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Dear Marie,

Thank you for your letter concerning the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's scoping work on the designations and appointment of the positions First Minister and deputy First Minister.

My view is that removing the designation requirement should be the next organic step in the development of the devolved institutions, with weighted majorities required on key votes. Mindful that we are now in a situation of *de facto* unionist-nationalist parity in the Assembly—and with the increased significance and presence of the unaligned vote—continuing with the designation requirement serves only to freeze the Assembly while society and politics in Northern Ireland has changed in many significant ways. Having taken a step backwards from the Belfast Agreement's carefully constructed checks and balances through the St Andrews' amendments, there is now a pressing need to take several steps forward and this should be one of them. That means initiating a process which enables Northern Ireland to look to a future beyond the ridged parameters of mandatory coalitions led by First and deputy First Ministers who cannot command a majority in the Assembly.

A weighted majority of 60 percent to elect the joint First Ministers seems appropriate, after all, this worked well before. Renaming of the two offices 'joint' First Ministers would also recognise the legal and constitutional fact that they are equal, and it would remove a misleading issue that has been at the forefront of our electoral politics for years.

The requirement for weighted majority would ensure that the First Ministers commanded a parliamentary majority, with all the legitimacy that this key aspect to democratisation entails. It is perhaps stating the obvious to note that this would have a fundamental impact in strengthening public confidence in Northern Ireland's institutions and in the Executive's ability to act independently of both governments. It would also stimulate the sort of coalition negotiations that are part and parcel of plural democratic politics elsewhere in Europe—in plural societies that have largely transcended their own deep seeded religious, ideological, and ethnic cleavages through evolving power-sharing mechanisms.

The requirement for weighted majority may need to be presented in a way that allows opposition parties to regard such a vote as consenting to the First Ministers taking office as opposed to signalling support for the new administration. This would, perhaps, prevent a replay of some of the more disruptive tactics that prevented the institutions from becoming established in the first decade after the Belfast Agreement.

Reforming the Petition of Concern to require a weighted majority would also be an important reform, provided that such a Petition of Concern would be restricted to particular votes, rather than being routinely deployed to stall Assembly and Executive business. There would be clear advantages to having a threshold required to invoke a Petition of Concern that ensured it required multi-party support.

I hope this is of some help and if you need any further assistance from me, please be in touch.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michel Ken". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.