

RESPONSE TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE 'CONSULTATION ON MEASURES TO IMPROVE THE OPERATION OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY'

INITIAL COMMENTS

Labour supports reviewing the effectiveness of the devolved structures in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State should work in partnership with the Executive and Assembly to look at how they, and the Northern Ireland Office, can work more effectively both individually and collectively.

The launch of this consultation was pre-empted by a speech made by the then Secretary of State, Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP, to the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) in Dublin on Friday 19th July 2012. His comments about the Assembly and Executive were widely condemned by political parties in Northern Ireland and have raised questions about the credibility and purpose of this consultation. We share those concerns.

The Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly is just over a year in to its second full-term. We should not be complacent about that. Labour's view is that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) - mandated by the Assembly and with representatives from political parties in the Assembly - should take primary responsibility for examining the current arrangements at Stormont, and proposing any amendments to them. Any change to the current system of government must command support from across the Assembly and the wider community.

1. NUMBER OF SEATS IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

There is a valid case for reducing the number of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). This should be done on an equal basis across Assembly constituencies, which should continue to be coupled with Westminster constituencies in the medium-term. It is important to maintain an adequate number of MLAs to scrutinise the work of the Executive and individual Ministers and Departments. An initial reduction of 18 seats – one from each constituency – would see a future Assembly comprised of 90 MLAs, which could meet the demands of the representative and legislative work expected of MLAs.

Any reduction in MLAs should only take place with the agreement and consent of the Assembly, with the specified number of seats to be reduced decided by the Assembly.

2. LENGTH OF ASSEMBLY TERMS

The timing of the next Assembly clearly needs careful examination. There is a concern that the scheduled combined polls for Westminster, Assembly and local government in May 2015 will mean that the multi-faceted nature of our democratic structures will be overlooked or undermined. However, if the Assembly term was extended by an extra year

to 2016, the same problem would arise with a Westminster poll scheduled for 2020 and a four-year Assembly term ending in the same year.

Labour does not oppose the decoupling of Parliamentary and Assembly elections, or the extension of the current Northern Ireland Assembly term. However, we acknowledge there are opposing views on these issues between political parties in Northern Ireland.

3. MULTIPLE MANDATES

Labour welcomes the move by political parties in Northern Ireland to voluntarily end 'double jobbing'. The government should continue to work with parties to ensure that the practice is phased out and ended by 2015.

4. GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION

Power-sharing is central to the settlement reached in Northern Ireland and is enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements. It is fundamental to the construction of the institutions at Stormont.

The development of politics in Northern Ireland will be shaped by people and politicians in Northern Ireland. The AERC will continue to look at issues of Executive accountability and the space for alternative voices in the Assembly.

One option that could be looked at is the provision of financial assistance, similar to 'Short Money' in Westminster, for those parties not in the Executive, to support them in their Assembly duties.

CONCLUSION

The Secretary of State has a role in encouraging and facilitating discussions on the future of Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, and in putting forward his or her views in a supportive and constructive way. Ultimately, however, it is a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to decide their futures, plan their development and propose and implement any changes to their structure. Labour's response to this consultation is made firmly on that basis.

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Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
On behalf of the Labour Party

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