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News - The only way forward is one which is fair and balanced

4-5 minutes

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Statement by DUP Leader Arlene Foster MLA - On balance we believe there is a basis upon which the Assembly and Executive can re-established in a fair and balanced way.

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This is a Government paper. Our Party Officers, Assembly and Parliamentary representatives considered the paper on Thursday. On balance we believe there is a basis upon which the Assembly and Executive can re-established in a fair and balanced way.

We have weighted the Government's paper against our ten commitments for negotiations as agreed by the Party in March 2017.

1. We will work to avoid Direct Rule and get local government back at Stormont as quickly as possible.
2. Our demands in negotiations will be proportionate to those of Gerry Adams and Sinn Fein.
3. As has been the case since 2007, we remain committed to working constructively and in partnership with all those who are in an Executive after an election.
4. We will respond positively to any proposals to increase transparency, accountability and will help the institutions function more effectively.
5. We will not compromise on fundamental unionist principles in order to retain power.
6. We will not permit the rewriting of the past or the persecution of the security forces.
7. We will oppose any border poll outside the terms of the Belfast Agreement.
8. We will stand over those proposals for reform as set out in our 'Making Stormont Work Better' document which have not yet been delivered.
9. We will work to ensure the full implementation of the Military

Covenant in Northern Ireland.

10. We will honour all previous commitments we have made on the basis that republicans will honour theirs as well.

This is not a perfect deal and there are elements within it which we recognise are the product of long negotiations and represent compromise outcomes. There will always need to be give and take.

We recognised this in August 2017 when we indicated that we would legislate for Irish but not on the basis of the draft bill published by the DCAL Minister in February 2015. It would have elevated the Irish language above English, forced its use upon communities and reduced career opportunities for those who did not speak the language. We note that this is not the case in this paper.

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and will remain so for as long as people are content and at home living here. Our place in the United Kingdom must not be diminished and that's where an Ulster British Commissioner can look at ways to strengthen our place in the United Kingdom.

I value people who cherish their Irish identity. I want them to feel at home in Northern Ireland. I do not want them to feel second class citizens but equally I do not want people, like me, who are British to feel uncomfortable celebrating their Britishness. The way forward must be about facilitation rather than imposition.

The appointment of a Veterans Commissioner and full implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant will ensure that the men and women from Northern Ireland who have courageously served our country will receive the support and care they deserve.

The last three years have been bad for Northern Ireland politics. We need to get moving forward again. The sustainability of the Assembly is key. Minorities must have protections and that's why we welcomed reform of the Petition of Concern but we could not support it being neutered.

The key to making devolution work will be having the resources to do so. This element of the paper will require further scrutiny.

Leaders on all sides need to work towards the common ground and focus on restoring devolution so we can have Ministers appointed and focus on key issues such as waiting lists and mental health.

The only way forward is one which is fair and balanced.