

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Ms Griffiths
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From: John Sawers

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LATEST VERSION (1630) JS cc: JT MT AC

DRAFT PRESS RELEASE

The Secretary of State, Peter Mandelson MP, has now signed an Order bringing into effect, from midnight tonight, the legislation to suspend the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

Commenting on this Mr Mandelson said

"This is a setback for the political process in Northern Ireland but by acting in this way we are averting a crisis. Of course there will be disappointment in all parts of the community that having made so much progress in recent years, and with the Assembly and Executive beginning to make a significant impact on people's lives, the institutions are now being put on hold for a period. But they are not being annulled and I believe they can operate again on an even firmer foundation than before.

"The overwhelming majority want to see devolved government working as part of the full implementation of the Agreement. But the institutions can only be sustained if there is trust and confidence on all sides.

"Sadly, that trust and confidence has been badly dented by the absence of decommissioning. The Independent Commission's report of 31 January, which I am now publishing, explains the position reached between the Commission and the representatives of the IRA, UVF and UFF.

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"The operation of the Assembly and the Executive, will therefore be suspended as from midnight tonight. This will have implications for the other institutions since the Agreement recognised that they are inter-dependent and inter-locking.

"I deeply regret having to take this step. But the only alternative would have been to see the Executive effectively ceasing to operate and a worse situation being created as a result. That could not be allowed to happen. We have a responsibility to ensure that good government continues for all the people of Northern Ireland. By instituting this suspension we are protecting the institutions and preserving the important gains that have been made, so that we are ready to pick up once more when cross-community confidence is restored.

"The task now facing the two Governments and the Northern Ireland parties is to ensure that the current difficulties are overcome as speedily as possible so that devolved government is restored. This will not be easy; confidence has been damaged on all sides. But it is in no-one's interests to have a lengthy suspension.

"This is not the end of the Agreement, nor is the Agreement itself being suspended. The Agreement provides the only way forward; it is the way that has been endorsed by the people, North and South. The key is to ensure that every aspect is implemented in a timescale that is acceptable to all parties.

"The peace process has experienced setbacks before and we have overcome them. We can and must do the same again.

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"I will therefore be in contact with the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland parties next week to discuss the way forward. There will be a Review, under the terms of the Agreement. In the interests of the people of Northern Ireland all participants in the process must do everything they can to ensure that we achieve an agreed outcome as soon as possible."

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The Northern Ireland Act 2000, which became law on 10 February, provides for the suspension of devolved Government in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State has signed an Order to bring the legislation into effect from midnight on Friday 11 February.

2. During the period of suspension –

- Assembly members remain in place but the Assembly and its committees cannot meet or conduct business.
- No Act can be passed by the Assembly.
- Those in elected office – Ministers, Junior Ministers and chairmen and deputy chairmen of statutory committees – no longer hold office.
- The provisions allowing members of the Executive to participate in the North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council are suspended.
- No functions can be conferred on implementation bodies.

3. Direct rule is therefore reinstated. Westminster will legislate on devolved matters by Order in Council. The functions of the First and Deputy First Minister are transferred to the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Departments are subject to his direction and control.

4. Subject to Parliamentary approval, the Secretary of State can make an Order at any time ("a Restoration Order") to restore devolved government.

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