

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY – NUMBER OF SEATS IN THE NI ASSEMBLY

Question 1

What should the future size of the Northern Ireland Assembly be?

I agree that the size of the Assembly should be reduced. I am content that the size of the Assembly be formulated on the number of Westminster constituencies but would also support there being 5 Assembly seats per constituency.

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY – LENGTH OF ASSEMBLY TERMS

Question 2

Do you believe that there should be combination of Parliamentary and Assembly elections in 2015 or should these be decoupled?

I have every confidence in the Electoral Commission being able to manage Parliamentary and Assembly elections on the same day, however I would favour a de-coupling of the elections.

Simultaneous Parliamentary and Assembly elections increase the possibility of local issues being over-shadowed by national affairs which in Northern Ireland heightens the perception, if not the reality, of a straight nationalist /unionist approach to voting.

The de-coupling of elections allows greater opportunity for regional issues to be addressed and the potential for smaller parties to obtain Assembly seats which would provide a broader, more representative Assembly. This will be particularly important if the number of seats is reduced.

Question 3

Do you think the term of the current Northern Ireland Assembly should be extended from 2015 to 2016?

If elections are to be 'de-coupled' then it follows that, if the de-coupling is to be achieved at the next available opportunity, the current Assembly should be extended to 2016.

I appreciate the constitutional issues and in particular the charge that such an extension is anti-democratic. In answer to this assertion, it may be argued that as the Executive operates on a cross-party consensual basis any short term erosion of the democratic process will be minimal, and be outweighed by the longer term gain of an Assembly election focused on local issues.

Question 4

Should the Northern Ireland Assembly move to a fixed 5-year term permanently?

With the cross-party format of the Executive, there are arguments both for and against 4 or 5 year terms. For example, a 4-year term might engender some urgency into decision making and bring the prospect of an earlier shake up of departmental

responsibilities. On the other hand, an Assembly 4-year term with a Parliamentary 5-year term will result in instances where Assembly and Parliamentary elections are held in the same year, undermining any previous work to de-couple elections.

CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY – MULTIPLE MANDATES

Question 5

Do you believe that representatives should be prohibited from holding the offices of MP and MLA at the same time?

Yes. With the development of the committee structure, it is extremely difficult to fully represent constituents in two different houses, addressing two different sets of affairs and challenges.

Question 6

Should MLAs also be prohibited from being members of the House of Lords?

Yes. I would see the House of Lords as a scrutinising body, with a degree of independence from the House of Commons and devolved administrations. Given this view, it would be inappropriate to sit in both Houses.

Question 7

Is it better to use primary legislation to ban such practices outright at the earliest opportunity or to take a power to do so at a later date to allow space for agreement to be reached?

I am in favour of a consensual approach and am therefore content that, if parties are agreeable to move towards removing the practice, these powers be taken at a later date. However, the period available to parties to reach agreement should be defined to give voters confidence that this matter will be finally resolved.

CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY – GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION

Question 8

Do you think the Assembly would operate more effectively with a system which provides for a government and an effective opposition? If so, how can this system best be achieved?

Ideally, a formal opposition would provide scrutiny and challenge but, given the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, it is difficult to envisage (i) an opposition of sufficient size and (ii) a sufficiently cohesive opposition to adequately hold Ministers to account.

There is also the very realistic possibility of parties being in permanent opposition which would do little to instil voter confidence in the opposition parties and ultimately make such opposition meaningless.

Rather than a formal opposition, an adjustment to the Committee system may prove beneficial in making the Assembly more effective. For example, priority for the role of Committee Chairmen be given firstly to those parties which do not have seats in the Executive and secondly to independent MLA's.

By this method, those not represented in the Executive have an automatic opportunity to adopt a formal role in the scrutiny and challenge of Ministers and departments.

With this formal role, the electorate will be encouraged to vote for a broader range of candidates with the potential for smaller parties and independents to be elected, who might otherwise be squeezed out of an Assembly reduced in size.

Thus voters who may currently feel that a vote for a smaller party or independent is 'wasted', see that small parties have a continuing role in the Assembly.

Larger parties may argue that this gives added weight to votes cast for smaller parties, but the fact remains that the larger parties will still form the Executive.