

8 January 2014 Statement by Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O'Sullivan

We note that all five parties participating in the Panel of Parties in the Northern Ireland Executive have put forward views on the draft agreement of 31 December, 2013. This draft was the product of their intense engagement with one another and with the two of us over the last six months on the issues within our remit, namely, parades, flags and emblems, and addressing the past. These terms of reference and this timetable, along with our mandate to preside at meetings and to facilitate agreement in our capacities as Chair and Vice Chair, were set by the office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and agreed to in advance by all the parties.

The agreement that resulted, if implemented, would make real progress toward contending with the legacy of Northern Ireland's past, a necessary precondition to reconciliation and realising the promise of a shared future. It would also devolve oversight of parades and other public assemblies to Northern Ireland and establish a process for addressing flags and the questions of identity with which they are so clearly associated.

We are pleased that some of the parties of the Executive have endorsed the agreement in its entirety and agreed to move forward on its implementation. We are disappointed that all five have not done so. Unquestionably, there are details that need further refinement, but these details should be honed in the necessary legislation and during implementation.

We understand that no party is fully comfortable with every element of the text as finalised on 31 December 2013. The draft reflects months of conversations with individuals and groups within Northern Ireland as well as the five parties. It reflects the often competing preferences of the five parties and what was required to bridge them. Our experience in Northern Ireland suggests that those who believe they can ensure that each and every element of the agreement is to their liking – and still secure five party consensus – are being unrealistic in the extreme. Politics inevitably requires that each party accept some elements it views as disagreeable in order to advance the greater good; indeed, it is only through compromise that the political parties will be able to collectively deliver the better future that the people of Northern Ireland demand and deserve. Leaders must be prepared to take and make precisely this case to their constituents and the broader public. We are confident that the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland understand this reality and, when they consider the whole text, agree that its acceptance would move society forward.

Despite our disappointment that the draft agreement did not meet with universal support, we endorse the establishment of a working group by the five parties of the Executive. We continue to believe that it is desirable for the parties to reach a comprehensive agreement covering all three issues; comprehensive agreement may also be necessary in order to accommodate tradeoffs and compromises. That said, it is ultimately up to the five parties to determine whether the ability to move ahead in any one area should be dependent upon consensus on the whole. We call on the parties to make clear to the people of Northern Ireland their timetable for completion of an agreement and urge them to move speedily toward its implementation.