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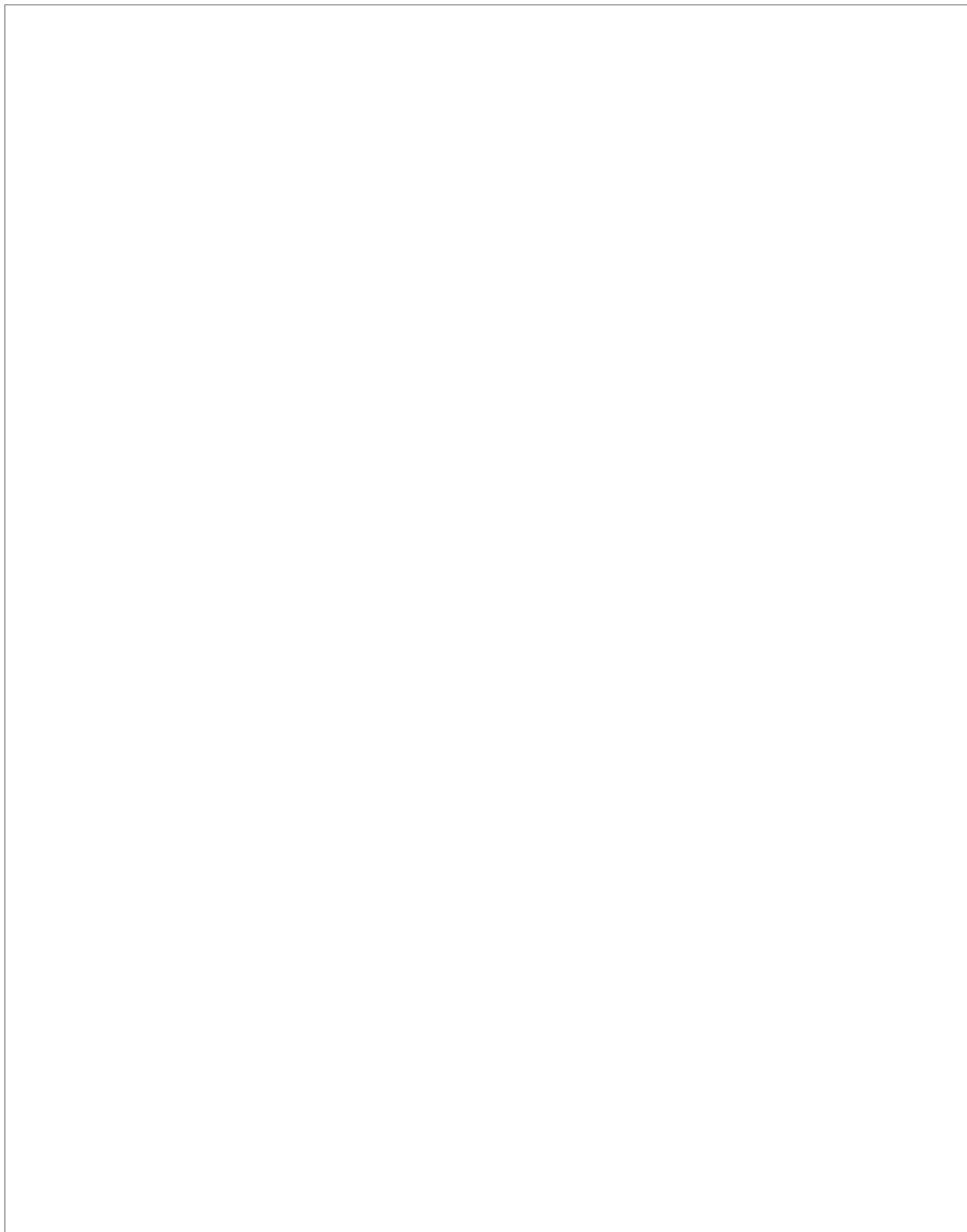
The Secretary's Call with Democratic Unionist Party Leader Peter Robinson

Background

DUP Leader Peter Robinson is threatening to resign as First Minister and thereby force elections if the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) does not vote in favor of devolution on March 9. UUP leader Sir Reg Empey continues to withhold his support for the Hillsborough Agreement, citing complaints about the functioning of the Executive and demanding movement on educational reform; an outcome that would benefit him electorally. Even though a UUP "yes" is not required for the vote to pass, 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. Sinn Fein feels both parties are miscalculating.

Empey's focus on getting some concession on education to "save" the Hillsborough Agreement focuses pressure on education ministerial portfolio-holder Sinn Fein; Robinson and the DUP have refused to discuss the impasse on education. However, should Robinson resign forcing early Assembly elections, both the DUP and UUP will undoubtedly seek to shift blame to Sinn Fein for their inability to compromise on this issue. 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. Regardless of Empey's behavior, Robinson, who is still exhibiting signs of weak leadership within his party, still holds the key to the March 9 outcome.

Points



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