



Sinn Féin Special Newsletter

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'Political institutions the best way forward'



DEAL REACHED: Joint First Ministers Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson

AFTER 10 WEEKS of talks, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) reached an agreement on 17 November entitled, 'A Fresh Start – the Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan'. The agreement covers issues of the Executive's Budget, economic protections for the most vulnerable, investment in public services, institutional reform and tackling criminality.

No agreement has been possible on dealing with the legacy of the past at this point due to the unacceptable position taken by the British government on the issue of disclosure to families of victims of the conflict.

SPEAKING AT THE conclusion of talks on 17 November, Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness said the political institutions remain the best way to protect people from the worst excesses of Tory austerity.

Mr McGuinness said: "At the heart of this agreement is our common commitment to a better future.

"The cuts to our welfare budgets, tax credits and our block grant are wrong and unfair. We are determined to do all in our power to oppose this austerity and protect our people and our public services."

"We have secured more than half a bil-

lion pounds of additional funding for the Executive plus flexibilities that can be invested in growth and public services," Mr McGuinness said.

"We are providing a package of £585 million to support the most vulnerable in our society and low-income working families.

"We have appointed a panel under the leadership of Professor Eileen Evason to draft proposals on how this money will provide essential support to people on welfare and thousands of families targeted by Tory cuts to tax credits.

"We will continue to do all we can to support those in need."

Legacy issues yet to be resolved

"The legacy of the past remains a huge gap in this work. The onus remains on the British government to live up to their responsibilities to victims – in particular, full disclosure," Mr McGuinness continued.

"We also addressed directly the issue of paramilitarism. There can be no place for armed groups in our society.

"That is why the agreement includes additional resources for policing and mechanisms to challenge armed gangs and criminality.

"Our political institutions are the best way forward. The First Minister and I are absolutely united on this."

A FRESH START – THE STORMONT HOUSE AGREEMENT & IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

THE KEY POINTS:

■ An extra £615 million in new money from the British Exchequer and between £525 million and £650 million in flexibilities, allowing this money to be used to grow our economy.

■ The establishment of a fund of £585 million over 4 years to provide support to people who will lose out on benefits and tax credits.

■ A panel will be appointed (headed up by leading benefits expert Eileen Evason) to bring forward a report on how this package of funding should be maximised and prioritised.

■ Funding for a number of key infrastructural projects was also agreed during the negotiations, specifically with regard to upgrading projects for the North-West Gateway Initiative.

■ The number of MLAs will be reduced to five members per constituency at the 2021 Assembly elections.

■ The number of departments will also be reduced from 12 to 9 in time for next year's Assembly elections.

■ Parties which are entitled to ministerial positions in the Executive but choose not to take them up will be recognised as an official opposition.

British government must honour its commitments on disclosure to victims

IN THE Stormont House Agreement that was reached in December 2014, the British government committed to providing full disclosure to families of victims of the conflict but have now done a U-turn from that position.

The British government has failed to honour this agreement, just as they failed to honour the agreement for a full and independent inquiry into the killing of Pat Finucane.

It continues to cover up the actions of its agents, army, police and political establishment during the conflict in Ireland by using a 'national security' veto.

Because of this, no agreement has been possible on dealing with the legacy of the past as part of the Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan announced on 17 November.

THE British government's proposals on legacy are unacceptable, Sinn Féin MLA Conor Murphy said on 17 November following the conclusion of talks at Stormont.

"The British government's proposals on legacy issues presented during the most recent talks were about preventing the full disclosure to the families of victims of the conflict they committed to as part of the Stormont House Agreement last year.

"The 'national security' pretext for blocking disclosure is clearly nonsense as much of the information families are looking for is related to events 30 to 40 years ago.

"This is unacceptable and means that no agreement was possible on dealing with disclosure and the past.

Mr Murphy said Sinn Féin will continue to work with victims' groups and families to hold the British government to account.

"The two governments committed to return to this issue to seek an early resolution – and we intend to hold them to that," he said.

“The ‘national security’ pretext for blocking disclosure is clearly nonsense as much of the information families are looking for is related to events 30 to 40 years ago

While welcoming the agreement, the Sinn Féin MLA criticised the role of the British and Irish governments throughout the talks process.

"The influence of Britain's military establishment and security and intelligence agencies is the major factor in reinforcing the Westminster Government's intransigence against revealing the truth about its role in the conflict," he said.

"They are absolutely hostile to Sinn Féin being in government in the North and share with the Southern political establishment an opposition to the continued electoral rise of Sinn Féin in the 26 Counties.

"The British government has failed to honor the Stormont House Agreement on full disclosure to meet the needs of victims.

"The Irish government must stand as a co-equal guarantor of the agreements, must honour its commitments and must hold the British government to account. They have failed to do this."



TOP: Sinn Féin MLA Conor Murphy. ABOVE: Families of the victims of the Ballymurphy massacre in August 1971 in which 11 civilians were killed by British paratroopers in west Belfast campaigning for truth outside Parliament Buildings, Stormont

Victims groups criticise British government position on disclosure

"In their homes around the country, those who lost loved ones in the conflict will be privately grieving and angry at London's insistence that it must be able to redact/censor reports from the proposed Historical Investigations Unit on 'national security' grounds.

"The PFC and JFF consider it totally unacceptable for the state to demand the right to conceal the actions of its agents in bombings, shootings and murders during the conflict. This was not part of the Stormont House Agreement in December 2014."

– Pat Finucane Centre and Justice for the Forgotten

"Let us be very clear – this is not a question of the 'local parties failing to agree'. It is the UK Government that has vetoed progress by demanding the right to use 'national security' to cover up the unlawful activities of its agents. It will use state power to give impunity to state agents. In so doing, it jettisons the interests of victims and the truth, continues its violation of international human rights standards and undermines the rule of law."

– Committee for the Administration of Justice

Political crisis abates as institutions stay standing but more work needs to be done

THE CRISIS in the political institutions was created by Tory austerity and their failure to honour commitments made in the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements, including full disclosure on the legacy of the past.

In July of this year, British Chancellor George Osborne announced that another £1.4 billion would be removed from the Executive's budget over the next four years.

He also announced cuts to tax credits for working families and those on low incomes. These changes will take another £1.1 billion out of the local economy.

While tax credits are not within the remit of the Executive, Sinn Féin cannot discriminate between supporting those on in-work and out-of-work benefits.

A package of measures has now been negotiated in the Stormont House Agreement & Implementation Plan to provide support to those who will be most affected by the Tory cuts agenda and to invest in public services and the economy. [See page 1].

Sinn Féin has negotiated a fund of £585 million over four years to support the vulnerable and working families.

But we know this will not be enough to cover the cuts being imposed by the Tories on working families, claimants and our block grant.

Their approach is unfair, fundamentally undemocratic and economically counter-productive. Sinn Féin will continue to actively oppose and resist this policy.

We will continue to campaign against austerity and support the vulnerable. We will campaign too for powers to grow our economy and to end the union.

We will not hand over our political institutions and hard-won agreements to a Tory Government. Keeping the institutions functioning is better for all of our people and means the Tories cannot return to direct rule and all that would entail – including water charges, increased student fees, prescription charges, end free travel for pensioners, impose privatisation and slash public services?

Political instability since 2010 as British and Irish governments step back

The political process in the North has been held back by continuous phases of political instability since 2010.

This pattern of instability stems from the disengagement and negative mismanagement of both the peace and political processes by the Tory Government. This British approach has been mirrored by the Irish Government's semi-detachment and passivity towards the North.

Both governments have failed to honour



“British government austerity policies directly threatened the viability of the political institutions and the political process itself

their commitments to ensure full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements since 1998.

For the past five years, unionist parties have made a concerted effort to unpick the Good Friday Agreement and undermine power-sharing in the North's Executive.

In 2013, all-party talks chaired by US diplomat Richard Haass and Professor Meghan O'Sullivan aimed to develop solutions to three key issues: dealing with the legacy of the past; flags and emblems; and parading. These comprehensive talks ended in compromise proposals developed by Haass and O'Sullivan which were endorsed by Sinn Féin and the SDLP but rejected by the unionist parties. The British government failed to endorse Haass's roadmap for progress.

Rejection of their proposals and further political instability is what then led to new all-party talks that began in October 2014, and put all issues on the table – the Haass issues as well as the economic crisis, welfare cuts, and the failure by the British and Irish governments to honour their legal obligations under the Good Friday and other Agreements.

The Stormont House Agreement reached in December 2014 was acceptable to Sinn Féin as it included key protections for welfare recipients, and included disclosure commitments from the British government on legacy issues. But the DUP quickly reneged on key aspects of it.

Austerity fuelled crisis

This vexed political situation has been exacerbated by the austerity crisis caused by the British Conservatives' reduction of the North's public expenditure settlement

(the block grant) by hundreds of millions of pounds.

With the election of the majority Conservative Government in May, further cuts have been announced.

British government austerity policies deepened the political instability to the point where it directly threatened the viability of the political institutions and the political process itself.

Arising from this context, political unionism contrived a crisis since the summer following the murders of Jock Davison and Kevin McGuigan. In response, and for the third year in a row, a new round of inter-party political talks began 10 weeks ago.

A cynical electoral power play between the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party brought them to an effective standstill.

But even with an agreement now reached, the potential exists for more sham fights, diversions and prevarication as the DUP and UUP try to electorally outmanoeuvre each other and for other negative political influences to hold back progress in the talks.

Nationalist and republican confidence in the integrity of policing arrangements has been seriously undermined by the actions of the PSNI. The possibility this has been deliberately provoked cannot be discounted, which in itself would be a serious and sinister development.

There is a widespread conviction that some elements within political unionism have pulled back and are not seriously committed to power sharing.

Villiers threatened return to direct rule

The role of the British Government is commonly viewed as being without either credibility or genuine intent.

The most recent negative public intervention by Villiers has been to threaten a return of direct rule.

More generally, the reputation of the political institutions and belief in the capacity of the political process to deliver has been damaged. That is why this latest round of talks needed to be successful. We can now build on this progress.

The templates for progress across many of the issues have already been agreed. Political stability, commitment to proper power sharing, and securing a sustainable, workable budget are the benchmarks of success. These are what the people want.

The trajectory needs to be ambitious to regenerate the vision of the Good Friday Agreement and to open up an era of transformational and inspirational politics.

That is what all our people deserve.