

RELEASE IN PART
B5

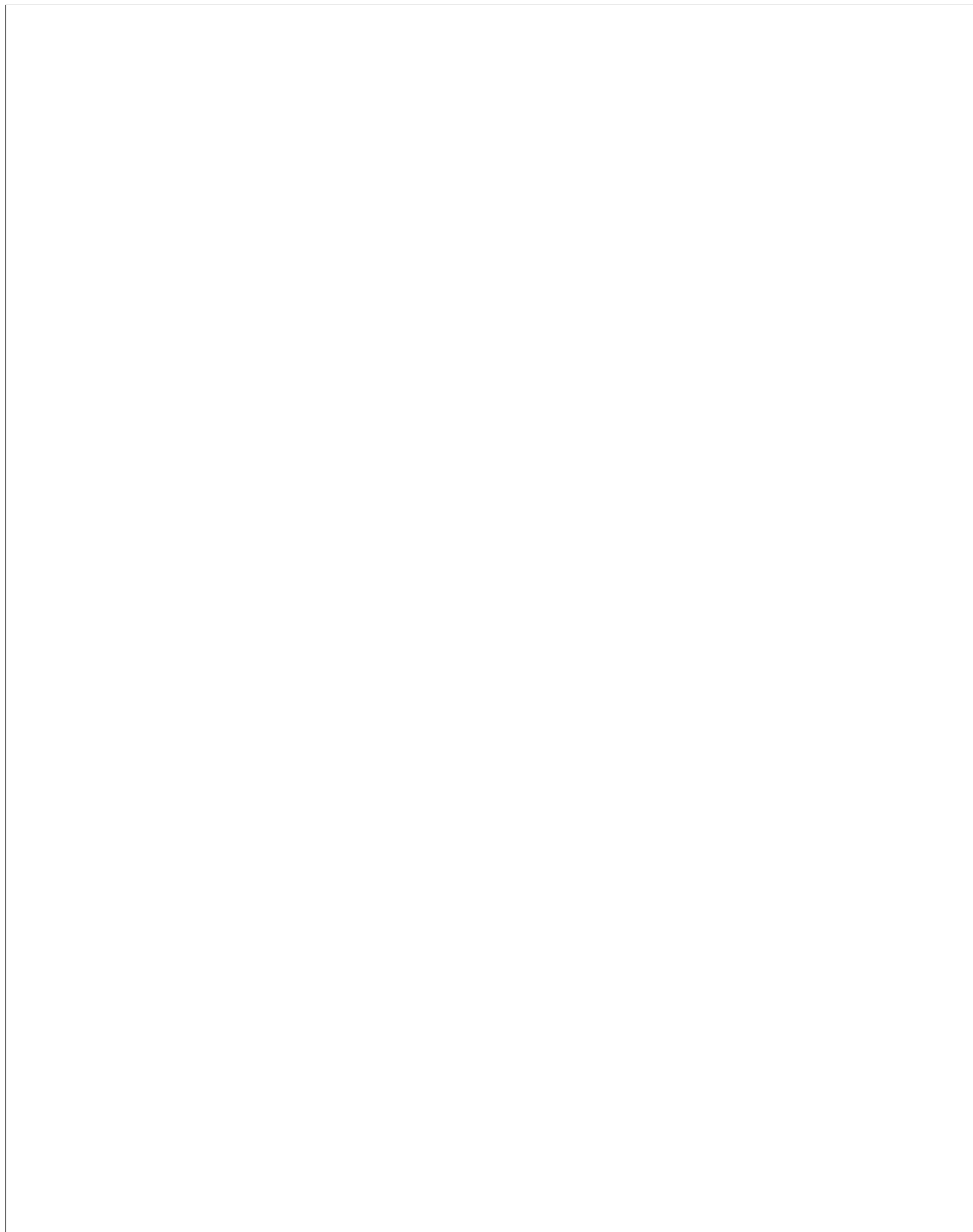
The Secretary's Call with Ulster Unionist Party Leader Sir Reg Empey

Background

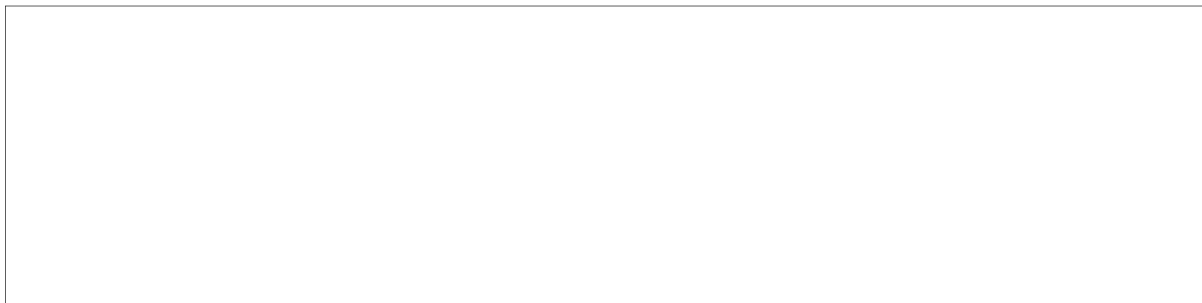
With the March 9 cross-community vote on devolution in the Northern Ireland Assembly looming, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader Sir Reg Empey and his party continue to withhold support for the Hillsborough Agreement. First Minister and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Peter Robinson has said that Empey's support is an essential component of "community confidence" in the deal, and that a "no" vote by the UUP on March 9 would prompt him to resign as First Minister, forcing Assembly elections to seek a unionist mandate for devolution of policing and justice. Such an outcome would effectively scuttle the Hillsborough Agreement and severely harm both local and international confidence in Northern Ireland's political institutions. There is also a strong possibility that Sinn Fein could become the largest party in the Assembly, which could cause a stalemate in establishing a new Executive after elections. (Under the St. Andrew's Agreement, the largest party holds the position of First Minister.) While electoral considerations factor significantly in UUP and DUP behavior at present, Empey's position is based on: 1) his anger at a lack of consultation by DUP and Sinn Fein during devolution negotiations; and 2) frustration with the dysfunctional workings of the Executive and the UUP's exclusion from decision-making. Empey is also looking to leverage the spoiler role, tacitly granted him by Robinson's position, to force the Executive to address the ongoing impasse on educational reform as a precondition of his support; an outcome that could benefit him electorally.

Since Hillsborough, Reg has received repeated calls from PMs Brown and Cowen, and Cameron and other senior Conservative Party officials. Empey has rebuffed them all and it appears their influence is limited. The Tories feel that Empey, who is increasingly isolated within the UUP, must be able to show his constituency that he has "gotten something" from the Hillsborough process, even if it is only a promise from the Executive to establish a framework to resolve the impasse on education. The Tories acknowledge that a commitment to future talks on education may not be enough for Empey, given his electoral concerns. Empey's focus on getting a concession on education puts disproportionate pressure on education ministerial portfolio-holder Sinn Fein. As a result, should the March 9 vote fail, unionists will undoubtedly seek to shift blame to Sinn Fein for their inability to compromise on education. Sinn Fein and the DUP have met with Empey numerous times in recent days to discuss ways forward, although no agreement has yet been reached. A senior DUP official has indicated that Empey's requests so far are not feasible.

Points



B5



B5