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George Bush to David Cameron: don't derail Northern Ireland peace process

Exclusive: Former president urges Cameron to rein in Unionist partners

- [Nicholas Watt](#)
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Monday 8 March 2010 21.20 GMT
- [Article history](#)

Former US president George Bush has called David Cameron over his concerns for the Northern Ireland peace process. Photograph: Andrew Parsons/PA

The former US president [George Bush](#) has made a direct plea to [David Cameron](#) to support the [Northern Ireland](#) peace process, amid widespread concern in the US about the Tories' new electoral pact with the Ulster Unionists.

In his most active intervention since leaving the White House, Bush took the rare step of calling the Conservative leader to ask him to use his influence to press his unionist partners to endorse the final stages of the 15-year search for a settlement.

Bush, who took a close interest in the peace process during his years in the White House, telephoned Cameron last Friday to ask him to plead with the UUP leader, Sir Reg Empey, to endorse the deal in a vote tomorrow in the Northern Ireland assembly.

Democrats and Republicans fear that the peace process could be undermined if the Ulster Unionist party, formerly Northern Ireland's largest party, which governed the province until direct rule was imposed in 1972, votes against the devolution of policing and criminal justice powers to Belfast.

While the UUP does not have enough votes to scupper the deal, the White House fears a no vote from the UUP could undermine support for the settlement within the Democratic Unionist party and among the wider unionist community. Cameron has faced intense pressure in recent months over his decision to form an electoral pact with the UUP, which could provide him with crucial support if the general election leads to a hung parliament. The pact has prompted fears in Washington that Cameron may abandon the even-handed approach to Northern Ireland adopted by John Major in the early years of the peace process.

The Guardian understands that the White House is so concerned that the US economic envoy to Northern Ireland, Declan Kelly, persuaded Bush to intervene. The former president telephoned Cameron to ask him to use his influence to persuade Empey to vote for the deal.

"There was a feeling that a conservative to conservative conversation was the right way to go about this," said one source familiar with the transatlantic negotiations. "This conversation was borne out of the concern that Empey is holding out." Another source familiar with the contact said: "This is the most active thing George W Bush has done in his post-presidency period. He has been incredibly restrained and diplomatic since leaving the White House. He has maintained radio silence."

One source familiar with thinking on Northern Ireland on both sides of the Atlantic added: "The fact that George W Bush has decided to intervene is really significant. He was interested in the peace process as president and appointed an envoy. It is a general sign of how concerned people are in the US about what David Cameron is up to."

A Tory source said: "George Bush did have a conversation with David Cameron. It was a positive conversation. David underlined his commitment to the agreement and said we are doing all we can to support it. But he said that we cannot force Sir Reg to vote for it. George Bush thanked David and said, 'I can see you are engaged.'"

The disclosure of Bush's intervention came as Empey met the executive of his party tonight to decide whether to endorse the deal brokered last month at Hillsborough Castle between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionists that would see policing and criminal justice powers devolved to Belfast next month.

The UUP leader, who is minister for employment and learning in the four-party power sharing executive, believes it is foolish to devolve the final set of powers while the coalition is struggling to function. In a sign of Empey's unease about endorsing the deal, a meeting between the UUP and the Sinn Féin deputy first minister, Martin McGuinness, broke up after just three minutes tonight.

The White House and political leaders across the spectrum in the US have been watching developments with care. Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, today pleaded with Empey in a 15-minute telephone call to support the deal.

A group of US Congress members wrote to Cameron last month to issue a stark warning that dissident terrorists will be "emboldened" to intensify their attacks if he fails to persuade the Tories' partners to endorse the final stage of the peace process.