

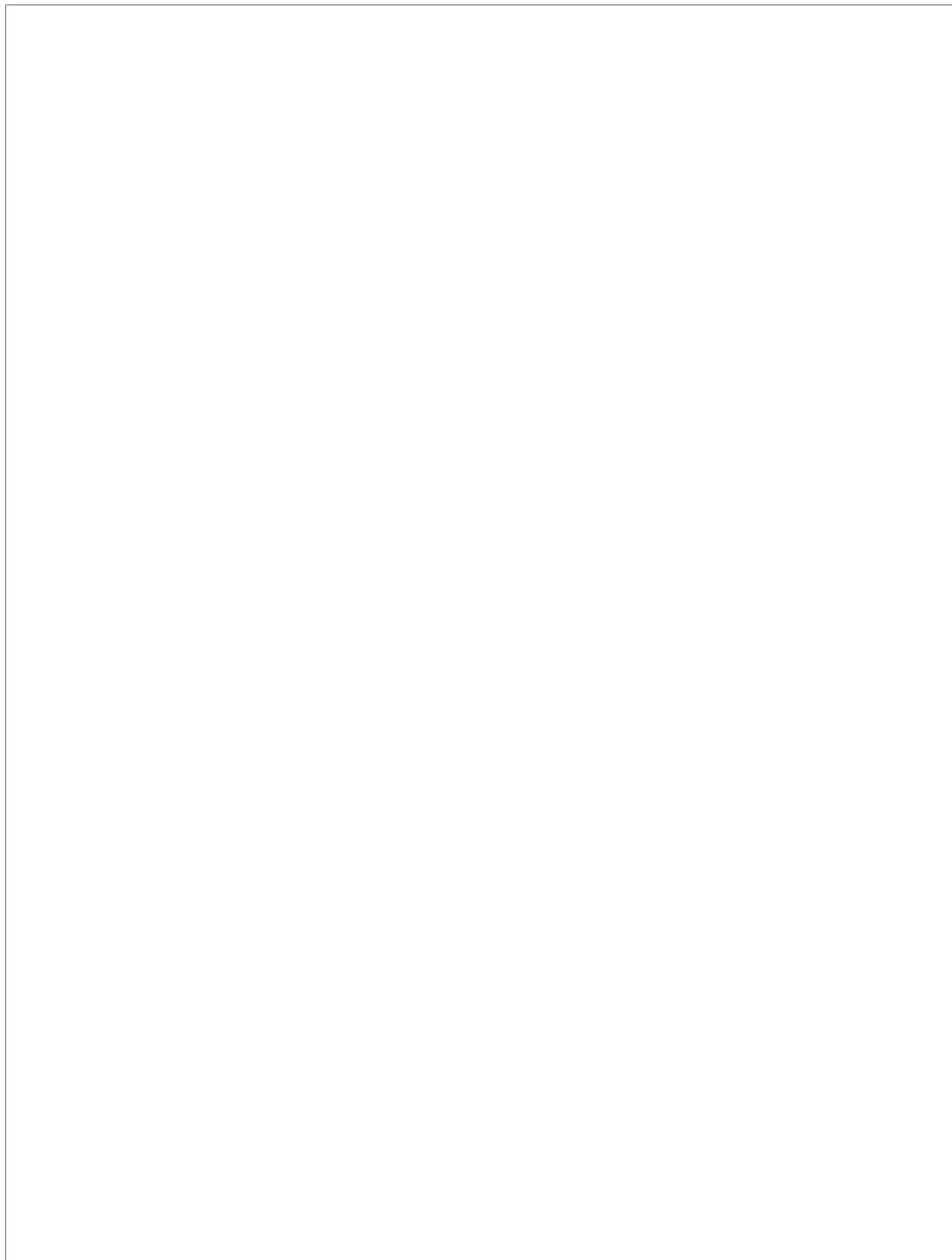
The Secretary's Call with Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness

Background

Although Sinn Fein threats of bringing down the government helped precipitate the crisis that led to the Hillsborough agreement, the party now finds itself seeking to offset an electorally-fueled battle between the DUP and UUP that threatens to do the same. UUP leader Sir Reg Empey is threatening to withhold his support for the Hillsborough Agreement vote in the assembly on March 9, citing complaints about the functioning of the Executive and demanding movement on educational reform. Sinn Fein and the DUP are currently mulling his demands, and Sinn Fein might be willing to offer talks on the post-primary education sector (as it did two years ago, according to McGuinness) as a face-saving measure for Empey. This may be too little for Empey. Even though a UUP "yes" is not required for the cross-community vote to pass, First Minister 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, force new elections to seek a unionist mandate for devolution. Such an outcome would effectively scuttle the Hillsborough Agreement and severely harm both local and international confidence in Northern Ireland's political institutions. Robinson feels strongly that the DUP would "hammer" the UUP in an Assembly election, while we understand that the UUP has done polling which would indicate significant gains for them against a scandal-ridden and weakened DUP. McGuinness feels both parties are badly miscalculating.

Sinn Fein and the DUP have met with Empey repeatedly in recent days to discuss ways forward, although no agreement has yet been reached. McGuinness has told us that regardless of Empey's behavior, Robinson still holds the key to the March 9 outcome and should come under the most pressure to allow the vote to go to the floor, with or without UUP concurrence. Having all parties except the UUP vote in favor of devolution will leave Empey and the UUP isolated, and Sinn Fein is trying to convince its DUP partner in government of such.

Points



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