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Politics**Boost for Maze sports stadium plan****Henry McDonald, Ireland editor****Sunday April 15, 2007**[The Observer](#)

Controversial plans to build a huge sports stadium on the site of the Maze prison will take a step forward tomorrow when one of the project's biggest champions becomes Northern Ireland's sports minister.

Edwin Poots has been one of the most vocal advocates for the construction of a 40,000 all-seater national stadium at the site outside Lisburn. 'Edwin's appointment is a powerful message in favour of the Maze as the new national stadium,' a senior DUP source told The Observer

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'The Northern Ireland Executive will have a clear majority in favour of the Maze project.'

The project is scheduled to be the home of Gaelic sports as well as soccer and rugby. According to the Northern Ireland Select Committee at Westminster, the British government will have to spend £400m on the scheme to convert the former top-security jail into a stadium.

But there is strong opposition to the plan based on political and logistical grounds. Many opponents regard the Maze as too politically sensitive. There are also arguments that the prison site is in the middle of nowhere, with no rail link and close to a gridlocked motorway.

Opponents of the Maze project predicted Poots's appointment would produce splits within the DUP. Belfast's current Lord Mayor, Pat McCarthy, called on all MLAs who represent the city at Stormont, including DUP members, to rebel against moves to convert the Maze.

'The MLAs for Belfast of all parties must demand a debate on the stadium once the Executive is formed next month,' McCarthy said. 'Even the British government's own report recommended siting the stadium in a city, and



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that, of course, means Belfast. If [the DUP] go ahead with the Maze as Mr Poots wants them to, then it's another example of the dirty deals being down between Paisley's party and Sinn Fein,' he said.

Ian Paisley's DUP is entitled to control four ministries following the results of March's Assembly elections. DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson is expected to take over the Department of Finance; his fellow MP, Nigel Dodds, would become enterprise minister and Arlene Foster, the environment minister.

The three Sinn Fein ministers are also likely to vote in favour of the Maze project. If the project were to go ahead Sinn Fein will be given a memorial on the grounds in memory of Bobby Sands and the other nine hunger strikers who died at the Maze.

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