times striven to move these forward, including in our engagements with the British Government and with the parties.

I have regularly raised these concerns with my British counterparts. And Minister Flanagan has worked tirelessly, including in particular on legacy matters and establishing the key institutions for dealing with the past as agreed at Stormont House in 2014.

The Stormont House Agreement also directly addressed commitments outstanding from previous agreements.

Specifically, the British and Irish Governments endorsed “the need for respect for and recognition of the Irish language in Northern Ireland”.

So there is undoubtedly unfinished business, both in delivering on specific commitments under the Agreements, and in ensuring that the spirit and principles of the Agreements are not just written on paper but are lived and breathed throughout the work of their implementation and in addressing the challenges faced by Northern Ireland.

Challenges of Brexit

There is currently no greater economic and social challenge for this island – North and South - than that of Brexit.

Its scale and complexity underline the importance of the existing institutions as mechanisms for working together.

My Government has made clear that Northern Ireland and the peace process are amongst our top priorities for the negotiations on the UK's departure from the EU. The last thing we want to see is further instability in Northern Ireland.

We want to maintain the common travel area, avoid any return to a hard border, continue to facilitate North-South business and trade, and sustain EU support for the Peace Process.

I have emphasised these points in all of my meetings with EU leaders, including of course Prime Minister May, but also with Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande, Prime Minister Muscat of Malta who currently hold the EU Presidency and, just last week, with Prime Minister Rajoy of Spain.

I have also emphasised them in meetings with European Council President Tusk, European Commission President Juncker, and the EU Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier.

These engagements are part of a broader Government programme of engagement with all Member States and with the EU institutions in which we are constantly emphasising our specific Brexit related concerns and issues. That programme is being intensified over the coming weeks.

As the UK's date for triggering Article 50 moves ever closer, the greater the need for us to work together on issues of major concern, particularly where they have a North-South dimension.

That is why we sought to use the North South Ministerial Council to forge a

common approach to Brexit related issues. At the Plenary meeting in July we agreed to work together to fully analyse the sectoral implications of Brexit for Ireland, North and South.

At the plenary meeting in November we agreed common principles and we undertook to continue our discussions both through the NSMC and bilaterally. Given the current political uncertainty, it remains to be seen whether the progress made so far via the North South Ministerial Council can be sustained.

It is deeply regrettable that the dissolution of the Northern Ireland Executive leaves the people of Northern Ireland without political leadership at this key moment in the evolution of Brexit.

Prime Minister May's Speech

Today's speech by Prime Minister May reaffirms the scale of the challenge involved.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister's speech provides greater clarity on the proposed approach of the British Government to the Brexit negotiation process. The speech largely focuses on the type of future relationship the UK wishes to have with the EU, from the perspective of a country that itself is no longer in the EU. While this will inevitably be seen by many as a "hard exit", the analysis across Government has covered all possible models for the future UK relationship with the EU.

I note that the Prime Minister has made clear that the UK wishes to secure the closest possible future economic relationship with the EU. That is an objective we share.

From our perspective, our overall negotiation priorities remain unchanged: our economy and trade, Northern Ireland including the Peace Process and border issues, the common travel area, and the future of the European Union.

Prime Minister May highlighted the specific and historic relationship between Britain and Ireland. In this context, she made clear that her priorities include maintaining the common travel area and avoiding a return to a hard border with Northern Ireland, both of which are welcome.

And I recognise the alignment between our economic and trading concerns and the objective of the UK to have a close, and friction-free, economic and trading relationship with the EU, including with Ireland.

But I am under no illusions about the challenges that remain to be addressed.

Both I and Government Ministers will continue to meet and engage with our EU counterparts over coming weeks to emphasise Ireland's concerns and to ensure that they are fully reflected in the EU position once negotiations commence. This activity is reinforced by extensive engagement at diplomatic and official level. The Government is acutely aware of the potential risks and challenges for the Irish economy and will remain fully engaged on this aspect as the negotiations proceed.

These challenges can only be greater as we await the outcome of the election in Northern Ireland.

Against this background it is even more essential that this Government continue its process of Brexit analysis and engagement on the key issues. We will continue in our contacts with other EU Member States and will promote North/South Co-operation to the greatest extent possible. At all times our focus on supporting and protecting the peace process in forthcoming negotiations will remain.

Our ongoing preparations will stand to us as we move closer to the triggering of Article 50 and the commencement of negotiations.

A key part of this is the Government's initiative on the All-Island Civic Dialogue which began on 2 November.

We have followed this plenary session with a series of sectoral civic dialogue events.

Led by Ministers, these events offer an invaluable opportunity to hear directly about the all-island implications of Brexit, from a variety of stakeholders and across a range of sectors.

Minister Flanagan and I will host the second Plenary session of the All-Island Civic Dialogue in Dublin Castle on Friday, 17 February, by which time 12 sectoral events will have taken place. This will be a further important element of our overall engagement and consultation on the Brexit challenges.

Conclusion

This is a critical time for Ireland and for Northern Ireland. It is a time when effective political leadership has never been more necessary.

Now that an election date in the North has been set, the political parties must ensure that the campaign is conducted in a respectful and responsible manner, engage in good faith and make every possible effort to form a new Executive and get the institutions back on track.

For its part, the Irish Government will work in partnership with the British Government and all parties to support this process and ensure that Northern Ireland is in a position to work through the Northern Ireland Executive, the Assembly and all of the institutions to meet the many challenges that we face.

ENDS