

# Review And Reform



Progressive Unionist Party

Submission

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# Review – Reform – Recommendations

## Review

Working class communities are struggling to find any semblance of the much-vaunted peace dividend. High unemployment, social exclusion, poor housing and high levels of deprivation underpinned by an education system which has consistently failed working class young people and serves only to condemn future generations to the same spiral of underachieved need.

Mandatory coalition has heightened sectarianism, fear and division. Executive Authority has diluted democracy and instead delivered an aristocratic form of governance that has exacerbated unmet need. The institutions envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement were a compromise, agreed at a time when an honourable outcome and stability were desperately needed.

However, those structures were not designed to last forever. They were specific to their context and, just like the devolution of justice or an extension of fiscal responsibility, the institutions grow and change as the political landscape does. We do not underestimate the monumental task of putting government back together and restoring confidence in the institutions however we believe a discussion on developing new and robust structures in line with the tenants of the Good Friday Agreement would be helpful at this time.

## Reform

We've heard the calls for the implementation of direct rule, founding of joint authority and the formation of a voluntary coalition. There appears to be little consensus on the future governance of Northern Ireland. There does, however, appear to be a growing appetite for alternative governance arrangements. With that in mind we'd like to put forward a workable alternative that could, with consideration and further discussion, perhaps build a home in which we all could live with structures we can all live with. And that is to adopt the Council-Management form of governance - ending mandatory coalition and executive authority replacing it with a system of governance that embodies the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement - sharing power - sharing responsibility. Replicating the style of Government that our parties already participate in and have been successfully operating for decades in Councils across the province. A tried and tested model that, despite occasional controversies and disputes, has weathered political storms with an integrity and strength not associated with our Assembly. Combining the strong political leadership of elected officials in the form of a governing and legislative body, with the strong managerial experience of an employed Director, per department, has allowed Councils and its members to diligently fulfil their role without threat of collapse or accusations of financial mismanagement. Of course we are not suggesting the Northern Ireland Assembly become a glorified council but that we could adopt the very best elements of the local government system in order to create a new regionally devolved legislature with the necessary public administrative powers, processes and structures befitting of a 21st century pluralist democracy. In doing so we can introduce the mechanisms for accountability, rejuvenate and copper-fasten the concept of sharing responsibility envisaged in 1998 and can improve public confidence in the devolved institutions of Northern Ireland at a fraction of the cost.

## Recommendations

- Permanent Secretaries assume responsibility for their departments.
- Members elected to the Legislative Assembly, equal in status, share in the power and responsibility of overseeing, developing and progressing the work of the departments through their respective committees.
- Positions of responsibilities to include: largely honorary and ceremonial roles of President and Deputy of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The responsibilities and authority of these roles would not be dissimilar to that of a City or Town Mayor and Deputy, including presiding over Assembly meetings. A chair and deputy chairperson for each of the assembly committees.
- Positions of responsibility filled via the St Lague formula annually.
- Mitigation against an outright majority rule, alleviating members fears, with mechanisms such as a simple and qualified majority rule, already practiced in local government subject to an equality impact assessment and a 'Call In' process not dissimilar to that already practiced in councils across the province.

## Conclusion

The Progressive Unionist Party has an unshakable belief in a shared, stable and successful Northern Ireland synonymous with the progress of the United Kingdom. We believe there are alternatives, workable alternatives and that Northern Ireland can move beyond start-stop-politics. With speculation that the agreement is dead in the water, perhaps now there is opportunity for the Northern Ireland Secretary of State to uphold its content and exercise the review detailed under strand one section thirty-six. It reads "After a specified period there will be a review of these arrangements, including the details of electoral arrangements and of the Assembly's procedures, with a view to agreeing any adjustments necessary in the interests of efficiency and fairness." The 16th of January 2017 marked the fifth suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly since its inception merely twenty years ago. Attempts to secure its operation on a permanent basis have been exhausted and frustrated by disagreements. The time is now right to review and reform the structures underpinned by a resurgence of the spirit with which it was intended.