

Joint statement by An Taoiseach Brian Cowen and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown

Hillsborough, Belfast
Wednesday 27th January 2010

We have worked hard over the last two days to establish common ground, to build dialogue between the parties, and to re-establish the trust necessary to complete the devolution of policing and justice in Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday [Belfast] Agreement provided the foundation for peace and political progress. The St Andrews agreement was a further major step forward. But a number of issues remain to be fully implemented.

Resolving these issues is the key to enabling the completion of devolution and the opening of a new chapter in the life of Northern Ireland.

The devolved institutions can then focus on the issues that concern everyone – jobs, health, schools, social services, community safety.

We do not pretend that this is an easy process.

The issues we have been discussing go to the very core of Northern Ireland's past, and their solutions are the foundations for Northern Ireland's future.

But we have been determined to bring it to completion over the past two days. Progress has been made inch by inch/slowly but surely.

Having talked to all the leaders of Northern Ireland's political parties, we brought forward proposals that we believe set clear parameters for a pathway to an agreement.

We have made much progress, but it is right that the parties themselves now work together, in the spirit of trust and understanding, to agree and take ownership of the solutions.

We believe there is now a firm basis for the parties to:

- set an early date for the completion of the final stage of devolution. We agree it would be practicable to set a date in early March for the cross-community vote and the beginning of May for the transfer of powers.
- create a new justice department and define the relationship between the justice minister and the executive on an agreed, strong and sustainable footing;
- benefit from the offer from the British government of £800 million of resources for a new department of justice – money which is only available if agreement is reached by the parties at this time
- enhance the existing framework to deal more effectively with contentious parades, learning lessons from successful local models, and enhance the framework governing parades and related public assemblies in a way that guarantees respect, dialogue, transparency and independence.

We have also put proposals for the executive to move ahead on other outstanding issues from the St Andrews Agreement.

The importance of these decisions for the future of Northern Ireland cannot be underestimated. With leadership and courage, they can be achieved.

We are confident that this week's talks leave Northern Ireland better able to overcome divisions, more determined to move forward together, with a greater understanding of what unites communities in Northern Ireland.

We look forward to receiving an update on progress from the first and deputy first ministers on Friday.

If it proves impossible for the parties to resolve the outstanding issues, we are prepared to bring forward our specific proposals at that point for wider debate and discussion.

We have listened to their views – and we are now right to ask them to do what they have to do, which is to reach agreement on these outstanding issues and move quickly to the cross community vote in the assembly necessary to achieve the completion of devolution.