

Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis – Statement following meetings with party leaders

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, has today met with the leaders of Northern Ireland's five main political parties; Michelle O'Neill, Sinn Féin; Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, DUP; Naomi Long, Alliance; Doug Beattie, UUP; and Colum Eastwood, SDLP.

In all his meetings, the Secretary of State reiterated the need to respect the electoral outcome of Thursday's election and restore the full functioning of the devolved institutions as soon as possible – both the Executive and the Assembly.

All parties agreed on the importance of maintaining political stability. The Secretary of State encouraged all party leaders to come together to form an Executive as soon as possible, starting with the nomination of an Assembly Speaker.

The Secretary of State acknowledged that the Northern Ireland Protocol remains a clear barrier to political stability and re-confirmed that the Government will do whatever it takes to protect the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, in all of its dimensions. He reiterated the Government's desire to address the outstanding issues by agreement with the EU, but confirmed that the Government stood ready to take further steps to rectify those issues, should that be necessary.

He noted that negotiations with the European Commission related to the Protocol were the responsibility of the UK Government and that they should not stand in the way of restoring the Stormont institutions and enabling the Executive to deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland.

He reiterated the importance of taking advantage of the new provisions in the NI (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act passed earlier this year to enable continuity in decision-making during the Executive formation process. This will ensure existing Northern Ireland ministers can remain in place to oversee NI departments, allow legislation to progress and support the delivery of vital public services.

Speaking after his meetings, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis MP, said:

"Northern Ireland's party leaders must come together to agree a way forward to deliver a stable and accountable devolved government.

"The UK Government's overriding priority remains the preservation of peace and stability in Northern Ireland and the protection of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its strands. The current situation with the Protocol

is fundamentally undermining the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and creating an unacceptable situation in Northern Ireland. We will continue to press the EU to agree the crucial changes that are urgently needed but will take nothing off the table in our pursuit of those solutions.

“As I conveyed to party leaders today, our collective focus must be on the restoration of the Stormont institutions so that those newly elected representatives can come together and deliver in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland.

“I will remain in close contact with the party leaders over the coming days.”