

## Ulster Young Unionist Council: Response to NIO Consultation on Reforming the Northern Ireland Assembly

- The UYUC warmly welcome the consultation. Arrangements for government in NI reflect a short-term confidence building exercise and current accountability procedures are inadequate as we move towards a more normal society.

The decision to consider primary legislation is timely. There has been little sign of impetus from within the major Executive parties for change. This inertia and ease with the status quo is not necessarily in the best interests of good government.

### Number of Seats

**The UYUC express concerns that a reduction in the number of seats in the Assembly will embed tribal politics by entrenching the two large parties in power. It may only result in modest cost savings with the potential to frustrate the development of government and opposition as the normal course of order.** We are concerned the two large parties have an incentive to hasten the implementation of such a reduction for party political purposes.

There is a more compelling case for rationalising government departments and achieving efficiencies from these. The UYUC firmly believe that a reduction in Assembly/Executive numbers must be accompanied by reforms to introduce an adequately resourced, cross-community opposition framework.

The UYUC believe that six-member constituencies are an important institutional feature of our system, ensuring that minority voices are not drowned out of the governance system and that a more proportionate reflection of public opinion is attained.

### Assembly Terms

The UYUC feel that the **holding of separate elections on the same polling day creates confusion and may frustrate effective accountability.** Different elections are fought on discrete issues. Consequently, we contest the assumption in para 2.5 that there was little or no confusion about local and assembly elections held on the same day in 2011. Canvassers can cite personal experience at that election of confusion being expressed by voters, particularly amongst the elderly and less politically aware.

The UYUC express strong concern that the holding of an Assembly election in 2016, at the time of important and potentially divisive centenary celebrations, has the potential to cloud the serious issues of government requiring urgent attention. The risk of a tribally-charged election ought to be avoided, as it may damage public confidence in the Assembly.

An Assembly election could just as easily be held in late 2014 as in 2016 and this would solve the problem of competing poll dates.

**Equally, five-year terms are not an adequate solution to backlogs of legislation in the Assembly.**

The UYUC believe that changes to the structure of government and the potential that the introduction of an opposition has to improve the scrutiny functions of both Assembly debates and Committees are more relevant to dealing with these issues.

**Multiple Mandates**

The UYUC are resoundingly opposed to double jobbing and can give concrete examples of elected representatives being unable to vote in Westminster due to attendance in Stormont, and vice versa.

The UYUC note that NI suffers from low participation in national politics and low visibility of Westminster-level issues. Failure to address one obvious cause of Westminster absenteeism, double jobbing, continues to exacerbate the problem.

Similarly, double-jobbing narrows the pool of political talent and may affect public confidence in our political class, as more remote from their concerns.

**Primary legislation on this issue would be welcomed** and we feel the electorate would support such a move. **Provisions for co-option should be allowed to avoid costly by-elections and to allow parties to effectively 'blood' new talent.**

**Government and Opposition**

The UYUC welcome the moves taken by the outgoing Secretary of State to raise this issue in the public domain. The UYUC see the introduction of a properly-resourced opposition as the number ONE priority of the consultation.

Paragraph 4.2 outlines the role of such an opposition would be to “enhance, challenge and provide a spur to innovation”. The UYUC wholeheartedly endorse this.

The UYUC believe that the introduction of an **opposition is entirely consistent with the key tenet of power-sharing**. One can have a cross-community government as well as a cross-community opposition, and this could be specified in legislative form.

The UYUC does not foresee a time when power-sharing will not be necessary, it is central to the stability of Northern Ireland. This however does not mandate all-party mandatory coalition. Nor should it be an obstacle to the introduction of an opposition, indeed, quite the contrary. **Both main**

**traditions need re-invigorated competition in order to re-engage the electorate and force politicians to focus on key socio-economic issues at election time.**

Consequently, concerns expressed by SF that the introduction of an opposition is designed to exclude them are misguided and without foundation. The Belfast Agreement contains a safeguard in that at least 3 Unionists and three Nationalists must be in the NI executive. Any government must command the majority support of Unionists and Nationalists in the Assembly. In practice, the largest of the two blocs would likely be coalition partners, with smaller of the two blocs allocated parliamentary time as an opposition.

The UYUC believe that the **first step would be legislating for an opportunity for parties to opt out of mandatory coalition, with the attachment of special speaking rights, financial resources and privileges for doing so.** The key is to ensure that the pivot of political debate becomes a more adversarial system of scrutiny between governing and opposition parties, whilst ensuring opposition parties collaborate across Unionist/Nationalist lines.