

## INTRODUCTION

1. The election on 2 March 2017 was a momentous one for the Northern Ireland Assembly, returning the DUP and Sinn Féin as the two largest parties with 28 and 27 MLAs respectively.
2. Attention will now turn to getting the institutions up and running, with an intense period of negotiations set to decide the fate of Stormont.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

3. The new Assembly must sit within **8 working days** of polling day (2 March). After this sitting, a First Minister and deputy First Minister must be nominated within **two weeks**.
4. Under the rules of power-sharing, the right to nominate the First and deputy First Minister falls to the DUP and Sinn Féin respectively – since they are the largest parties within the largest community designations in the Assembly (unionist and nationalist).
5. While this process was a mere formality after the Assembly election in May 2016, a number of barriers stand in the way this time.
6. Sinn Féin contested the election on the basis that there would be no return to the “status quo” at Stormont; indicating that progress must be made on same-sex marriage, the Irish language and legacy issues before it will agree to join the DUP in the Executive.
7. Perhaps even more importantly, Sinn Féin has made clear that it will not accept the nomination of Arlene Foster as First Minister while the investigation into the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme is ongoing. As the party's Upper Bann MLA John O'Dowd [said on 5 March](#): “If the DUP decides, after the implementation talks that are going to take place over the next number of weeks, that they are going to nominate Arlene Foster as joint first minister, Sinn Féin will not support that nomination.”
8. Finally, Sinn Féin has also indicated that special EU status for Northern Ireland will be part of its negotiation platform. As Michelle O'Neill [stated on 4 March](#): “We will continue to... campaign for designated special status for the north in the EU. Sinn Féin is ready to enter negotiations on those principles.”

## POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

9. The fact that the DUP ardently oppose same-sex marriage, disagree with the need for Irish language legislation, and campaigned for Brexit in last year's referendum, makes the prospect of agreement during the two-week timeframe look incredibly unlikely. Accepting Sinn Féin's demand to step aside from the First Minister's role will also be a tough pill for Arlene Foster to swallow.
10. If a First and deputy First Minister aren't nominated before the two-week deadline, however, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Brokenshire, is legally required to call another Assembly election.
11. It is unlikely that Mr. Brokenshire will take this course of action, given that another election would cost money and probably end with the same results as the last one.
12. Instead, the Secretary of State may opt to suspend the Stormont institution to allow for further negotiations to take place. This would require legislation at Westminster.
13. Ultimately, however, if the DUP and Sinn Féin cannot agree to form an Executive, we face the prospect of a prolonged period of Direct Rule, where British Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office will be responsible for the day-to-day governing of Northern Ireland.