



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Act 1998: Review of Parts
III and IV

11 September 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Gregory Campbell
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr John McCallister
Mr Raymond McCartney
Mr Conall McDevitt
Ms Caitríona Ruane

The Chairperson: Members, I note from the research paper that the Cabinet Secretary is responsible for advising the Prime Minister on Westminster machinery of government changes. I propose that, on that basis, the Committee ask a senior official from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to come before it to advise on what factors or principles should be taken into account when considering its review of the Northern Ireland government structures. Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mr Campbell: It should be interesting.

The Chairperson: I now draw members' attention to two further papers for their consideration. They relate to written evidence received on part two of the Committee's review. A newly created document, 'Summary Analysis of Political Parties of the Assembly's Proposals on Reduction of NI Government Departments.'

Mr Hamilton: Snappy title.

The Chairperson: It is. This document reflects, in summary, individual party views on how Departments could be organised and structured. The summary is presented alongside the current Department structures.

Mr Campbell: I just want to say that it is a good summary.

Mr Hamilton: Yes, it is very good.

Mr Campbell: Certainly, someone has done his or her homework. Have any parties or individuals said that they will come back to the Committee as they have not yet fully formulated their response, or is this the final package?

The Committee Clerk: That is the package. Indeed, the next document is a table with the wording of the parties' responses and those of some other stakeholders who responded. It refers to the detailed submission, and the red text captures all that. That is as far as we can take it from the evidence provided.

The Chairperson: The final document, members, is the 18 July statement from OFMDFM on, among other subjects, the structures of government. Members will, or may have, comments on these two summary documents or on the OFMDFM statement in the context of the Committee's reaching a common position on the reduction, and future structure, of Northern Ireland Departments. I, therefore, propose to ask, in alphabetical order, starting with the Alliance Party, a member from each of the parties represented on the Committee to speak on his party's position on how the Committee might reach a common position and what that might be.

Mr Dickson: Our preference is clearly set out in the document, where it has been neatly summarised. I will not bore you all by taking you through why we believe that there is a need to reduce the number of Departments from 12 to eight. We have given a strong indication of what we envisage the functions of those eight Departments being and how they would operate. That said, the Alliance Party is open to discussion about the precise split and is flexible about that discussion, although we think that ours are reasonable proposals on the basis of an assumption that there will be eight Departments.

Our only caveat is that if the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) went to OFMDFM, the urban and social development Department could be split, possibly into something like infrastructure and social development, which would create eight. One consideration that, perhaps, we and others have not taken account of is those functions that would transfer from Departments to local government, which we need to factor into the discussion. Essentially, however, our position is clearly laid out.

Mr Hamilton: Like Stewart, I do not think that we need to go too far beyond what is in the table. I think that Gregory and Stewart would agree that it is a very useful table in that it draws out where there is commonality among parties. It is good to see that the majority of those who provided a response have quite specific ideas. It is by no means a finished work right across the board, but there are many areas of commonality, which gives us a good starting point for the review. Our party position has been fairly consistent in that we believe that there are too many Departments. We believe that between six and eight Departments would be better than the present number. It is worth stressing that fewer Departments would mean more than cost savings. In the longer term, there would undoubtedly be cost savings, but, increasingly, both in our constituency work and here at Stormont, we see a lack of departmental joined-upness over the big issues. Flooding, for instance, is a big issue in Conall's constituency, as it is in other constituencies. That disjoint among Departments is highlighted in such situations. Fewer Departments is as much about the effectiveness of government as it is about efficiency.

Mr McDevitt: I join colleagues in thanking both the Research and Information Service and the Committee staff for their excellent papers; they are really helpful.

At the outset, I want to make an observation. Events over the summer at Westminster have an impact on this debate. The prospect of a reduction in the number of constituencies is now gone, which begs the question whether there will be a reduction in the size of the Assembly. That is worth noting, given that it is our first Committee meeting after the summer since we last considered those matters.

We have long argued that the debate should be about function and that the form should follow the function. Simon identified the many areas in which there is both inefficiency and a lack of joined-upness in government, and I broadly agree with him. We take the view that the number of Departments should be consistent with the mandate that the people gave at the time of the Good Friday Agreement. That would allow us up to a maximum of 11 Departments, which is fewer than we have ended up with after taking on the Department of Justice. We do not necessarily think that a small number of Departments is the solution. We are much more interested in, and would be much happier, if the Committee spent some time considering the functions of government and what

functions could be better marshalled into certain places. Our position remains that we would probably like 10 Departments plus the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Sheehan: In principle, we are not opposed to a reduction in the number of Departments. Important issues such as efficiencies and the effectiveness of government should be on the table. We certainly look forward to future discussions on the issue.

Mr McCallister: Conall's point about boundary changes looking incredibly unlikely, and the size of the Assembly, could have a knock-on effect on the number of Departments. We would suggest a maximum of eight Departments, either including or excluding OFMDFM, and we would not want to go over the figure of eight. We feel strongly about co-ordination on our key priority, the economy, and ensuring that we move to one Department of the economy. We are happy to discuss the issue about how we can reach agreement over function.

The Chairperson: On the basis of the Committee's discussions today, I propose that we continue the discussion at our next meeting. Members may wish to consult their parties further on their position on the review, and the Committee's discussion at our next meeting will be taken in open and closed sessions. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.