



NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

8 March 1999

MOWLAM SETS DATE FOR D'HONDT

The target we set ourselves of completing all the necessary legislative preparations for devolution by 10 March will be met.

This morning David Andrews, the Irish Foreign Minister, and I signed four Treaties to establish all the North/South and British-Irish bodies. Paul Murphy will take the legislation on the six North-South bodies in the Commons tonight and legislation will go into the Dail as soon as possible.

The Northern Ireland departments are now also ready to be restructured into the ten agreed departments.

All this has required an enormous amount of hard work - by the parties and both governments. And I want to put on record my thanks to the civil servants who have worked evenings and weekends to meet the target.

Over the past week I have been reviewing with all the parties progress towards March 10 and the running of D'Hondt.

I said I was ready to call a meeting of the Assembly on March 10 to implement D'Hondt but first I wanted to hear the views of the parties on what they thought was the most constructive way to implement the d'Hondt procedure.

I heard different views from different parties. Some wanted the running of d'Hondt to be delayed, others for it to go ahead immediately. But all the supporters of the Agreement remain committed to achieving full implementation of all its aspects as quickly as possible. All said they wanted to move forward on an inclusive basis.

I have decided that March 10 would not be the best time to run D'Hondt. I recognise that will disappoint some, for which I'm sorry. But we all want an effective Executive on which both communities will be represented. My consultations with the parties showed that would not be the result if D'Hondt were moved on Wednesday. Some parties feared it might even collapse the process.

However we can't keep putting this off. I shall call a meeting of the Assembly for the purposes of running the d'Hondt procedure no later than the week beginning the 29th March. That is the week of Good Friday.

This gives the parties the time and space to find a way forward. Many will be visiting the United States. There will be opportunities to build confidence and talk informally together ready for an intensive round of discussions when they return to Belfast.

D'Hondt is just a procedure - it can be run at any time but power can only be transferred and exercised with cross-community support.

Finding a constructive way to implement the d'Hondt procedure is difficult but it is a problem we all share. We've come so far because we've always moved forward together. With determination and courage we can take the next steps.

We shall be working closely with the Irish Government and all other supporters of the Agreement. We shall continue all our efforts to find a constructive way forward - as will, I am sure, the parties.