

Statement to Parliament: Secretary of State's Oral Statement on NI political situation

Mr Speaker,

With permission I would like to make a statement on recent events in Northern Ireland.

Since the Northern Ireland Assembly election on 2 March I have been engaged in intensive talks with the political parties and the Irish Government, in line with the well-established three-stranded approach.

There has been one clear purpose, to re-establish an inclusive, devolved administration at Stormont in accordance with the 1998 Belfast Agreement and its successors.

Progress has been made on a number of issues.

These include on a budget, a Programme for Government and ways of improving transparency and accountability.

We have seen further steps forward on agreeing a way to implement the Stormont House Agreement legacy bodies to help provide better outcomes for victims and survivors of the troubles.

In addition progress was made around how the parties might come together to represent Northern Ireland in our negotiations to leave the EU, which is so important in the context of Article 50 being triggered tomorrow.

That said, it is also clear that significant gaps remain between the parties, particularly over issues surrounding culture and identity.

Throughout this process the Government has been active in making positive proposals to try and bridge those gaps and help the parties to move things forward.

In law, the period allowed to form an Executive from the date of the first sitting of the Assembly after an election is fourteen days.

That fourteen day period expired at 4pm yesterday with no agreement and therefore no Executive.

This is a source of deep disappointment and regret to me and many and I know there is widespread dismay across the country.

From all my extensive engagement across Northern Ireland with business, civil society and members of the public, I am in no doubt inclusive devolved government is what the overwhelming majority of the people want to see.

Working for them, delivering on their priorities and continuing the positive progress we have seen in Northern Ireland over recent years.

Devolved institutions up and running and serving the whole community.

Yet following the passing of yesterday's legal deadline, Northern Ireland has no devolved administration.

This also means that other elements of the Belfast Agreement, including the North-South Bodies, cannot operate properly.

The consequences of all of this are potentially extremely serious.

And the most immediate is the fact that we are rapidly approaching the point at which Northern Ireland will not have an agreed budget.

From tomorrow a civil servant, the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary, will exercise powers to allocate cash to Northern Ireland departments.

This is an interim measure designed to ensure services are maintained until such time as a budget is agreed.

We are keeping in close contact with the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service on these matters and I understand that the Department of Finance will be setting out more details today.

But let me be very clear.

This situation is not sustainable and beyond a short period of time will have an impact on public service.

What we are talking about here is the health service, schools, voluntary groups and services for the most vulnerable in society.

This isn't what people voted for on 2 March.

During the course of the past twenty four hours I have spoken to the leaders of the five main Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government.

I am encouraged that there remains a strong willingness to continue engaging in dialogue with a view to resolving outstanding issues and forming an Executive and that must absolutely remain a priority.

But the window of opportunity is short.

It is essential therefore that the intensity of discussions is stepped up with renewed intent and focus and I believe a positive outcome remains possible.

To that end I will continue over coming days to work closely with the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government as appropriate.

I will need to keep the situation under review.

But if these talks are successful, it would be my intention quickly to bring forward legislation after the Easter recess to allow an executive to be formed, avoiding a second Assembly election, for which I detect little public appetite.

I am also determined to take forward the legacy bodies in the Stormont House Agreement in accordance with our manifesto commitments.

I will be involving a range of interested parties, including the Victims Commissioner.

But in the absence of devolved government it is ultimately for the UK Government to provide for political stability and good governance.

We do not want to see a return to direct rule.

As our manifesto at the last election stated 'local policies and local services should be determined by locally elected politicians through locally accountable institutions'.

But should the talks fail in their objectives the Government will have to consider all options.

I therefore want to give the House notice that following the Easter recess as a minimum it would be my intention to bring forward legislation to set a regional rate to enable local councils to carry out their functions and to provide further assurance around the budget for Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker,

It is vital that devolved government, and all of the institutions under the successive agreements, is returned to Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

And the Government's unrelenting focus is on achieving that objective.

Northern Ireland needs strong devolved government.

To deliver for teachers, doctors and nurses, business, industry and the wider community.

To ensure that it plays a full role in the affairs of our United Kingdom, while retaining its strong relationship with Ireland.

And to continue the work of the past two decades to build stronger, peaceful and prosperous future for all.

That needs to be the focus of everyone as we approach the crucial next few days and weeks.

And I commend this statement to the House.