

Green Party
1st Floor
76 Abbey Street
Bangor
BT20 4JB
County Down.



Constitutional and Political Group
Northern Ireland Office
1st Floor
11 Millbank
LONDON
SW1P 4PN

18th October 2012

Re: Consultation on measures to improve the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Ms/Sir,

I am responding on behalf of the Green Party in Northern Ireland (GPNI) to the above consultation.

Could I begin by expressing our frustration that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) of the Northern Ireland Assembly have not made more definitive progress with regard to the matters that they have been examining in the recent Assembly term. Our preference is that the AERC specifically, or local politicians more generally, should discuss and agree the elements of political reform for Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, we are happy to set-out our position on the consultation matters below.

Question 1

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

As detailed in our AERC submissions GPNI believes that **reform of the electoral system** is critical to considerations of the size of the Northern Ireland Assembly. We believe that an Assembly of 80 members would be adequate for the representative and scrutiny functions of the Assembly but that this should only be considered jointly with **electoral reform**. We are committed to the a Northern Ireland Assembly elected either by (1) a form of multi-member constituency PR-STV with a “top-up” regional list or (2) an Additional Member System with single member constituencies and a single Northern Ireland Regional Constituency. GPNI could not consider a reduction below 6 members per constituency without a redesign of the Assembly electoral system. We believe a new electoral system can maintain the representation of smaller parties and minority views and (through a regional list) promote the

greater participation of women in politics. The decoupling of the Assembly and Westminster boundaries should take place at the earliest opportunity to allow electoral system reform.

Question 2

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

GPNI is generally opposed to multiple polls on the same day and we do not accept the case that costs should be the overriding issue which determines the date of an election. We note that there is no guarantee that the Westminster, or indeed Stormont, governments will survive to full term. We advocate the decoupling of polls in most cases; for voter engagement; for campaign clarity; for simplicity of electoral administration.

Question 3

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

We struggle to articulate in a considered manner the posing of this question. "It may be construed as anti-democratic" says the consultation document. Construed?. Quite simply, the extension of an electoral mandate after the act of an election **would be anti-democratic**. GPNI is surprised that the NIO is even considering such an option. We note that the NIO has not asked should the term be **reduced** by one year. We suggest to the NIO that they forcefully resist the pressure they are coming under from larger parties to extend the current Assembly term.

Our favoured option is, in the event that the Westminster government survives to full term., that the Assembly term is reduced by two months, with Assembly elections in March 2015

Question 4

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

No. It appears inevitable that district council and Assembly elections will be synchronised going forwards. Given the sharing and distribution of powers between Stormont and local government there is a greater rationale for the Assembly term being aligned with local council elections than with the Westminster term.

Question 5

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

GPNI is opposed to dual mandates at all levels of democratic representation. So, Yes.

Question 6

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

Yes.

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?

We would hope that all legislators share GPNI's vision of a vibrant and participatory democracy. In February 2012, 23 of 38 DUP MLAs were also local councillors. Primary legislation should be enacted to ban double-jobbing at the earliest opportunity.

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?

We do find consultation on the development of an opposition at Stormont somewhat incongruous along with the relatively technical matters addressed above. As the consultation document alludes to, and GPNI believes, power-sharing is "**of the essence**" of the Belfast Agreement. Nonetheless the document also states "change could be effected by legislation in the forthcoming Bill ..". In our opinion, any change to the **principles** underpinning the Belfast Agreement can only come about through all-party talks/agreement, the participation of the Irish & British Governments and the endorsement through referendum by the people of Northern Ireland.

The following motion has been proposed by the GPNI Executive for the Party's 2012 AGM on 27th October and would be happy to advise on the position adopted by the Party after that date.

"While restating deeply held concerns about the nature of so called "normal" adversarial politics and endorsing all parliamentary methods that promote consensus decision making, The Green Party in Northern Ireland advocates the establishment of a recognised Opposition within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We believe that the Northern Ireland Executive should be formed by post-election inter-party negotiations that should also agree a Programme for Government. Both the Executive Ministers and the Programme for Government should be subject to endorsement by the Assembly by a 66% majority of elected Members present and voting.

Such a fundamental change to the principles underpinning the Good Friday Agreement should be part of a wider political reform programme tackling other legacy issue arising from the Good Friday and St. Andrew's Agreements. Such a political reform programme should be endorsed by a referendum put to the people of Northern Ireland, endorsed by resolutions in both houses of the Oireachtas and enabled by primary legislation passed at Westminster."

Regards

Conor Quinn
Chair, Green Party in Northern Ireland

T: 077 177 177 55

E: conor.quinn@talktalk.net