

Is the Idea that Northern Ireland is Over-governed a Myth?

Introduction

There is a widespread popular view that Northern Ireland has a system of governance structures that justify the criticism that it is over-governed and has led to calls for a reduction in government structures. This view has been put forward by the media, many Northern Ireland politicians, at times Secretaries of State, private sector organisations, economists, political commentators and some academics. How valid is this view? What does the available evidence suggest? May it be a myth that Northern Ireland is over-governed? The view that Northern Ireland is over-governed must be based on some form of evaluation and assessment of the size and nature of governance structures. It also presupposes a comparison either with some abstract standard of the size of government structures or in terms of a direct comparison with another country. The most obvious and relevant comparison is with the other devolved administrations, that is, Scotland and Wales. Comparisons could also be drawn with England; the Republic of Ireland; or other EU countries such as France, Germany or Belgium.

In this paper I propose to examine five main aspects of governance: local government; quangos or public bodies; government departments; the size of the Assembly and the overall size of the public sector. I intend to use comparative evidence drawn mainly from Scotland and Wales and also perspectives drawn from current academic interpretations of public sector modernisation.

Local Government

The existing and proposed reformed system of local government in Northern Ireland both constitute one of the most minimal systems of local government in the whole of Europe and the western world. This description relates to the number of councils, average population, the functions of councils and the size of the workforce. Knox (2010) refers to an “emasculated” system of local government. Comparative data is presented in Table 1, drawing on a comparative European study by Wilson and Game (2006) who conclude that the UK has proportionately fewer and much larger local authorities than almost any other country, with citizens having fewer councillors to represent them. Within the UK Jeffery (2006) notes, “only in Northern Ireland does local government do and spend little”.

Table 1 Local Government Systems

| Country | Number of councils | Community councils | Average population | Workforce 2011/12 |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Northern Ireland | 26 | - | 69,000 | |
| | 11 | - | 166,000 | |
| Scotland | 32 | [1,200] | 163,000 | 274,000 |
| Wales | 22 | [735] | | |
| 140,000 | 174,000 | | | |
| England | 434 | [8,700] | 139,000 | 2,120,000 |
| Republic of Ireland | 41 | 81 town councils | 70,000 or 43,000 | |
| ----- | | | | |
| France | 36,782 | | 1,650 | |
| Germany | 12,434 | | 6,630 | |
| Spain | 8,108 | | 4,970 | |
| Belgium | 589 | | 17,600 | |
| Holland | 467 | | 35,120 | |

Source: Adapted from Wilson and Game (2006) and Knox (2002)

In terms of the number of councils and councils per population Northern Ireland stands out in a European, British or Irish context as; having very few councils, councils with very large populations and is low in elected representatives per population. The comparison with Scotland and Wales is significant as their extensive local government systems operate within devolved government. It can be noted that local government in Germany operates within a federal system, but in Spain within a devolved system and in Holland and Belgium within systems of regional government. It is often overlooked that Scotland and Wales have a second tier of local government involving a large number of community and town councils. They are responsible for a range of minor functions, somewhat akin to the town commissioners in the South. It is well known that local government in Northern Ireland has been operating since the early seventies with a very limited range of functions and without what would be recognised in most European countries as core local government functions. In Scotland and Wales since devolution local government has maintained all their core functions. The opportunity has not been taken with the reform of local government in Northern Ireland to further develop local government functions with the only significant change being local planning approval. The present configuration of public service delivery would make the envisaged role of community planning largely impossible. Justifications for limited local government are sometimes offered in terms of the divisive history of local government but it is difficult to raise such a barrier against such non-contentious local government services as libraries.

What are the implications in terms of the modernisation of public administration? There has been little consideration of the value and role of localism as a key value. Localised structures are seen as; strengthening local communities; increasing democratic participation; making services locally responsive and accountable and encouraging public representatives to work together on local and neighbourhood issues. Counter arguments, apart from verging towards the near abolition of local government, depend almost exclusively on financial costs. However, it can be noted that the RPA main document suggested no financial difference in cost whether there were 7, 11 or 15 councils (RPA, 2005). The large expenditure necessary on local government reform and transitional costs mean that reforms will bring few savings. A calculation of very long term savings was based on the actual removal of further local government services. Value for money in local government means valuing its impact on the quality of services, enhancing public well-being and contributing to greater efficiency in service delivery. The assumption that size is associated with efficiency and effectiveness is far from proved (Knox, and Carmichael, 2007). It was David Cameron who recently argued that localism was the key to greater efficiency. At present Northern Ireland does not have strong local government in terms of comparative benchmarks and the proposed reformed system will produce neither strong local government nor super councils.

Quangos and Public Bodies

In Northern Ireland the quango sector is large and this is demonstrated clearly in the size of the workforce, as Table 2 shows. The sector in Northern Ireland is much larger than local government or the civil service.

Table 2 Quangos

| | Northern Ireland | Scotland | Wales |
|---------|------------------|----------|-------|
| Quangos | 83 | 146 | 47 |

There has been a commitment since the RPA to reduce the size of the quango sector, as in Great Britain (Flinders, 2011), and while there has been some reduction in numbers the overall size of the sector has not changed but what has happened has been the establishment of very large quangos through mergers. These quangos are either centralised or large in population size and have a very extensive range of functions. The existence of very large quangos can lead to a problem of under-governance for a number of reasons. It is possible to clearly identify these in looking at two examples in education and health and social care. In education there is the proposal for a single Education and Skills Authority as a single education administrative body for the whole of Northern Ireland. This proposal has been delayed because of political disagreements but these disagreements do not relate to the peculiarity of presenting the ESA as representing modernisation in public administration. In practice the idea of such a single large totally centralised quango belongs more to the nineteenth century. The problems with the concept can be summarised as;

- too extensive a range of functions, covering not only schools administration but youth services and early years education and care
- raising issue of compatibility with devolved institutions and as competing in powers with department of education
- such a centralised body cannot be responsive to local communities or local needs
- the board will consist of a small group of people so reducing public participation
- limits structures for user involvement, including young people's involvement leading to poorer quality services
- is not efficient as a very large centralised bureaucracy

The restructuring of health and social care has led to the creation of a number of centralised quangos including the Public Health Agency a function now given to local government in England. However, the main structure in Northern Ireland is a centralised Health and Social Care Board and five delivery health and social care trusts. How does this compare with Great Britain and with principles of modernisation? Again a number of points can be made.

Northern Ireland relies totally on a quango based model to administer health and social care. In Great Britain social care is a local government responsibility as are some aspects of health.

The Northern Ireland health and social care quangos have a large range of functions covering primary care acute care, adult social care and children's social care. In England different organisations would be involved; Primary Care Trusts, to be replaced by clinical commissioning groups; hospital NHS Trusts; local authority social care departments; and local authority children's Trusts. The Northern Ireland health and social care trusts are also among the largest health related bodies in the UK, with populations of between 350,000 and 450,000.

The structure for health and social care again raises issues of modernisation which can be listed as;

- the small number of quangos limits public and user participation
- the lack of responsiveness to local communities, accentuated by interventionist centralised control by Department
- a structure has proved unworkable in providing a commissioner-provider model between Health and Social Care Board and the five Trusts, as originally planned
- Trusts are too large and unwieldy, leading to the current proposal in *Transforming Your Care* for 17 health and social care partnerships, relating back to the previous 18 Trusts
- the structure means large hospitals do not have their own specific management team

Government departments

A major component of the over-governance argument is the view that central government in Northern Ireland has too many departments and that the number of departments should be reduced from twelve to six or seven. The main criticism relies mainly on the view that a reduction in number would save money while the main view suggested for the status quo or minimal change relates to the existing configuration as a necessary element of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Twelve departments facilitate sharing out ministerial portfolios and powers among more political parties and for more inclusive participation at Executive level. The issue of a reduction in the number of departments has been considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee but the final report sets out a possible scheme of mergers of existing departments into six departments but does not actually make a recommendation (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2012). Such a change may produce limited savings, mainly in senior posts, but there would be significant reorganisation costs. It has to be noted that the same functions of central administration have to be carried out irrespective of the departmental configuration. Again it can be asked what can be learnt from experience in the other devolved administrations and principles of public administration? It is usually overlooked that the departments in Northern Ireland are based on what may be called the Whitehall and Westminster model of discrete and separate departments headed by a minister with responsibilities exclusive to that department. Questions can be asked if this is the most appropriate model for a devolved central administration. Scotland and Wales have both found this not to be the ideal model and have moved away from the model, although still operating within the UK Home Civil Service. Scotland in 2007 changed from the departmental structure to establish 31 directorates while Wales has developed a strongly integrated administration under the *Making the Connections* strategy. Two key lessons are the facilitation of joined up government, a major problem with the existing Northern Ireland structure, and a breakaway from the “ministerial department” principle as ministerial responsibilities do not have to match civil service groupings. There is a further point that several departments in Northern Ireland are comparatively large, for example, DHSSPS, in terms of functions, expenditure and staff, and smaller units could be desirable. Little attention has been paid to the possibilities of connecting up the different parts of the public sector and the most obvious direction is the absorption of some parts of the quango sector into central government departments. Scotland and Wales provide several examples of this process.

Size of Assembly

It has often been noted that the membership of the Assembly is, on a population basis, larger (108) than the Scottish Parliament (129) and the Welsh Assembly (60). An inquiry into the number of members of the Northern Ireland Assembly has been carried out by the Assembly Executive and Review Committee and this largely focussed on the coupling of the numbers of MLAs to the number of Westminster constituencies and investigating if a reduction in numbers would impact on the effectiveness of the Assembly. The proportionately larger number of MLAs in Northern Ireland can be again justified as part of the necessary architecture of the 1998 Agreement, ensuring wide participation to include; a full range of political views, representation of rural areas, minority interests and promote representation of women. However, there is another justification for the Northern Ireland Assembly having greater representation than the equivalent body in Scotland or Wales, which the Assembly Review does not mention. Local government councillors have very extensive powers in

Scotland and Wales which reduces the workload of MSPs and MAs. This is, of course, not the case in Northern Ireland. It can also be noted that with the increase in legislative powers of the Welsh Assembly there is a debate about the need to increase the number of Welsh Assembly members. A further consideration is that the Northern Ireland Assembly does have the numbers to carry out more parliamentary work than it does perform and could be more active and effective. This would apply particularly to committee work, possibly through additional committees on the EU, external relations, equality, a petitions committee as in Scotland and Wales; or more full inquiries by existing committees; or more detailed monitoring and scrutiny of the large number of quangos.

Size of public sector employment

The claim is often made that the public sector in Northern Ireland is very large in terms of the numbers employed. What does the statistical analysis demonstrate?

Table 3 Public Sector Employment 2012

| | Employed in public sector | As percentage of total employed | As percentage of adult population |
|------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Northern Ireland | 213,000 | 27.7 | 18.4 |
| Scotland | 581,000 | 23.5 | 17.3 |
| Wales | 333,000 18.5 | 25.6 | |
| England | 4,863,000 | 19.6 | 11.2 |
| UK | 6,058,000 | 20.4 | 11.8 |

Source: ONS, 2012

There has been a decrease in each area in public sector employment but the workforce remains substantially as column 1 indicates. If public sector employment is expressed as a percentage of the total in employment, then Northern Ireland has a higher ratio although not greatly different from Scotland and Wales. However, if the public sector employment rate is expressed as a proportion of the population of workforce, Northern Ireland is not the highest of the four countries and is similar to Scotland and Wales. The claim that Northern Ireland has a very large number of public sector employees is not very strong and it can be argued that there is a fairly normal number of public sector jobs. Arguably one would expect a slightly higher number of public sector jobs in the context of the requirements of conflict resolution and social disadvantage. The issue also reflects, of course, underdevelopment of the private sector. However, statements often made by economic groups concerning a need to rebalance the economy are misleading in assuming this means reducing the public sector. It can be noted that the Treasury Paper on this topic (HM Treasury, 2010) gives six definitions of the meaning of rebalancing the economy, none of which refer to a need to reduce the public sector.

Conclusions

Only in a small number of respects is the Northern Ireland public sector any larger than the devolved systems in Scotland and Wales. Local government in Northern Ireland is on a very small scale; quangos are in the major areas too large; government departments have to carry out certain functions and the number is not the key organisational issue: there is a case for not undertaking a major reduction in the size of Stormont and the numbers employed in the public sector do not differ greatly from Scotland and Wales.

There is a lack of evidence for the views that the public sector and systems of governance are large and grounds for treating such views as misinformed or unaware of systems in other countries. However, there is a danger in Northern Ireland of ignoring principles of modernisation, localism, participation and accountability. This may lead to out of date systems, to systems incompatible with devolved arrangements and dealing with democratic deficiencies.

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