

Press release: Secretary of State Karen Bradley announces new phase of talks

Since my appointment as Secretary of State I have had a number of discussions on the way forward to restore the Northern Ireland Executive and other political institutions under the Belfast Agreement. What has quickly become clear to me is that time is short and one last opportunity to reach agreement remains.

Without agreement we will be facing a set of political consequences that will represent a significant setback to the progress made since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, almost twenty years ago. Over the past eight months the political parties, particularly the DUP and Sinn Féin, have made progress in closing the gaps existing between them on a range of difficult issues that have prevented the formation of an Executive. The gaps are narrow, but there are still significant differences to overcome. I also want to emphasise the role played by the SDLP, Alliance and the UUP who have made an active and positive contribution to making political progress. Based on my conversations so far, I believe it is possible to reach agreement.

All of the parties have expressed their commitment to the restoration of the Executive. They have indicated to me directly their willingness to engage in a constructive manner to try to reach agreement. A short, intense set of political talks to restore the Executive will therefore commence next Wednesday [24 January 2018].

These will involve the five main parties, the UK Government and the Irish Government in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach.

Initially, these talks will focus on gaining clarity of understanding on the progress that was made over the last seven months on a range of issues, including formation of the Executive and what are known as legacy issues. Progress must be swift. It is clear that Northern Ireland needs strong devolved government and political leadership. The people of Northern Ireland cannot continue to have their public services suffer by the lack of an Executive and without Ministers making the key policy and budget decisions.

Without an Executive, Northern Ireland's voice on critical issues will not be heard as strongly.

I will be updating Parliament in Westminster no later than 7 February on progress.

Without rapid progress, the UK Government will face significant decisions.

These include setting a budget for 2018/19, the future of MLA pay, the

prospect of a further election (which I continue to keep under review) and ultimately other arrangements to ensure that Northern Ireland is able to benefit from the good government that its people both need and deserve.

My clear focus now, however, must be to see devolution restored, an Executive established and the progress that Northern Ireland has made over the past two decades continue. And that is what I intend to do in the coming weeks.