



# First Minister's Platform in Belfast Telegraph



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Below is the text of a platform published from the First Minister in today's Belfast Telegraph.

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## Peter Robinson MLA

DUP Leader and First Minister of Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland is facing a moment of truth that will determine our direction for years to come. The assessment from the Chief Constable that members of the IRA have committed a murder and that structures of that organisation remain in existence cannot and will not be tolerated.

Seven years after the Independent Monitoring Commission report stated that the PIRA Army Council was "no longer operational or functional" we should not be debating its existence. Whilst some seek to make political gain from these murders they, like the republican leadership, are focusing more on their own interests than the good of Northern Ireland.

In 2015, there is no place for any paramilitary grouping in Northern Ireland. It is beyond the time that they got off our backs and let us move forward.

Last year I wrote an article for this newspaper asserting that the Assembly was no longer fit for purpose. This led to the initiation of a Talks process and consequently the Stormont House Agreement. The out-working of that agreement was the mechanism to improve the operation of Stormont. We sought to repair the system because people accepted it wasn't working as it should.

The Agreement covered welfare reform, the budget and corporation tax. It dealt with parades, flags and the past. In addition it set out changes in the way both the Assembly and Executive operates including arrangements for forming an Official Opposition. The Agreement was not our final destination but it was a significant milestone and would have heralded a considerable improvement in how politics operates in Northern Ireland.

However the SDLP and Sinn Fein reneged on the deal and thereby caused a major crisis. Having signed up to a series of changes, they backed out of the deal. So even before the present crisis caused by the murder of Kevin McGuigan we faced major problems that, without resolution, would have resulted in the collapse of the Assembly. The events of the last few weeks have multiplied both the gravity of the situation and the challenge to politicians.

We cannot have an acceptable level of criminality from those who are linked to a party in government in Northern Ireland. Now is a time for cool heads, clear thinking and a steely resolve to ensure that democracy and the rule of law triumph over terror and murder.

The decision of the Ulster Unionist Party to leave the Executive nine months before the next

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scheduled election is not one of principle but of political expediency.

One would have more respect for the decision if there were even a degree of honesty about the motivation behind it.



*Exiting the field of play is not a tactically clever first option. It can only ever be a last resort. Punishing your own community for the wrongs of others and rendering yourself irrelevant is hardly a brave, bold or sound strategy.*

Having fled dramatically, the Ulster Unionist Party has taken the pressure off Republicans. Now they have marginalised themselves what do they do for an encore?

Mike Nesbitt's assertion that his move was not designed to bring down the Assembly exposes his real intention. Let's be clear, if other unionists were to follow his so-called "principled" move, the fall of Stormont is exactly what would happen and terror would triumph.



*Whatever we do we must not allow republicans who precipitated the crisis, to end up benefitting from it. It should be republicans and not unionists who pay the price for the misbehaviour of the IRA.*

Playing party politics in these highly dangerous circumstances is irresponsible. Doing it in a ham-fisted manner is both irresponsible and illogical.

The combination of the non-implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and the impact of the role of paramilitaries cannot be sidestepped or ignored. We have made it clear there can be, and will be, no fudging of the fundamental basis upon which the Executive was established in 2007.

In the coming period it will not be business as usual at Stormont. The Secretary of State is aware of the fact that the challenges ahead are unlike anything we have faced since the return of devolution in May 2007. Clearly time and space are now required to address the issue of the existence of, and activity flowing from, terror structures and the non-implemented aspects of the Stormont House Agreement.

Much of the discourse of recent days has centred on the issue of whether the involvement of members from one part of the republican movement should have consequences for their representatives in the Assembly and Executive. While those of us in the political process will have our own suspicions and views we must ultimately make our judgement on an evidential basis and we look to the Chief Constable and the PSNI to provide the facts upon which we base our judgement.

I accept entirely the analysis of the Chief Constable that (a) members of the IRA were involved in the murder of Kevin McGuigan and that (b) some IRA structures remain in place over a decade after it was said that they had left the stage.

However, it is the Chief Constable's view that there is no evidence thus far that the murder of Kevin McGuigan was approved by the republican leadership. This, some believe, on the face of it, would indicate that no sanction should be applied to Sinn Fein as, they contend, it did not meet, in strictly legal terms, the exclusion requirements set down in the Act. Whatever anyone's view may be on this matter it is not the end of the matter as far as we are concerned. If we are to accept the Chief Constable's conclusion, a much more horrifying scenario appears to exist – the leadership of the republican movement cannot control the organisation they lead. They demonstrably are incapable of keeping those with whom they are associated in line. The picture painted by the PSNI shows that the IRA exists and elements are active. It demonstrates that its members can kill or engage in criminality or both and no discipline exists. The Sinn Fein leadership indulges in hand-wringing and lives in utter denial.

Whether approved or not, this kind of activity is unacceptable and inconsistent with membership of the Executive. In the coming days we will hold fast to the fundamental principle that those who

are in government in Northern Ireland cannot also be involved with those who engage in paramilitary and criminal activity.

If the present set of principles and the accompanying sanctions do not capture this kind of situation then change is needed. Dealing with these matters is a political imperative. Resolving them cannot be down to gestures and ambiguity. Mechanisms need to be in place, not alone to punish, but to discourage such behaviour in the future and remove it from our society.

Tomorrow I will meet with the Prime Minister to discuss how these issues can be resolved and to seek his assistance in doing so. We will also talk to other parties and will meet with the Government in the Republic.

This is not the time to flee the battlefield, it is the time to confront violent republicanism, to stand and fight for democratic principles and to do what is right for the law abiding citizens of Northern Ireland who want to see our country prosper and reach its full potential.

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### DUP Headquarters

91 Dundela Avenue  
Belfast  
BT4 3BU  
United Kingdom

T (028) 9047 1155  
F (028) 9052 1289  
E info@mydup.com

