
Minister Flanagan Seanad statements on Northern Ireland

Speech

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30 March 2017

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

Cathaoirleach,

I am very pleased to participate today in the Seanad statements on Northern Ireland, on behalf of the Government.

This is a critical week for Northern Ireland. On Sunday, it was clear that there is a need for further engagement by all sides to reach an agreement on formation of a new power-sharing Executive. Yesterday, Article 50 was triggered by the British Government, and this has profound implications for Northern Ireland, as it does for this island as a whole.

I wish to outline to the House the Government's approach in the period ahead in continuing our intensive and comprehensive work to deal with both of these major and connected issues in respect of Northern Ireland.

All of our engagement is guided by our responsibilities as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement and our stated headline priorities for dealing with Brexit.

The Government's overarching objective in all respects on Northern Ireland, is simply and fundamentally to protect and further the peace process, living up in full to our duty as a co-guarantor of the Agreement.

Cathaoirleach,

I participated for the Government over the last three weeks in the discussions in Belfast with the political parties and the British Government to seek progress on outstanding commitments under the Agreements and to support the formation of a new Executive.

While there was good engagement by all parties, and significant progress was made across a number of issues, in the event an agreement on the formation of a new Executive was not reached in the timeframe set out.

This is extremely disappointing, most importantly for people in Northern Ireland who look to the Assembly for representation and governance.

On Monday morning, when it was clear that an agreement would not be reached, I held a further discussion 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 on Tuesday 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, indicated on Tuesday that a short additional window of time is available to find an agreed basis for the re-establishment of the Executive. I spoke by phone yesterday with the Secretary of State and we discussed the details for these additional and finite discussions, which I anticipate will start in the very near future.

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, 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.

Cathaoirleach,

In looking ahead to these further discussions in Belfast, I want to specifically mention the work on dealing with the painful legacy of the past.

The Government is very conscious that victims and survivors are long overdue some evidence of delivery on the legacy framework of the Stormont House Agreement and the reform proposals of the Lord Chief Justice on legacy inquests.

Determined efforts were made over the last three weeks by the two Governments and the parties to move forward. I believe that a final push in the days ahead, can and must get all participants to the point where the necessary legislative processes to establish the legacy bodies can definitively commence, in both jurisdictions.

I will be urging all participants to these discussions to display the necessary compromise to ensure that this can be achieved, for the benefit of victims and survivors, and for society as a whole in Northern Ireland.

Cathaoirleach,

Effective devolved government for Northern Ireland, and the full operation of the North-South and East-West institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are particularly crucial as we deal with Brexit.

In this context, the absence of agreement so far on establishing an Executive is deeply concerning, and must be immediately resolved. A new power-sharing administration with a new mandate, given by the people in full sight of the challenges of Brexit, can be a powerful advocate for Northern Ireland's interests. Following the British Government's Article 50 notification yesterday, we are now in the operational phase of the Brexit process, and Northern Ireland's voice must be represented.

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, the Council agreed a set of common principles to guide future work. This work needs to continue now in even greater depth and detail, as the negotiations commence. However, it can only do so following the formation of an Executive.

Northern Ireland's needs must also be articulated in London, as its negotiators in Whitehall prepare British compromises. This again, is something that can only be achieved by a cohesive and inclusive power-sharing Executive.

In this context, I am glad that during the course of the recent discussions in Stormont, there was a wide measure of agreement between the parties on the need for a new Northern Ireland Executive to articulate a strong common position on Brexit. All parties must make the final effort now, so that a new Executive can be formed, and thereafter deliver the necessary strong representation on Brexit to protect the overall interests of the people in Northern Ireland.

Cathaoirleach,

The UK has now triggered the Article 50 application to leave the EU. Brexit is not an EU policy. Neither is it an Irish Government policy – in fact, in last year's referendum the Irish Government made clear its view that Brexit would be bad for the EU, for Ireland and for British-Irish relations. While the Government accepts and respects the overall outcome of last June's referendum, we are also mindful that 56% of voters in Northern Ireland opted to remain in the EU.

We have been preparing, since well before the UK referendum was held, on how to deal with the consequences. As all Members of this House know, there are many challenges, both political and economic, and these are particularly acute in Northern Ireland.

In relation to the peace process, the Government has and will continue to be very clear that both the letter and the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement must be respected through the process of the UK's departure from the European Union, and in the future EU-UK relationship. Nothing can be allowed to undermine the peace process which, founded on the Good Friday Agreement, has brought us definitively beyond the horror of the Troubles and transformed the political relationships across these islands.

A huge dividend of the peace has been the opportunity of increased prosperity, for all communities and all regions on the island. A headline priority for the Government in dealing with Brexit is to protect our economic interests, including on an all-island basis

Anything less would be a partial and flawed effort.

The European Union facilitates and directly supports the development of the all-island economy, which provides a crucial source of employment and business activity, particularly in border regions. The maintenance of the open border and the preservation of the Common Travel Area are of the utmost importance for the all-island economy. They are therefore part of our headline priorities on Brexit.

The interdependence of agriculture and the food production chain between our islands is a striking example of the challenges that we face. Farms can straddle our border, with sterling sheep at one end and euro sheep on the other, secured by the EU single farm payment. Milk that is processed in Cavan is sold as butter in Belfast, Balbriggan and, indeed, Birmingham.

Working closely with our EU partners, and as a committed EU Member State, the Government is determined to find the right solutions. In building understanding and support for the unique situation on the island of Ireland, I have brought a number EU colleagues to see our border. Or rather, to not see our border, which,

thanks to EU membership and the changes since the Good Friday Agreement, is invisible. As the Taoiseach has made clear, the Government is determined to find a political solution that will enable the maintenance of the open border on our island.

On the basis of our continuing intensive political and diplomatic engagement with every EU Member State and the EU Institutions, I am greatly heartened by the solidarity and support that our EU partners have shown for the imperative of protecting the peace process on our island. Commissioner Barnier, who leads the EU negotiating team, indicated last week his aversion to anything that would 'weaken dialogue and peace' in Northern Ireland.

Cathaoirleach,

The EU-UK negotiations that will commence in the weeks ahead will be tough and difficult compromises will be required on all sides.

The Government has prepared extensively in pursuit of our headline priorities and we are ready to advance these now through the EU-UK negotiations.

Our interests in, and responsibility to support, a stable, peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland are key imperatives in our approach to the Brexit negotiations.

The Government will continue to do all it can to ensure that the interests of Ireland, North and South, are at the heart of the long negotiations process and protected in the final outcome.

With the same resolute determination, the Government will proactively engage in the renewed discussions in Belfast to restore confidence in partnership politics in Northern Ireland and allow for the formation of a new power-sharing Executive, as well as for the full implementation of commitments from previous agreements.

Thank you Cathaoirleach, and I look forward to hearing the Members' contributions.

ENDS