

## Summary Paper

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RW

### Section 4

- (1) On balance, disposed to de-coupling from the Westminster constituency model: it would offer longer-term stability for NIA constituencies: it would also align NI with Wales & Scotland. Such an outcome would present parties with potential organizational challenges at constituency level & may confuse electors. However, re the latter, electors already cope with different DC & Westminster/Assembly boundaries with no obvious insuperable difficulty.
- (2) Any reduction in the total number of MLAs will place strain on committee effectiveness/efficiency. However, the reduction of the number of Depts to eight would enable a reformed committee system, each with nine members, to engage in effective scrutiny of legislation, policy etc. This would be further enabled by the routinized use of sub-committees/rapporteurs to spread the workload. Such an arrangement would also (virtually) eliminate the current scale of multiple committee memberships which hinder efficiency.
- (3) The Scottish Parliament is the nearest (UK) comparator: there the average number of members per equivalent committee is eight & there is no obligation to offer all MSPs a committee place, unlike in NI. That obligation can be met with an overall reduction of MLAs to 80 if there is to be a total of eight Depts, and statutory committees are capped at nine members. Turnover in committee membership should also be avoided.
- (4) Workload management is important in ensuring a robust/effective committee system. What would assist is the careful phasing of the Executive's legislative programme. The Executive's concern for *efficiency* in getting its business done should not hamper the committees' concern to engage in *effective* scrutiny. Committees themselves should be smarter in managing their agendas, especially re inquiries: shorter/focused inquiries carry the potential to exert a more immediate influence/impact. Need to address management of European business at committee level; Chairs of statutory committees not to serve on others; place Liaison Group on a statutory footing; consider reduction of standing committees; set aside committee days for plenary sessions.

### Section 5

There is no 'magic' number of Depts/perfect model of Exec design: in NI currently, favoured number appears to be eight. Three criteria generally apply to the reasoning for constructing Execs/govts: economy and efficiency; policy effectiveness; political advantage—and they can/do conflict, striking a balance is difficult. And, dividing up the work of govt in a way that avoids overlap between/among Depts is impossible. Key is how overlapping briefs are managed and by whom – OFMdfM, in my view. It should steer rather than row policy boats: it means stripping out a number of its functions.

DEL proposal seems ill-timed/judged? Signal it gives is unfortunate: the process of Exec reform should be cohesive, shared, integrated – to coin a phrase.

In broad terms, Exec reform can be undertaken in a piecemeal, incremental fashion ( a la the DEL decision) or approached more systematically. The former might entail determining the number of Depts first, then reallocating functions to try to achieve a better fit – this is probably less disruptive than a root and branch approach which might opt for a thematic model of Departmental design, as in Scotland/Wales in some measure. Should Depts be designed to ‘solve problems’ (easier said than done) rather than just clustered around functions and services (the traditional model): the latter tends to promote departmentalism, the former perhaps leads to a more joined-up approach which better prizes horizontal links between/among Depts: a hollowed out OFMdFM can be the catalyst for the latter. However designed, what matters is whether or not the Exec is animated by a spirit of accommodation: and that’s a behavioural rather than a structural matter.

Final point: the reform of the NIA & the Executive should itself be joined-up: not simply a case of the Executive proposing and the Assembly disposing: the A&ERC needs to cast itself in the guise of ‘critical friend/partner’ to the Executive in what should be a genuinely shared enterprise.