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From:
Sent: 17 August 2012 06:28
To: CPG Mailbox
Subject: TRIM: A response to the consultation on N.I. Assembly
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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Dear Secretary Paterson,

The following is my response to your recent (and necessary) open consultation on potential reforms of the Northern Ireland Assembly;

1) I believe the Assembly should consist of no more than 78 members, with a decoupling of the link between Westminster and Assembly constituencies, and a return to the twelve local constituencies used in the 1973 Assembly elections, with each constituency having between five and eight representatives, depending on population size. I also believe that a reduction in the number of government departments to about eight in all would further streamline the overall operation of the Assembly, and make it a more effective and better value-for-money one at that.

2) I do not believe the Westminster and Assembly election happening on the same day in 2015 poses any real problems, so no change regarding the convergence of the two elections is warranted in my opinion.

3), 4) If I may, I believe one answer would suffice for both questions, and that is the current four-year term is more than sufficient for the Assembly, it provides a point of focus for MLA's and executive ministers in drafting and passing legislative acts, and extending that term to five years would unnecessarily stretch out the parliamentary term for no real substantive reason.

5), 6), 7) I firmly believe that no individual should be simultaneously both an MLA and an MP, or alternatively, both an MLA or Peer simultaneously, those positions are separate and distinct positions, with different legislative areas, and I do not believe a single individual can properly serve their democratic remit fully if their time and attention is split between two legislatures. If an MLA is elected to Westminster, they should have to give up their seat in the Assembly, likewise if an MLA is given a peerage to the Lords, they should also have to either give up their Assembly seat or decline the peerage. I believe it is a likely and necessary step for statutory legislation to enforce an end to so-called 'double-jobbing' as some will abide by any agreement reached on the matter, but some will not, and I believe it to be an important enough matter that legislation in this case is both likely and necessary.

8) It is absolutely vital, in my opinion, that a fully functioning and effective parliamentary system should have both a government that represents the majority of citizen's opinions, and an opposition that can effectively hold said government to account. In the case of Northern Ireland, this potentially poses certain problems given the current constitution of the Assembly, but one that can be easily remedied if representatives are both calm and objective in their assessments of how to better reform said Assembly in a way that both maintains the current power-sharing principle but also one which holds to the most rudimentary and fundamental principles of democracy. To that effect, I strongly believe that a voluntary coalition executive, comprised of parties that can garner a majority in the Assembly, but one which cuts across community lines (for example, the Unionist-SDLP-Alliance coalition that existed in the short-lived 1974 Assembly), would be a very positive next step in reform

of the Assembly, and one which would likely meet with very broad support from most parties and Northern Ireland citizens alike. Those parties in the Assembly who would not be a part of such a voluntary coalition executive would then have a choice to either form a majority coalition opposition, or alternatively remain as individual parties with the largest party not in the executive assuming official opposition duties. Further, I also believe that reform of the legislating procedure in the Assembly is necessary, and to that effect, I would suggest firstly a triple-lock safeguard function, in which any legislative bill proposed by an executive minister would have to be jointly agreed to by OFMDFM before going to the executive table, which then would need a simple cross-party/community majority to move to the full Assembly for debate, after which a simple majority of the Assembly, as long as that majority cuts across community lines, would be needed to pass said legislation. These reforms would both keep the current power-sharing principle in place, but also simultaneously respect the principle of basic democracy, a principle that the current and highly flawed constitution of the Assembly does not reflect by any stretch of the imagination.

These are my suggestions on the consultation regarding potential reforms of the Northern Ireland Assembly, thank you for your time in reading this contribution, and I sincerely hope they make a positive impact on any drawing up of reform-related legislation.