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From: sbwhoeop [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, March 9, 2010 11:03 PM
To: H
Subject: H: You are at top of NI story. Sid

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Stormont votes to take over Northern Ireland policing powers

- Power-sharing finalised as assembly agrees to first justice minister since Troubles
- Ulster Unionists oppose measure but Hillary Clinton welcomes assembly's yes vote

A 15-year search for a political settlement in Northern Ireland cleared its final hurdle today when unionists and nationalists voted to transfer policing and criminal justice powers to Belfast, creating the province's first justice minister since the Troubles erupted four decades ago.

Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party (DUP), who were barely on speaking terms a few years ago, joined forces with the nationalist SDLP in the Northern Ireland assembly to endorse a deal on policing, hammered out last month.

The justice minister will be appointed on 12 April and is likely to be David Ford, the leader of the centrist Alliance party.

The breakthrough was marred by a row when the Ulster Unionist party (UUP), which governed Northern Ireland for five decades until the imposition of direct rule in 1972, voted against the deal.

Sir Reg Empey, the UUP leader, who recently formed an electoral pact with the Conservatives, said he had voted no because his party did not believe that the four-party power-sharing executive was functioning properly. Empey, the minister for employment and learning, said: "We exercise our rights, refusing to bow to the blackmail and bullying to which we have been subjected in recent weeks."

The UUP hit out after facing intense pressure from London and the US to fall in behind David Cameron, who has backed devolution of the criminal justice system. Gordon Brown phoned Empey shortly before today's vote, while former US president George Bush pleaded with Cameron last week to persuade the UUP to support the deal.

Empey's unionist rivals, the DUP, who have overtaken the UUP in recent years, focused on what could happen after the vote. The DUP leader, Peter Robinson, who managed to persuade all but one of his 36 assembly members to back the devolution deal, said: "The move is about completing and maintaining devolution, it is about whether we move forward together as a society."

The vote secures an extra £800m for policing and justice that Brown promised the assembly if they backed the transfer. It also adds an extra 1,200 police officers. The prime minister praised the main parties for reaching the deal on an issue that almost broke the power-sharing government.

He said: "Today the politics of progress have finally replaced the politics of division in Northern Ireland. The completion of devolution, supported by all sections of the community in Northern Ireland, is the final end to decades of strife. It sends the most powerful message to those who would return to violence: that democracy and tolerance will prevail. The courage and leadership of the parties who voted to complete devolution at Stormont will be noted around the world."

The vote was also praised tonight by Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state. She said: "I commend the Northern Ireland Assembly for its affirmation of the Hillsborough Agreement and its endorsement of the devolution of policing and justice, an important step in ensuring a peaceful and prosperous future for all of the people of Northern Ireland for generations to come."

Irish president Mary McAleese also hailed the move. "Today's vote in the Northern Ireland assembly represents an eloquent statement of confidence in the political institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement," she said. Matt Baggott, chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, welcomed the vote as a step forward. "Devolution will strengthen our service. It will help to ensure communities receive the policing service that not only they deserve, but that we are committed to delivering.

"The financial package is also welcomed ... it will help us deal with those who are living in the darkness of the past and who have tried to disrupt this process and the lives of our community."

But there was discord inside Stormont after the UUP and their 17-strong assembly team voted against the move.

Martin McGuinness, Sinn Féin's deputy first minister, denounced the UUP stance, claiming they were doing it to embarrass the DUP. "The UUP declared last night [Monday] that they will not support this resolution," McGuinness told the assembly. "That saddens and disappoints me. They are opposed in my view to the transfer for cynical party political reasons." He stressed that no single party could control the justice department.

The UUP no-vote will put pressure on the Tories, who will campaign with their allies in the general election, having taken opposing sides on the biggest vote since the DUP and Sinn Féin started sharing power in 2007.

Cameron insisted that the Tories had played a constructive role, saying he would maintain his alliance with the UUP. "We want to move Northern Ireland politics forward – to focus on the issues that affect people in their everyday lives – rather than remaining stuck in the past. That is why we remain totally committed to bringing national, mainstream UK politics to Northern Ireland and to ending its semi-detached political status."

Cameron's remarks were designed, in part, to reassure the White House, which fears a UUP no-vote could harden unionist opinion against power-sharing.

Hardline Unionists turned on the DUP tonight. Jim Allister, the former DUP MEP, who now leads the breakaway Traditional Unionist Voice, claimed his former party had "rolled over in triple somersaults for Sinn Féin". He also suggested the new justice minister would be a "pointless puppet keeping the seat warm for Sinn Féin". Prior to the vote the widow of the first Police Service of Northern Ireland officer to be murdered by dissident republicans urged all parties to back the devolution of policing and justice powers. Kate Carroll, whose husband, Stephen, was killed by a Continuity IRA sniper, said in an appeal to the UUP: "It is heartbreaking that I have to get on this morning to please ask the politicians to get on with their job."