

# Delivering good government in Northern Ireland

## *Summary of a private roundtable*

### Introduction

This roundtable, co-hosted by the Mitchell Institute at Queen's University Belfast, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and the Institute for Government, brought together key experts from the media, the third sector, business, academia and the civil service to discuss how we can achieve better government for the people of Northern Ireland. The discussion will inform the work of the Institute for Government / Bennett Review of the UK Constitution, which is exploring ideas about how to address issues of governance and constitutional reform in all parts of the UK.

### Background

Northern Ireland faces many questions about its constitutional future, but just as important and even more pressing are the questions about the functioning of the constitution in Northern Ireland at present.

Constitutions serve many purposes, but an essential element is to enable good government, allowing the state to deliver on behalf of its citizens. Northern Ireland has unique arrangements that are necessary to make government possible, but they can also make governing difficult. It faces a range of complex policy challenges that successive executives have struggled to address, and the fragility of the political system has meant that it has repeatedly been left without a fully functioning executive to seek to tackle them at all.

As political attention has been increasingly consumed by Brexit, the Northern Ireland Protocol and the challenges facing the devolved institutions, other key issues – such as how Northern Ireland is represented at the centre of UK government, and how well its distinctive needs and economy are understood in Whitehall – have fallen to the wayside.

This discussion sought to focus on these and other questions of governance and public policy. The following three questions were discussed:

- How can the barriers to addressing the problems in Northern Ireland's health services be overcome?
- What conditions are necessary to ensure the stability of the executive?
- What reforms are necessary to ensure good government in Northern Ireland?

## What are the challenges of government in Northern Ireland?

### *The executive in Northern Ireland lacks stability*

Many of the challenges facing Northern Ireland are the same as they were 25 years ago. People need certainty and stability, and while these goals have been delivered in terms of ending violence, they have not for politics or policy. There has been very little political stability, and the power-sharing executive has frequently collapsed.

For 40% of the time since devolution, there has been no functioning government in Northern Ireland. There has been a lot of time lost and, as a result, a failure to make progress on resolving Northern Ireland's long-term challenges. Solving the immediate issues that the people of Northern Ireland face – for example, the cost-of-living crisis – is much more difficult without an executive.

### *When there is government, there is a reliance on good relationships*

Good governance in Northern Ireland is possible under the current system but is reliant on good leadership of the parties, a willingness to co-operate and mutual trust. Examples of this include under Peter Robinson as first minister and Martin McGuinness as deputy first minister, as well as in the six months immediately after the Brexit referendum.

When good leadership leads to projects in Northern Ireland being done well, it breeds confidence in the system and further good governance. The current three-year absence of government has undermined this but remains a potential avenue for change.

## What are the causes of these challenges?

In many areas, Northern Ireland faces many of the same governance challenges as other parts of the UK, including a failure of ministers to engage in long-term planning, prioritise, or take strategic or difficult decisions around public service reform, for example closing local services. But there are a number of factors specific to Northern Ireland that also present barriers to good government.

### *Northern Ireland's political history*

Questions of the union and unification hang over politics in Northern Ireland, leading to continued debate and uncertainty over its political future, which can prevent a focus on the immediate governance challenges. The executive also has to manage divisive legacy issues, which can create tensions between political parties.

Many of the problems of governance in Northern Ireland are a product of the ways that the Good Friday Agreement functions, and the structures of government it produced. Politics remains divided across community lines, and the Good Friday Agreement has paradoxically embedded those divisions at the cost of ending violence.

### *Institutional structures produced by the Good Friday Agreement*

Northern Ireland has a mandatory coalition, which requires political parties from both communities to be in government together. Not only does this make it vulnerable to frequent collapse, but it also presents a number of governance challenges. Good government requires the political parties to co-operate, but simultaneously parties need to differentiate themselves, which means they are also in competition with each other. Ministers need to secure

agreement from other political parties in the executive to implement their policies, which can hamper progress, particularly in health where the minister is often from one of the smaller parties. Political parties in government also want to play an opposition role, criticising decisions that other ministers make for electoral gain.

Some participants also argued that the electoral system encouraged localism, which meant that members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) were often focused on defending their local areas rather than making the right decisions for Northern Ireland as a whole.

### ***The structure of the Northern Ireland Civil Service***

Unlike other parts of the UK, in Northern Ireland, the different government departments are defined by law. This means that departments across the Northern Ireland Civil Service tend to work as silos, so it is hard to have a joined-up approach to policy issues that would benefit from multiple departments working together, such as tackling health inequality or net zero. The fact that ministers come from different parties and are often not inclined to co-operate only solidifies these barriers further.

### ***Disruption from the UK government***

Since devolution, Northern Ireland has felt more isolated from Westminster. There has been an asymmetry of engagement between Stormont and Westminster. Politicians in Northern Ireland are aware of and engaged with what happens in Westminster, whereas there was a sentiment at the roundtable that the UK government only really engages during crises. The panel expressed concerns that the UK government does not fully consider Northern Ireland when making decisions.

The process of exiting the EU has changed the UK government's approach to devolution. The UK government has focused more on Northern Ireland in relation to the process of exiting the EU, than issues of governance. The Northern Ireland Protocol and Retained EU Law bills put Stormont in a difficult position, creating potential divergence from Great Britain, and have also exacerbated political issues – contributing to political instability.

## **What are possible solutions to these issues?**

### ***Greater learning from other governments***

The UK is currently a petri-dish of different government models, but Northern Ireland politicians or civil servants do not make enough effort to learn from others. Links with the other devolved administrations could be strengthened, and relationships at lower levels of government would be helpful.

Participants suggested that Northern Ireland could learn from the Scottish government's unitary governance structures, where officials are organised into directorates rather than separate departments as a way to prevent silos. Others also suggested that Scotland's wellbeing approach, which has already inspired a change in approach to the programme for government, could help address cross-cutting social policy issues.

Lessons can also be learned from co-ordination at a service level. Participants noted that co-ordination at the operational level between hospitals across the UK has worked well, but those relationships could be strengthened. Similarly, building relationships between officials in the UK and devolved governments working on the same policy area could also improve collaboration and information sharing.

Government at the local level in Northern Ireland can also be instructive. Participants noted that despite several periods of executive collapse, local government had continued to function throughout this period despite facing similar challenges of cross-party working. Stormont could benefit from looking at the successes of local government.

### ***A more active approach from the UK government***

Northern Ireland cannot afford another three years of no government. Parties in Northern Ireland and the UK government should think carefully about the implications of this vacuum. Some participants suggested that the UK government might need to take a more active approach to devolved issues in Northern Ireland to prevent crises in the health service and those related to the cost-of-living crisis while negotiations progress at Stormont.

The UK government also needs to resolve issues around Brexit to help Northern Ireland deliver good government. In particular, attendees identified the Northern Ireland Protocol and Retained EU Law bills as bills that would cause problems for Northern Ireland.

### ***Reform of domestic institutions***

The problems of governance in Northern Ireland are not new. There are no clear black-and-white answers on solutions, but there was consensus among the panel that the current situation was failing to deliver. Some participants suggested that incremental reforms, for example changes to the committee system, could improve governance. Others argued that more fundamental reform of the power-sharing arrangements might be needed.

All participants acknowledged the challenges of reaching an agreement among political parties on reforms. As vetoes for political parties or communities have been built into the system, it can mean good ideas for reform cannot be implemented without political consensus, which is very difficult to achieve.

But participants also noted that, in the past, changes in Northern Ireland governance have been forced by the previous situation becoming untenable. The current situation may present a critical juncture, and ongoing negotiations may present an opportunity to make changes to the current system, which is failing to deliver good governance.

Devolution remains broadly popular in Northern Ireland and has helped the public become more connected to those who govern them. There is potential for more engagement with the public, as a route to better governance.



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