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**In response to article in "The Irish News" on 15 August 2012**

**Bi-cameral Model**

The current Assembly could be replaced with a bi-cameral body. A legislative council with thirty-two members would deal with "constitutional" issues (that is with the only issues in which Northern Ireland's often ignorant, lazy and corrupt politicians are interested).

A new assembly of sixty-four members would be responsible for the practical social and economic issues, about which Northern Ireland's politicians know little or nothing (and don't seem to care).

Each political party would have to decide whether it was a "council" party or an "assembly" party: the latter would not be able to comment on socio-economic issues and the former would be prevented from discussing "constitutional" issues.

All registered "assembly" parties would have to publish statements of (i) general aims; (ii) guiding principles; and (iii) detailed policies.

**The Number of Constituencies and Assembly Members**

The number of constituencies should be reduced to two.

Each constituency would elect eight MPs to Westminster; sixteen members of the legislative council; and thirty-two members of the legislative assembly. This would allow the retention of a simple voting system but make it fairer, allowing smaller parties to be represented in proportion to their support.

The current, six-member constituencies benefit long-established political parties but not the people of Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein and the DUP effectively shut out the minor parties, making it impossible for Green or Alliance MLAs to ask oral questions for instance. The Stormont Assembly does not fulfil one of the basic functions of a legislature: it does not call the executive and administrative branches of government to account. Five-member constituencies would be even worse. Small parties in Northern Ireland tend to be more moderate or liberal and be interested in "normal" politics (class-based, issue-based etc).

The introduction of multi-member constituencies for Westminster elections would not establish a precedent in Great Britain because almost all Westminster politicians accept that circumstances in Northern Ireland are different.

### **Other Reform Measures**

- The names of parties should be removed from ballot papers, to discourage unthinking support for the existing parties. It was less than forty years ago that the labels first appeared.
- Political donations should be banned. Instead, resources should be made available to candidates, during elections (eg two free radio broadcasts, one television broadcast, 30,000 free leaflets for each candidate).
- If this proves impossible to achieve, each voter should be allowed to donate a maximum of £200 a year, before his donations have to be made public. All annual totals above that amount should be available for inspection. All donations should be made through a government body, so that they can be monitored. It should be a criminal offence for a public representative or an officer of any party, which has elected representatives, to accept a donation personally.
- Transport to polling stations should be provided by the state, to allow people to vote without undue pressure being placed on them by parties or greater use made of alternative voting arrangements. Proxy voting should be discouraged.
- Representatives of political parties should be excluded from polling stations, during voting hours.
- Requirements for deposits and nomination by electors should be abolished, as these are a nuisance to long-established political parties and a burden to independent candidates and minor parties.
- The salaries of legislators should be reduced to one and half times the average for Northern Ireland.
- Legislators should be strongly encouraged to use public transport. We might suddenly find that levels of comfort and the frequency of journeys increased.
- A “hostel” could be provided near the Assembly, so that there are no claims for accommodation from MLAs.

The alternative to reform is turn-out figures of 30% within a few years and institutions, which have no legitimacy.

The current Cypriot-style constitution has set sectarianism in concrete and local politicians will

never reform it: turkeys don't vote for Christmas (as everyone is fond of saying). It served its purpose- bribing the IRA to give up terrorism in return for a place in government and getting the DUP to work with people it claimed it would never talk to- but it is time to move on. The UK Government has a duty to push forward reform, as it has occasionally had to do in the reactionary Crown Dependency of the Isle of Man.

In time, the legislative council might be abolished but that may be possible only in twenty or thirty years' from now, after segregation in housing, education and so on has been eliminated and a common identity created. The aim should be to normalise politics and that means dismantling the existing party system.

### **“De-sectarianisation”**

To that end, a referendum should be held on the establishment of a single system of schools, free from the influence of religious groups. There is a lot of support for this policy among the people of Northern Ireland: *it is the existing political parties, which (for selfish reasons) oppose reform.* The current situation is crazy: taxpayers in the Midlands and south of England are funding educational and political systems, which create, maintain or exacerbate tribal divisions in Northern Ireland; and then they have to pay for the consequences (two sets of schools, two sets of leisure centres, extra security and so on).

Once the new education system is operating, a programme should be introduced, with the aim of destroying sectarianism. This should be modelled on the de-Nazification programme, which was devised by the American and British forces of occupation in Germany, in about 1950, and still exists today.

The messages, which the current system of government sends out are that murder is acceptable; some lives are expendable; organised crime pays; politics is a business (and very often a family business at that); and no one is to blame for the killing of around 5,000 people and destruction of society and the economy. The results of such perverted thinking are plain to see- in the economic and physical wasteland that covers a large proportion of Northern Ireland's urban environments and in the social attitudes of many of its people.

### **Functional Board Model (as an alternative to bi-cameralism)**

An alternative to a “socio-economic” chamber at Stormont is a series of specialist boards, covering areas about the size of counties or two counties taken together; directly elected and running services such as public transport, planning, roads, water, drainage. The same rules, excluding sectarian political parties, would apply. One advantage of this system would be that members of boards, unlike legislators, need not be paid salaries. No one would be allowed to serve on more than one board. Another would be that the boundaries of the areas administered by various types of board could be set for specific purposes and not in an arbitrary fashion. The local government boundaries of 1973 and 2011-12 were based on those established in 1898 and, with every passing year, they have less and less to do with human geography. The “reform” of local government was an exercise in cross-community gerrymandering, for the benefit of Sinn Fein and the DUP.

## **Supervision of Northern Ireland's Institutions**

It is very worrying that the UK Government is not overseeing developments in Northern Ireland. It is a similar story with the transfer of responsibility for planning to district councils- something which I believe will be disastrous. What we are seeing is a return to the 1920-1969 period, when Whitehall and Westminster didn't really want to know what was happening in Northern Ireland. Timely action by the UK Government in the 1950s might have relieved the tension, which led to the Troubles.

## **Local Government**

Below the functional boards, there would be around one hundred and twenty community councils, each covering an area with a population of roughly 15,000 and having about 30 councillors. These would be representative bodies but might be given some minor responsibilities for regeneration.

I believe that small towns and villages have suffered, since the abolition of Urban and Rural District Councils in 1973. Places like Donaghadee, Portaferry, Ballynahinch, Saintfield, Crumlin, Templepatrick, Whitehead, Dunmurry, Finaghy and so on have either lost their identity and civic pride or been ignored by larger local authorities, sometimes run by "rival" towns.

Down District is an example: all the council's efforts have been concentrated in the Downpatrick area (and to a much lesser extent, Newcastle, which was rejuvenated by the Department for Social Development). Ballynahinch and Saintfield, unionist areas in a nationalist-controlled council, have been neglected (and, in any case, are more closely linked to Lisburn, as the economy, schools, shopping and travel patterns have changed markedly).

To avoid various staffing problems, which existed in the pre-1973 system of local government, all public servants would be employed by a Public Service Commission and then seconded to bodies at different levels. However, promotion and transfer throughout the public service would be possible (within the limits imposed by qualifications and specialisation).

## **Timing of Elections and Length of Terms**

If the link between Stormont and Westminster constituencies is to be retained, then it makes sense to hold both elections on the same day but only if the terms of the regional assembly and UK Parliament end in the same year.

I believe that the assembly (in my functional-boards-and-small-assembly-model) or the legislative council (in my bicameral Stormont model) should be elected for only two years and that the date should be established by legislation in advance (with some leeway, to allow for natural disasters, sporting events etc).

## **Double Jobbing**

This is merely one aspect of much wider problem with corruption. I don't accept the explanations for double jobbing, given by the CSPL. It is really down to greed on the part of thinly-disguised fascists, who see politics as an opportunity for personal gain and not as a way of solving problems or serving the public. People were not discouraged from participating in politics by the Troubles. In many cases, they became involved because they wanted to do something to end them!

Many are actually discouraged by the party system and the perception that politicians are both useless and "bent". There is no doubt that the situation is worse today than it was in the 1990s. A country, in which two far-right/ultra-nationalist [*I use the terms favoured by a German political scientist, who studied the Far Right, across Europe for two decades, and described Sinn Fein and the DUP thus.*] parties control the Government ad infinitum is hardly more democratic than a country, which is run by one traditionalist/ultra-conservative party [*same source*] for fifty years. Ironically, the old Stormont was probably more open to new ideas, allowed more debate and was more accessible to ordinary people than its successor.

There is also a (fully justified) belief, on the part of a large section of the population, that a significant number of Northern Ireland's politicians are corrupt; that they fiddle their expenses claims; put their relatives on the payroll; accept bribes in return for pulling strings in the Planning Service; and so on. This sort of thing must be tackled, if Northern Ireland is to make economic, social and political progress. The NIO has been doing an impression of Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen for too long.

I don't think that the PSNI have the independence or the resources to tackle corruption. I suggest that the powers and presence of SOCA be "beefed up". It might be instructive to arrange exchanges with the Carabinieri and the judges, who investigate the Camorra, the Sacra Corona Unita, the Cosa Nostra and so on. Perhaps, responsibility for the investigation of organised crime could be transferred from the PSNI as well: it obviously no longer has the will to investigate it (and it must be slightly difficult, when some of those involved sit on policing boards or even around the cabinet table). It seems to me that the police (and possibly the UK Government) now pretend that there is no organised crime. A normal society isn't possible, when 80 or 90% of the urban area is covered with protection rackets. That isn't normal- except perhaps in Sicily and Campania.

At one time, it was theoretically possible for someone to be a councillor or alderman; a member or chairman of several council committees; a mayor or deputy mayor; an MLA; either a member of Assembly Committees or a minister in the executive; and an MP, all at the same time. In addition, he/ she might still have had a job outside politics!

This system did not only deprive the people of Northern Ireland of effective representation: it also led to conflicts of interest and made the whole political system look ridiculous. At one meeting of Castlereagh Borough Council shortly after the Assembly was established, officials from the Roads Service (an executive agency of the Department for Regional Development or DRD) presented a report to a council committee, on which Alderman Peter Robinson MLA MP sat. In his role as an alderman and council committee member, he was able to question Roads Service officials and criticise DRD policy, despite the fact that, at the time, he was also Minister for Regional Development and theoretically responsible to the Assembly for that policy. The minutes do not record whether he slipped out to the Mayor's room in order to change, when switching between ministerial and council roles, or simply wore a costume, which (rather like one of Tommy Cooper's) had different left-hand and right-hand sides.

The UK Government should legislate, at the earliest opportunity, to prevent MPs and peers sitting as MLAs. There is overwhelming support for this measure, throughout Northern Ireland, but it will take Stormont politicians years to reach agreement about it. Should the House of Lords be abolished (by some miracle), peers could be readmitted to Stormont. Those hereditary peers, who no longer have the right to sit at Westminster, should be able to sit as MLAs.

## **Opposition**

An official opposition is generally regarded as one of the cornerstones of democracy and is especially important in a parliamentary system.

It is hard to see how any workable system of opposition could be established, under the existing constitutional arrangements. It would never be stable. That was why I suggested either stripping Stormont of most of its responsibilities (and using a referendum to circumvent the opposition of political parties) or splitting the Assembly into a “bread-and-butter” chamber and a “tribal-warfare” one.

The 1960 Constitution of Cyprus came to a very sticky end (partly because the British Government, alleged guarantor of the agreement, failed to protect the Turkish minority but mainly because the system was flawed, right from the start). Therefore, I don't think it would be unreasonable to suggest that the British Government could have done better in 1998, however much pressure the State Department and Iveagh House were applying. Now, we are left with a system, which almost inevitably generates corruption and political stalemate and which is impossible to reform. Trebles all round in Whitehall!

There are only four remaining alternatives; twenty years of martial law; population exchanges between Northern Ireland and Sweden or some other liberal country; slow economic strangulation (a strategy which seems to have been implemented several years ago); or the complete and immediate abandonment of Northern Ireland by the UK, followed by civil war and streams of refugees fleeing to Scotland and the North West of England.