

**Plenary Meeting
5 February 2010**

Speaking Points for Taoiseach

I want to thank the First and Deputy First Ministers for the very positive and encouraging report which they have presented to us today.

When the Prime Minister and I departed from Hillsborough last Wednesday, we identified the key issues that needed to be addressed in order to achieve the devolution of justice and policing powers and ensure the stability and sustainability of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland.

The agreement that has been reached provides the basis for each of these issues to be addressed and resolved.

Fair and balanced compromises were required so that gaps could be bridged and different perspectives accommodated.

The completion of the devolution of policing and justice in a matter of weeks is an essential step for peace and security in Northern Ireland. It consolidates the operation of devolved government and closes the circle in the transformation of policing structures in Northern Ireland.

I also welcome the agreement on a way forward on parades. A new and improved framework, implemented by agreement, offers the prospect of respecting, and equitably balancing, the rights of all – both the loyal orders and the local residents affected by parades in their areas

I want to congratulate all of the parties around the table that contributed to this positive outcome. The leadership displayed by the First and Deputy First Minister, and their respective party colleagues, was instrumental in achieving the agreement that has been reached.

This leadership was facilitated by the contributions made – both in plenary and bilateral formats – by all of the parties that spent the last 10 days or so in constructive dialogue.

I have been reinforced in my view that all of the parties at this table are determined to make the devolved institutions work and deliver good government for the people of Northern Ireland.

The agreement reached presents a real opportunity to renew the partnership which is the life blood of the devolved institutions.

The people of Northern Ireland Government yearn for this constructive partnership to deliver tangible outcomes that improve their lives – in the areas of employment, health, the environment, education and culture.

The Irish Government is committed to working with the Northern Ireland Executive to achieve these positive outcomes for all of the people of this island.

Both parts of this island face major developmental challenges – economic, fiscal, educational and environmental. Working together, sharing our knowledge and expertise, we stand a far better chance of addressing these challenges than if we try to tackle them separately.

Building on the constructive engagement and partnership that has brought about today's agreement, and as guarantors of the Good Friday and St. Andrews Agreements, [both Governments/we] look forward to the implementation of outstanding commitments relating to the establishment of the North/South Parliamentary Forum and the North/South Consultative Forum, as well as the completion of the St. Andrews Review of the North/South Bodies.

When I spoke here on Wednesday, I said that what was needed was for the parties to recover the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement; that vision of a better future for the all the people of these islands.

That better future must be built on mutual respect for people of different traditions; equality and tolerance; and respect for each others political aspirations and cultural expression and inheritance.

That includes respect for the Irish language and for those who treasure it as part of their cultural heritage. It also includes respect for Ulster Scots.

Both languages are part of the rich tapestry which has been woven on this island and which we are very fortunate to enjoy. We look forward to further progress in implementing the relevant commitments in the St. Andrews Agreement.

Finally, I wish to thank the Prime Minister for the extraordinary commitment he has shown in making today's agreement possible – not least in securing the financial package that will underwrite the devolution of justice and policing powers.

I also wish to thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for Foreign Affairs for the efforts they have invested in facilitating today's outcome.

Above all, I commend you – the political leaders of Northern Ireland – for the courage and determination you have shown in stretching yourselves to reach this agreement.

I wish you well in your collective endeavours as you continue, in partnership, to work together for all the people of Northern Ireland.