

Irish cardinal praises new agreement on Northern Ireland

BELFAST, Northern Ireland - The head of the Irish bishops' conference welcomed an agreement that would give Northern Ireland control over its police and justice issues.

"Local politicians are best placed to deal effectively with the issues that most affect the day-to-day life of people in Northern Ireland, especially the need for a shared approach to policing, security and justice," said the conference president, Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland.

Under terms of the so-called Hillsborough Castle Agreement, announced Feb. 5, control over Northern Ireland's police and the province's justice policies should be devolved from the British Parliament in London to the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast by April 12. It will be the first time that policing has been under the control of a locally elected legislature since the British government imposed direct rule on Northern Ireland in 1973 because of the increasing conflict between unionists, who are predominantly Protestants and identify themselves as British, and nationalists, who are mainly Catholic and identify themselves as Irish.

Cardinal Brady prayed that people would reflect on the agreement and spoke of additional problems that need to be addressed in Northern Ireland.

"We need an urgent and united effort to stimulate economic recovery, to address social need, to ensure the best possible education provision for children and to build on the vast improvement in community relations which has taken place in recent years," he said in a statement issued Feb. 5. "We need to show to each other the spirit of neighborliness, welcome and generosity which others from outside so often see and celebrate in us. A local devolved executive (branch) working efficiently and in partnership for the good of everyone in our society remains the most effective way of achieving this."

Most people had hoped that policing and justice powers would have been devolved

to the Northern Ireland Assembly under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, but progress was delayed by arguments between the Democratic Unionist Party, the largest unionist party, and Sinn Féin, the largest nationalist party.

As part of the Good Friday Agreement, decisions on controversial sectarian parades was made the responsibility of an independent commission, which most notably has banned a parade by the Orange Order, a Protestant fraternity, through Drumcree, a Catholic district of Portadown, in County Armagh. The parades issue is not resolved in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, but the signatories agreed to work toward a fair solution.

Cardinal Brady said he hoped 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. Respectful dialogue and a willingness to treat each other with dignity and respect have been shown time and time again to be the most effective way of resolving the issues which challenge our society. This remains the only way forward and the most effective way of refuting those who would wish to bring us back to the futility of violence and division.”

The Hillsborough Castle Agreement must be approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is scheduled for a vote March 9 and is expected to pass.