

Church officials hail political agreement in Northern Ireland: Transfer of authority

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Church leaders in Ireland have welcomed an agreement concluded between the two largest political parties in Northern Ireland, which will see the completion of a process of devolving power from the British government.

The Roman Catholic Primate of All Ireland Cardinal Seán Brady hailed news of the agreement reached February 5, saying, “My prayer is that everyone in our society will reflect on what has been agreed today with a spirit of generosity and concern for the good of the whole community.”

Brady also expressed his hopes for a resolution of issues concerning sectarian parades, which have in the past led to violent confrontations. “I want to express my particular hope that efforts to address the issue of parades will be met with generosity, sensitivity and a willingness to go beyond old ways of approaching each other on all sides,” said the cardinal.

His (Anglican) Church of Ireland counterpart, Archbishop Alan Harper, said, “I most warmly welcome the news that agreement has been reached on a way forward on the devolution of justice and policing powers to Northern Ireland, together with the other issues that have been taken into account in the recent protracted negotiations.”

For many summers, Protestant groups such as the Orange Order have marched through streets in Northern Ireland to commemorate the victory of King William III, a Protestant, over King James II, a Catholic, at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Many Catholics consider the parades to be offensive.

The largest political parties in the province of Northern Ireland—the Democratic Unionist Party that draws its support from the Protestant community and the mainly

Catholic-supported Sinn Fein party—had been locked in a months-long standoff over the issue of police powers and a process to bring them under local control. Until now, they have been under British control.

Under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, signed on Good Friday, April 10, 1998, responsibility for a wide range of government departments was transferred to a Northern Ireland executive and assembly. The first minister and deputy first minister must come from the two political traditions in Northern Ireland that have been bitterly opposed to one another—the mainly Catholic nationalist community and the predominantly Protestant community which has favored union with Britain.

The 1998 agreement provided for the devolution of authority over the policing and justice systems but specified that this would only take place “with the broad support of the political parties.”

The February 5 agreement will see authority over the Northern Ireland policing and justice systems devolved on April 12, more than 12 years after the original agreement was signed. A cross-community vote will take place March 9, requiring a majority of both nationalists and unionists to put the agreement into effect. -ENI