

Academic Reflections: A review of political events in Northern Ireland 2022

KEY:

A: Anne Marie
C: Dr Clare Rice
M: Marina

A: Hello, everybody. Welcome to our series of Academic Reflections. We're delighted to have with us again Dr. Clare Rice and Dr. Rice is working with the politics department at the University of Liverpool. And in addition to being a research assistant and her academic life, I'm sure Clare is known to many of you as a political commentator, and Clare's interest of politics is far and wide concentrates on Northern Ireland politics, UK politics, power sharing and Brexit and identity.

So thanks to Clare and thanks also to Carrickfergus Grammar and Lismore Comprehensive who have sent us in some questions which we will deal with in the latter part of the session.

So I'm joined by my colleague in the Education Service known to you all, Marina McConville who'll start us off with the questions in the latter part of the session. So thank you very much for those.

Okay, Clare, over to you.

C: Thank you very much. And thank you for having me back to discuss all the things that have been happening in 2022. I'm going to preface the presentation here by saying that I will not be going into any great depth and talking about the election we had in May. I'm aware that there's another presentation that deals with that in much more detail. So what I'm going to be focusing on here today is really what the Assembly and Executive did achieve in the time that it was operational within the, since the last time I was speaking to you all round about this time last year. Look, a little bit at what the current situation is. Try and make a little bit of sense of what's going on. I'm going to dip a little bit into some public opinion just to give a little bit of a sense as to what the public response is to the current dilemma that we find ourselves in. And then I'm going to wrap up by looking at what may or may not come ahead.

So the appropriate place to start. I've been asked countless times over the last few months what was the starting point for the current troubles that we're seeing here in Northern Ireland. You know, where did all these current issues start? And it's very difficult to actually pinpoint it because I suppose if you want to look for a more recent starting point, you look back to the Executive collapse. At the start of this year, we saw that the Democratic Unionist Party, the DUP, resigned their first minister from post what effectively collapsed the Executive. That came the day after the Agriculture Minister had attempted to stop checks on ports related to the protocol in Ireland. Northern Ireland, which is part of the Brexit arrangements that are in place between the UK and the EU for managing the UK's exit from the European Union.

So the timing of it was a little bit difficult to predict. It certainly came out of the blue when it did happen, albeit it wasn't entirely a surprise that such a move was taken. We then had a number of weeks where we had the institutions operating in a bit of a caretaker capacity,

which I'll get into in due course. But effectively this is the point that I go back to whenever I'm asked that question of where did this all start?

Now, arguably, you can extract that further backwards towards, well, we're going to have the Northern Ireland Protocol as a result of Brexit. We only have Brexit as a result of the campaigning that happened around the Leave campaign. Why was it that particularity EU sentiments existed in Northern Ireland?

Well, that's a whole other history conversation in itself. So to keep things as succinct as possible, this is my starting point and the reason for the DUP's decision to resign its first Minister was very much embedded in a protest of the protocol on Ireland of Northern Ireland. I include here on the slide a tweet that was issued at the same time that the speeches were happening, where it was being announced that this was going to be the course of action taken for the DUP, very much this word enough is enough. That was the tide line and the underpinning reason for it very much wanting to see action taken on the part of the UK government with regard to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

What exactly that action is not entirely clear. Now, when pushed on this matter during one of the pre-election leader debates back in April, what we heard from Jeffrey Donaldson was language around wanting to see it removed and replaced. Now, how that differs in anything other than semantics from what other parties are saying or it's broadly talking about changing the protocol is a whole conversation on itself. But certainly it looks like there is a little bit of wriggle room there for some sort of a consensus to be reached that will get things back up and going again. But certainly going into the election, it was pretty much settled that the DUP would not be returning to power sharing.

So it was very much a situation where the parties were in election mode at a very early stage they continued an election mode right up until then and effectively that remained in that ever since.

Now and those few weeks after the DUP's resignation from the First Minister post of the collapse of the Executive, we saw a real flurry of legislative activity within the Assembly. Now, the reason for that is the Executive was collapsed, but the Assembly was still able to function.

So what that meant was that legislation that was already in progress was able to continue. Ministers for Departments were able to carry on in what was effectively a caretaker capacity, so they were able to oversee activity within their departments. But whenever it came to Executive decisions on new or cross-cutting issues, that wasn't able to happen. So there was effectively a cap put in place in terms of what could be achieved within the departments.

Like within the Assembly, we saw a real flurry of activity, as I mentioned. And despite the fact that the mandate of the 2017 to 2022 mandate only operated for approximately half of that time. We saw 47 Acts completed within that time, and that's compared to 67 in the last really full mandate that we had between 2011 and 2016. So it's not a huge disparity. It's worth noting that of those 47 Acts around about half of them were pushed through in those final six, seven weeks after the collapse of the Executive.

So it was a really concerted focus and effort to get as much done as possible before things formally dissolved, before the election. And there was some really significant work done in that regard. I include just some examples here of the work that was achieved legislatively. We had Integrated Education Bill. We had the opt out Organ Donation legislation and the legislation

around climate change and a whole host of other really significant pieces of legislation passed in that window.

Now, whenever we came to the election, it was always going to be difficult, it was always going to be tense. And I know that there is another talk that goes into the outcomes of the election in much more detail.

So there are just three points that I want to emphasise from that here that will help to contextualise what I'm going to saying the remainder of my presentation.

So the first thing I want to say is that what we saw from the election was that there were three pillars really, instated in Northern Irish politics, and that has been reinforced by some surveys that have been conducted since. Each of those pillars centre on a specific party.

So within unionism we have the DUP within nationalism, we have Sinn Féin, and within the centre ground or the so-called others. We have the Alliance Party. Now the success of those three parties have really come at the expense of all the parties in between those spaces.

So to you, the SDLP and the UUP suffered as a consequence of the focus that ended up being placed on these, on these three parties. And it shows really that it's increasingly difficult to think of Northern Irish politics as being bipartite as being a binary system. It's one that is evolving. It's one where there's a third voice now coming into play in those conversations. And that in itself is leading into a wider conversation around whether or not the institutions we have are actually still fit for purpose.

So the arrangements that we have now and the outcome of this election has given us a scenario which is quite different to anything that was envisaged back in 1998 whenever these institutions were first designed.

We now have a Nationalist First Minister or First Minister designate at the stage where that was previously unexpected. It wasn't anticipated that that would be a likely scenario to emerge, certainly this quickly and we have the institutions that are designed still very much focused on the Unionist block and the Nationalist block or those designate groups within the Assembly that make it difficult for the third voice or that centre guard presence to actually really be able to get involved and to engage with the institutions in the same way as those other two blocks.

There's an increasing pushback from the centre ground and particularly from the Alliance Party in regard to that. So just to throw in this slide well, to demonstrate what I was saying about the three pillars, if we look at the first three stacks, there, Sinn Féin, DUP and the Alliance Party, we have data here from three different polls.

The first one in the black column is the Northern Ireland Assembly and two Lucid Talk polls thereafter. Really reinforcing that what we saw in the election back in May is more than likely what we would have seen if another election had been held as was mooted for a while there in December of this year.

We may still have another election on. I'll get into that. But certainly it doesn't look as though what would have changed in terms of those dynamics within the Assembly. We might have seen a movement of a few seats here and there, but ultimately it wouldn't have been any anything drastically different.

Now, what brings me to the current situation? So since the election, we haven't had a functioning Assembly or Executive. There have been several attempts where the Assembly has been recalled with view to discussing different issues, but that couldn't proceed until an election of the Speaker happened. And that didn't happen on any of those occasions. Most recently, just a few weeks ago.

The reason for that is because of the election processes involved with picking a new Speaker. It required the DUP to support that process and they did not participate in that. So effectively that is part of the DUP's ongoing protest of the Northern Ireland Protocol. Very much they are still minded, still very strongly speaking in terms of wanting to see action from the UK Government with regard to the protocol and changes to it, as opposed to relying too much on words or platitudes that might come from Westminster in that regard. And in a sense, it is understandable that the DUP has taken that position of wanting to see action, given that it has borne the brunt of a lot of difficult relationships and difficult outworkings with regard to Brexit, in terms of East-West relationships over the last number of years.

So the DUP has adopted quite a hard-line position on this and it has meant that effectively once the election happened, there was a ticking clock was set in place that started a countdown at the end of which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would be obliged to form a new Executive.

Now, these arrangements I spoke about them previously, it was last year in the Northern Ireland Election Ministers and Petitions of Concern Act. This stems from the New Decade New Approach agreement that was reached at the start of 2020. And effectively the reason that this extended timeframe was put in place was to allow a space for cross-party conversations and negotiations to happen in the event of any political instability or upheaval, with a view to enabling people, politics power sharing to restart and for politicians to get back around the table in the Assembly and the Executive without the need to go to an election.

So this period, the maximum amount of time was 24 weeks to form a new Executive that came and went. The 28th of October was the deadline for that. And I'm sure you heard the very strong vocal statements from the Secretary of State in the lead up to that deadline where he was very much adamant that at one minute past midnight, an election would be called. And it was for that reason that we were expecting potentially to be hearing about an election somewhere around the 15th December.

Now, that hasn't happened. Indeed whenever that time came, it was a little bit of an anti-climax of sorts because everyone was sitting waiting, trying to find out what was going to happen. And it was after the weekend and into the next week before we had any sort of a sense of what would be happening. All we knew was that there would be an election, but there was no clarity on when. And we knew that the Secretary of State had a window of 12 weeks within which he could call that election.

Just earlier this week in the House of Commons, the Secretary of State announced that he would be extending that window of 12 weeks through legislation to somewhere between six weeks, which would take it to the 8th December or 12 weeks, which would take it to the 19th January. Now, that means that the Secretary of State has that flexible timeframe within which to call an election. Not that an election will necessarily happen within that timeframe, but it does mean that if we take that to the maximum point of the 19th of January, that we could be looking at an election at some point in April.

So that will present a bit of a clash with the local government or the council elections that are due to be happening this year. Whether or not things be extended a little bit further, that an election for both of those, for both the Assembly and Councils could happen on the same day or not, but that will remain to be seen. I think certainly the hope at this stage is that an agreement will be reached long before then that will facilitate the reestablishment of an Executive and remove the need for another election to happen. But certainly at this stage it seems that the mood music between the UK the EU is quite positive.

So one of the reasons that this extension has been put in place to allow for those conversations to happen, to allow for any outcomes to be presented to the parties in Northern Ireland to allow a bit of space for the DUP in particular to take stock of what any such changes might band to see if that would be enough to enable them to return to government in Northern Ireland while still upholding its position with regard to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Now, I mentioned previously that there is a little bit of wriggle rooming terms of what the DUP is looking for. It's relatively ambiguous. So we've heard strong language around remove and replace and want to see the overturn of the protocol. But what that actually means in reality hasn't to my knowledge anyway, I've been really solidly pinned down, so there isn't a really firmed line in place there as such.

So there is the potential that should there be sufficient changes there that would mitigate the impact, the operational impact of the protocol on the ground in Northern Ireland, that that might be enough just to enable the party to get back into power sharing. But will that be enough?

There is still the potential that no matter what is agreed between the UK and the EU as a result of these current conversations, the DUP still might be minded to say it's not enough to still put faith in the Protocol Bill that is moving through Parliament in Westminster and that in itself could act as a further roadblock down the line to getting power sharing going here.

So there are a number of routes and options ahead for the DUP and I'm focusing on the DUP as it's the party very much at the centre of what's going on currently. There are a number of routes ahead for the party that it could possibly take. None of them are easy, so it's going to be a choice of the least bad option effectively for the party going forward. And we'll have to wait and see what comes forward with that.

Now, it's impossible to think about what's happening in Northern Ireland currently without looking at the wider context within which it is situated. It's been quite a year since we last spoke, leaving aside the election itself, we had the Platinum Jubilee, the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. Within UK Politics it has been a succession of upheaval and instability within the Conservative Party that has had really serious consequences for politics at the UK level more generally, but also as an indirect consequence of what has happened here in Northern Ireland in terms of really further adding to that insecurity and instability around what is happening with the protocol on Northern Ireland and in particular how those different personalities at the top in the Prime Minister position are going to be changing the dynamics of the conversations between the UK and the EU. Certainly with Rishi Sunak in post as Prime Minister, things seem to be certainly more minded towards finding a solution.

But as we heard before a Westminster committee earlier this week as well, there's still a long way to go before any agreement is reached, but certainly movement is moving, is going in the right direction in that regard. But it doesn't help at all that we've had three Prime Ministers,

three Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland. We have this really, really protracted issue with regard to the Northern Ireland Protocol, an issue that is beyond the parameters of what can be dealt with in Northern Ireland.

It's very much resting in the hands of Westminster in terms of finding a solution for that and to confuse things even further. We've had three Secretaries of State which has made it a lot more difficult to build those relationships that are necessary for feeding through their perspectives in the interests of what's happening within Northern Ireland, both with regard to the protocol and more generally in terms of, for example, the cost of living crisis and other issues here in Northern Ireland and getting that information through to Westminster as well. So we seem to have little bit of stability now. Chris Heaton-Harris was reappointed to his post when Rishi Sunak took office there just a few weeks ago. So for the foreseeable we know who our Secretary of State is, and hopefully that one element of stability that we will have for the next few months at least.

We also have the census results that were released, which it depends on your perspective on it, it was significant and it showed there was a change in the religious dynamics in Northern Ireland for the first time. It's one of those things that you might be able to read a lot into it. You might not. I'm very much of the view that increasingly it is difficult to consider that there's a real a crossover the different categories of identity or identification within Northern Ireland.

So numbers of Catholics, for example, doesn't necessarily give a direct line to indicating the number of nationalists, and that in turn doesn't even itself give a direct line to indicating how people might be minded to vote in the event of a border poll. So, yes, it's an interesting finding, but it needs to be read in a much wider context and understood in terms of a changing complexity around identity in Northern Ireland more generally.

And this in turn feeds into another not issue, but another dynamic that has been applied. Which has been in the wake of Brexit, we've seen a lot more conversation and a lot more concerted conversation around Northern Ireland's constitutional future. What that would mean, what that would look like, how it would work in practice, and whether you agree or disagree with one perspective or another, they're conversations that are happening, arguably becoming increasingly difficult with a lot more tension around those conversations than there was a year or two ago.

But certainly it's something that is feeding into that to some degree, at least feeding into that wider narrative of understanding how Northern Ireland's politics is operating. Because Northern Irish politics isn't just focused solely on the here and now.

As important and as a significant and prevalent as that is. What we have to remember that our parties are grouped among designate groupings of unionism, nationalism, predominantly. They each have different constitutional aspirations. So of course they're going to be having conversations that are in broadly divergent directions. And a lot of the focus over recent times has been how those divergent conversations can be amalgamated somewhat to try and understand better what Northern Ireland's future might be. So there's myriad different perspectives on that debate. I've got a slide with some further resources, some of which tap into that conversation as well that will be sent out afterwards. But certainly it's something that's a low level, at least feeding into those wider dynamics at play currently within Northern Irish politics.

So I mentioned that I would talk a little bit about public opinion. So it's not my job to say what's good, bad, indifferent or anything of the sort with regard to any of these topics that I'm talking about today. But I will look to some of the polling and surveys that have been done just to try and get a sense of what the general public responses to the issues.

Now, what I'm going to present here is by no means a fulsome, in-depth analysis of all of the data that's out there at the moment. But they're just some snapshots of some interesting points that have emerged from those. And I've included the links as well, if you wish to follow those up further.

So the first that I'm going to look at is from Queen's University in Belfast, and it's "Testing the Temperature" part six survey, that they have been conducting. And this has been a series of polls that have been conducted over the last few years, focused primarily on the protocol and responses to it. So this is just one very small element of it I'm addressing here.

Participants were given the statement the Northern Ireland Executive should be fully functioning regardless of what happens on the protocol. And we see from the results here, 65% of all participants agreed with the statement, 32% disagreed, 3% either didn't know or weren't sure. And effectively what that shows us is that for the majority of people that were surveyed, the protocol should not be essentially a stumbling block to getting power sharing back up and running. So this was from October this year. Quite, quite a recent survey. And it's interesting to see that actually the position as a whole, if we look across the survey sample, the position that the DUP is taking isn't one that the majority of people in this instance agree with.

If we look at the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, so this data from 2021, but it was released just this year in 2022. Participants were presented with this statement. There are a number of different opinions on the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, which was signed in 1998. Which one of these statements is closest to your view? And we see that there is a 65% response rate saying that either the agreement remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland as it is or that it remains the best basis for governing NI but needs some changes to it. In other words, 65% saying effectively the Good Friday agreement in some format least should still form the basis for governance in Northern Ireland.

Now I think that's something to be read in a positive light in so far as it shows that there is still support there for the Good Friday Agreement. There's still support for that idea of power sharing in Northern Ireland, albeit in an amended format for a number for the largest grouping in terms of responses in the survey, 40%. So there's something to be optimistic there. But despite the challenges of what's happening currently, there's still, at least within this sample group, an interesting seeing power sharing continue.

And we also saw just there at the weekend Lucid Talk Belfast Telegraph polling. I've spoken a lot about the DUP and Unionist response as to the Northern Ireland Protocol in particular, and I think it's worth thinking about whether or not the DUP is operating in a silo or whether or not it is actually taking the hard line position that it is on the protocol issue because it sees that there is a demand within unionism for that. And certainly if you look at the Lucid Talk poll from this month, it does seem to suggest that there is support for the party's position. Only 5% of those that were surveyed want to see an immediate return to power sharing. The majority, 80%, either support the Stormont boycott until the protocol is scrapped or until it is significantly changed. So that was two category responses combined that lead up to 80% in that regard.

So we see that the DUP does have a support, does have support there for the position that it's taking but the majority of people do not see if we go by the QUB polling that the protocol itself should be a stumbling block to getting back to power sharing.

So that leaves the question of what would be an amenable way of doing things. And there has been some talk in different quarters about the potential for parallel, a parallel approach to getting back to power sharing whereby the DUP would return to Stormont, but the work on the Northern Ireland Protocol would continue alongside the DUP have been very vocal in saying that that will not happen for reasons that I have already outlined in terms of them wanting to see action around the protocol so effectively it emphasises looking across these figures that we're still in a very hard stalemate with this with this particular issue.

And I've mentioned as well, the language around what scrapped means or significantly changed. That's very ambiguous. So scrapped to one individual might mean something to another. Same with significantly changed and I've just included a note here at the bottom of the slide around caveats, the selection of data that I have here, as I mentioned, isn't the only polling and surveys that have been done in in this regard. But it's important, I think, just to note that there is a lot of conflation around the terminology. There's a lot of politicised ways of speaking about some of the terminology related to particularly the protocol in Northern Ireland.

And indeed, in recent weeks we've seen around joint authority and consultative roles in the event the power sharing doesn't get back up and going again, what role if any would the Republic of Ireland have in governance within Northern Ireland. And indeed the team at Queen's University Belfast who conducted the polling that I've mentioned here, they undertook a study earlier this year in which they actually tested that knowledge of their participants.

So that they asked participant show well they felt they understood the issues around the Northern Ireland Protocol and then presented a series of questions around the technicalities of it to see how accurate the responses were and they found that actually a lot of people who said they were well informed felt they were well informed of the protocol, actually weren't necessarily so. Whenever you looked at the breakdown of the technical questions.

So if that's what the general public, then there's a question for what's happening at the political sphere within media, within every possible public platform in terms of the way in which these issues are being communicated and presented and the accuracy of those. So that's just something to it to always have in the back of your mind, particularly as students and going on into your future studies, just to be aware that what you see and what you hear isn't necessarily everything that's out there, and to just always be mindful, to dig a little bit deeper.

The final point that I will add here is, again this QUB "Testing the Temperature" survey - Essentially, in this same survey, participants were asked about the levels of trust that they have in different bodies and stakeholders with regard to the Northern Ireland Protocol. And there's two, two boxes here that I want to highlight.

Now, if we're talking about the Northern Ireland Executive, we see that it has one of the lowest trust levels with regard to the Northern Ireland Protocol, second only to the UK Government. One of the most trusted stakeholders or groups is Northern Ireland business, and that's been a fairly consistent finding for quite some time now. But it goes to show that despite the

optimism that there is still something there to be fought for with regard to power sharing in Northern Ireland.

Actually, even if the Executive does get back up and running, it has a lot of work to do in order to instil trust and restore trust in the public that it is capable of doing what it is there to do. And it's worth saying as well that there are other areas where the Executive hasn't necessarily been shown to have the confidence of the public.

So the Northern Irish Life and Times survey, for example, one of the questions asked there was around, has the Executive done enough to mitigate poverty within Northern Ireland. I'm paraphrasing, but that was the gist of it. And the response in the majority was that, no, it hasn't.

So there's a lot of work there to be done. If and when an executive does get back up and running in order to instil the confidence that it is able to do the job that it's there to do. Now final point that I will put out here is just looking ahead. What's to come? And it's really all answers on the postcard at the stage with this one. There's so many potential routes ahead that can be pursued with this. I've mentioned that we might have another Assembly election at some point in 2023. I think at this stage there's not much inclination towards that because as I showed you from the data, there's very little to indicate that anything would substantially change as a result of that.

But I think what we're likely to see for the next number of months until there's clarity on what's happening around that that is parties will remain in election mode. So we had a sense of that whenever the parties reconvened in the Assembly few weeks ago. We hear the way that the parties are talking on media, for example, across social media as well. And we can see that very much they're preparing for an election. They're ready for it come what may. But the difficulty with that is, as these positions harden, the gaps between the parties become much more difficult to reconcile. And that will mean that when things get back up and going again, assuming that they do, it will be much more difficult for those cross-party relationships to coalesce again and to effectively overcome these divisions.

So I would be very surprised if we don't see a period of cross-party negotiations and talks before anything gets going again.

So effectively what I'm saying, I think at least might happen based on what I've seen, is that we have a two stage process whereby first of all, it'll be what happens between the UK and the EU in terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol and whether or not there can be sufficiently strong changes secured there that will allow the DUP to get back into power sharing. And then following that will be a period where those challenges internally within Northern Ireland will need to be sifted through and worked out before anything can get going again. So there's no easy solution and there's a very long road ahead.

But certainly there is a concerted focus that with the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement approaching, that there is a need for the optics of it as much as anything to ensure the power sharing is functioning by then it will be very difficult and it's been spoken about. I think it was a DUP member in terms of being a funeral for the Good Friday Agreement, if there is no functioning Assembly and Executive by then.

So it'll be very difficult to get to that stage without power sharing in place and still be able to argue that it is worthwhile having. And I think we'll be a lot more focus if that is the scenario at

that point in time on what's wrong with power sharing and I guess a more negative analysis of what's happening with it. Than looking for the opportunities that exist within the framework of the Good Friday Agreement in terms of what can be done to make the institutions more robust to ensure the power sharing going forward can be stabilised.

All of this is happening against the backdrop of a cost of living crisis with the economic instability that we've seen both at the UK level and particularly within Northern Ireland as well. Which is compounding to...we're only seeing the very start of it at this stage. It's going to get a lot worse before it gets any better.

So there's a lot of work to be done in that regard. And it will be worth keeping an eye on how that the broader package of issues interacts with what's happening politically in terms of what might be the pushing factor to encourage power sharing to start again.

We saw back in 2019, late 2019, that it was health care worker strikes that proved to be a bit of a catalyst for in the New Decade, New Approach agreement across the line. So there may be something there that might just even if what comes from the UK, EU isn't as full a package as the DUP would like to see, it might just be enough to encourage the party to say, okay, we can work with that and to get back in light of those other issues potentially and perhaps being a bit too optimistic about that is certainly one option on the table.

We're also hearing recently that there's a really significant budget deficit and that has arisen. Civil servants are saying in part that is because there hasn't been the presence of ministers overseeing departments and able to operate within their full capacity for the last few months. And that has contributed towards this deficit. That in turn will have an impact on the block grant the money that comes from Westminster to Northern Ireland next year.

So effectively whenever or if an Assembly and Executive gets back up and running, it will be extremely difficult to see how a lot of the issues that will be building up in the meantime can be addressed in any sort of fulsome way in light not just of the broader issues that I've spoken about, but in light of the financial constraints in terms of what can be done in that regard. The Civil Service is limited in the meantime.

So once that deadline at the end of October was reached, essentially what happened was ministers...their, caretaker capacity completely finished. They are no longer in any ministerial post so that means more or less that Northern Ireland is currently being run by civil servants in terms of the devolved powers.

So what that means is that there are limitations on the decisions that can be taken by civil servants, then we saw that there was some legal pushback on that between 2017 and 2020, which helped to define the boundaries of what it was that civil servants can do. But there is still a little bit of grey area there.

So in addition to that legal clarification of sorts, we also have a degree, more than likely of hesitation within the civil servants to be taking any decisions that might stray into territory that could be legally challenged. So effectively, we have a very constrained civil service in terms of what they can do.

And I'll conclude with a not insignificant question. Would an Executive help any of this? The short answer is yes.

I mean, we've seen the challenges over recent months, for example, with the distribution of financial assistance in light of the cost of living crisis. That's just that's just one element. I'm not trying to paint the picture here that if we had an Executive, everything would be solved within a couple of days or a week and everything would be grand again.

It wouldn't a large part of that is because we have a huge backlog of really significant issues, not just since the election in May, but actually preceding as well. A lot of the backlog from the 2017 to 2020 hiatus was still there in the system.

So there's a lot built up there and that's going to be happening within a very difficult economic environment going forward there will be less money. There are for ministers to be able to do what they want to do, what is they have to do within their departments in order to address some of those issues.

We have the health care situation as well. We have strikes that are pending for nurses and numerous other sectors as well. So it very much isn't the case that everything can or will be solved by an Executive coming back into place. But certainly on looking at the evidence, it would suggest that having an Executive in place in a purely practical sense is a much better place to be in than not to be.

So I will leave it there and looking forward to hearing the questions.

M: Hi, everyone.

Clare, thank you very much for your insight and an excellent analysis of politics and Northern Ireland in 2022 you packed a lot into that. And you put it into the wider context of UK politics as well, the public opinion, political attitudes. I find that very interesting. I haven't seen that before. So, you know, particularly in relation to trust and confidence in the institutions, I find that very interesting and looking forward. Well, you know, it's seems to be a difficult, difficult time generally, not just for the politicians, but for all of us at the moment.

So we've got some questions for you now. And I'd like to thank again the students who sent in questions.

We're going to start off actually on a few questions about, you know, the fact that we do not have a functioning Assembly and Executive at the moment and from Lismore Comprehensive there is this question.

Do you think the current cost of living crisis would be better managed if our own government was up and running?

C: I've said it's not my place to give opinion on these matters, but certainly if you look at what's happening there are mechanisms that would be better administered if there was an Executive in place. And I mentioned about the financial assistance with the fuel bills and so forth that hasn't been distributed here in Northern Ireland yet.

There was a recent conference or event up at Stormont (Parliament Buildings) "Crushed by the Cost of Living Crisis", which took a whole day where it really emphasised through experts input and conversations around the issues that are arising as a result of the lack of a functioning Executive currently.

So certainly people working on the welfare and social security side of things and with expertise in that end and they're very much screaming from the rooftops that we need an Executive in place to be dealing with these issues.

Certainly if you look politically at what the parties as well are saying, they're very minded. I think it's fair to say even for the DUP, they're very minded that there are issues therein terms of the cost of living and the broader economic picture in Northern Ireland at the moment that does require leadership, but that's where the difficulty is that the DUP is very mind it and saying an Executive wouldn't necessarily do everything that is needed in that regard.

So, you know, there's no great incentive there to break its hard-line position with regard to the protocol in light of that, whereas the other parties broadly in slightly different ways are saying we need to get the institutions back up and running to deal with this.

So there are some different perspectives there. But I think if you're talking to the independent experts on the issues so stepping away from the political arena, they're very much minded that there needs to be an Executive reformed in order to address these issues. And not the only feasible and practical way in which that can be achieved is through an Executive.

So I'm not sure if that's really answered the question, but certainly I would recommend looking at the "Crushed by the Cost of Living Crisis" event that was held in Stormont a few weeks ago. Those independent academic experts that that fed into that and certainly, that will give a much more in-depth analysis of some of the issues that are being seen in relation to that.

M: Okay. Thank you very much for that recommended extra reading, Clare. We also have a question from Karen. It's not only schools that sign up to get our information at times.

So Karen has asked us to ask you "What are the implications for governance of Departments in the absence of an Executive?"

C: Um, yeah.

So this is a very practical sort of question. The implications are through our caretaker phase that was that the ministers were very limited in terms of what they could do. So there wasn't that opportunity to be able to take the same breadth of decisions, either within departments or across the Executive that was there whenever everything was functioning as normal.

Since the end of October now we have civil servants that are effectively running the departments and that's not a new situation. I think they're very used to it at this point. After 25 years of stop start politics and direct rule previous to that. So I think what we're essentially saying is we have, if I can put it this way, unelected individuals who are now taking decisions, but their ability to take big decisions is very, very restricted.

So we're at a bit of a stalemate where there's a bit of a shortfall between what can be done within Northern Ireland now in terms of decision-making capabilities within departments and how far Westminster is willing to go in terms of stepping in.

And we see there have been some areas where Westminster has stepped in in terms of legislation, for example, but there is there is a grey area between those two points and that's where we're going to start to see the issues arising. So in terms of governance, there's a huge democratic question mark, if I could put it that way, over what's happening within the

departments. And unless there's some movement in some direction or another, be that in terms of direct rule or getting the institutions back functioning again. That grey hole is just going to remain there as time goes on.

More and more issues are going to be falling over the cliff edge in to that, again, adding to the backlog, then that will have to be dealt with further down the line. So it's without being dramatic about it, it is a pretty serious situation that we're in currently in terms of governance.

M: Thank you very much Clare, for that answer. And from Carrickfergus Grammar and I suppose this goes back to a public opinion.

“What level of popular faith is there in the Assembly and Executive? What are the approval ratings of the Assembly and Executive?” And I know that you've touched on this obviously already in your presentation. “If these are in decline, is there a danger of the institutions simply withering away?”

C: Yes and no.

So I'm an optimist insofar as I see that there is an opportunity there for the framework of the Good Friday agreement to be worked with. I do think that it is possible to implement new strategies and new processes that will enable power sharing to be more sustainable going forward as a means of governance and to enable the institutions themselves to be a bit more robust whenever it comes to shocks internal or exogenous.

At the same token, I can understand that there is a level of frustration and we see that across polling as well. There is a level of frustration within the general public at stop, start politics of the idea of, well, you know, so what if we get things back up and going again? There's just going to be another crisis further down the line. You know, everyone's almost waiting for the next the next challenge that will arise that will knock power sharing sideways.

And in that sense, it's difficult to see how public interest or public...What's the word I'm looking for? Yeah, how public approval of the institutions can in any way kind of increase, you know if it's constantly looking for the next issue where is there to look for the positive you know you're just you're just waiting for something bad to happen so it's always with a negative sort of lens that you're looking at it.

But that said, the data and the polling does seem to indicate that there's the support there for the Good Friday Agreement to be a basis for devolution. So I think it's more a question of perception and issues around the institutions, how they're shaped and how they're functioning as opposed to the presence of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland.

And I think that's where the conversation needs to be situated. In looking at how those two camps can be, can be brought together, how those two conversations can be, can be merged, because if there's support there, for the idea of devolution and having that more localized form of governance, then it's not a question of it being there.

It's a question of how that is done. There is wriggle room within the framework of the Good Friday agreement for that to be rejigged effectively. How that's done? Don't know that that's a conversation not just for geeks and nerds like me who talk about these things on a daily basis, but also within the political sphere.

Because remember, we have the institutions arranged predominantly to prioritize the unionist and nationalist groups within them, and that's starting to be challenged now with what's happening in the centre ground. So different parties at different parts of the political spectrum of Northern Ireland will have different intentions and aims and ambitions around what they would want to see in the event of any such institutional reform.

So that's a very difficult conversation that would need to be happening in itself. And dare I say, it may even be one that further down the line could be the next or another point of contention between the parties going forward. But I think this as a final point in this question, any such questions like that would be more or less internal and a matter to be solved internally.

What we're seeing happening in terms of the current impasse is external and that's where the issue is. It's not something that sitting the parties in the room together can solve. This is something that's very much that that stage cannot be reached until the external factors have been dealt with. And that's where the issue is here. And it's something that wasn't foreseen with NDNA and it's something that wasn't really accounted for, I think it's fair to say, back in 98 either. So it's relatively new territory here and it's difficult to see how it will be navigated.

M: Thank you very much for that answer.

Clare, I have one more question to ask you about and it's in relation to the DUP, and the Northern Ireland Protocol and it's from Lismore Comprehensive.

Is there a way forward for the Democratic Unionist Party over the issue of the protocol or will this continue to be a stumbling block for the return of the devolved government in 2023?

C: Yes, there is a way forward, but there are no easy options for the party. So effectively the DUP could change its position and decide, right, we're going to go back into the Assembly and do things in parallel. As I mentioned in the presentation, the party's very minded it's not going to do that, but that is one option on the table.

Another option is that the party will accept whatever comes as a result of these technical negotiations between the UK and the EU on the protocol, and take that perhaps maybe want to still work in the background on tweaking some elements of that, but be happy to go back into power sharing and do that in a sort of semi parallel way.

Another option. Third route is that the DUP is entirely happy with what happens. Gets back in, leaves the protocol be and things get going as normal as they can be in Northern Ireland politics. Where the protocol is no longer pushed up as a priority issue. But those are those other factors that I discussed in the presentation and other social issues more generally can gain more prominence.

It's very difficult to say what way the party will go because we don't know what the outcome will be of these conversations. It isn't clear where the DUP's line is with regard to what will be acceptable as a result of those conversations.

And in addition, we still have this legislation in Westminster on the Northern Ireland Protocol, which is deeply antagonistic, if I can put it that way, for the EU to be seeing that progressing. But it's a positive for the DUP to be seeing it progressing because that's a sign of action being taken.

So it depends what happens as well with that and indeed the mood music and what's being said from Westminster as well will all feed into this much bigger picture.

So it's very difficult to say what way things will go for the party, but certainly there are a number of options there, none of them easy, it has to be said, but there are options there that the party could pursue.

Whether or not that will cause further stumbling blocks in the future, it's anyone's guess. I'm really not sure at this stage, and it very much depends on what route the party does opt to pursue.

Certainly Brexit and the protocol won't go away in the next couple of years there will be a vote in the Assembly on the continued application of aspects of the protocol that democratic consent lock that's within the protocol for that.

So it's not going to go away anytime soon. But whether or not the parties will be able to work together to overcome the issues or whether or not it will be an effectively dividing bloc between the parties and different perspectives from the Assembly on that issue.

But as I say, I think if there's any things that could potentially be the next challenge for the Assembly, and it's inevitable they will come. But I think it's important for us to try and look for more positive aspects of what's going on, if there's if there's any sort of potential going to exist there for things to continue, albeit in a slightly different way, but for things to operate.

M: Yes, we're inclined in Northern Ireland to always look at the negative situations.

C: I think so, yeah. There's, there's a lot there that there is to be negative about, but certainly there's also something to be positive about and it's effectively political will and how the parties will interact with each other that will determine how it progresses.

M: Okay. Thank you very much, Clare. That's my questions finished for now. So I'm going to hand over to Anne Marie who has a few more for you.

A: Thank you very much Marina.

Clare, I have two questions here from Lismore Comprehensive. And the first question is in relation to the Belfast Good Friday Agreement.

And the question is, in your opinion, should the Belfast Good Friday Agreement be tweaked in order to avoid a future scenario where one party can walk away and bring down the institutions?

C: I'm going to swerve the first part of that because my opinion doesn't really matter in the situation, but I will try and give the academic response.

There is the potential there for that to be done. Now how effective it would be or otherwise is, would be a bit of an experiment and remains to be seen. But certainly within the Good Friday Agreement, there are mechanisms, there are there is at least space for mechanisms to be brought in where the institutions might not be just as susceptible to collapse.

So, for example, you could have the Office of First not the office, you could have First and deputy First Minister positions brought into the d'Hondt mechanism, for example. So that would be one way that if, if, for example, the First Minister resigned, it could go back out to d'Hondt and things could work out that way.

You know, there are various options around designation, for example, that could mean for the election of the Speaker for instance, where it isn't reliant on one party or both parties which in Sinn Fein or the DUP, being able to partake in that process in order to elect a Speaker.

So that could potentially be a route to overcoming the kind of obstacle that we've seen the last few times the Assembly has been recalled.

So there are options there. But the big issue isn't so much. It's not so much an academic question of what the options are, but it's more of a political question of what that would mean for the particular parties.

And you will see some parties that will be keen on some institutional reform ideas because it would negatively impact them in terms of their power, their influence and what they could do within the institutions potentially. And on the flip side, it could be giving more power and influence to other corners of the Assembly that wouldn't be happy with, particularly coming up to elections.

So there's the political dynamic of any such questions around the institutions is much more pertinent than any academic sort of debates or ideas around it. And it will very much depend on what political parties are willing to do in that regard to prevent it going forward DNA did take a number of steps to try and ensure that the situation we're in currently wouldn't happen again.

But as I mentioned, the situation that we're in isn't one that could have been envisaged, right?

The parties can just sit down and have a chat and sort this out on this occasion, it's entirely external at this point as to what's happening. It's being pushed outside the parameters of Northern Ireland. So it's a very different scenario and I think that's part of the issue as well, is that there will be unforeseen circumstances and challenges and knocks that will come down the road for the institutions. And you can't foresee everything, but you can put in place mechanisms that should, in theory enable the institutions and the parties to be able to overcome some of the more the more expected issues and challenges that might come down.

There is the space to do that. It's just whether or not the parties will be willing to take any such steps and indeed what steps they would be happy to do so. That will that would ultimately dictate any such scenario like that.

A: Thanks, Clare.

And our final question, the theme here is the Northern Ireland Health Service.

So our health service is under immense pressure, especially since COVID and recently we've had the scenario where A&Es have had to close their doors and ask people not to come. With this being one of the BIG issues--and BIG is in capital letters--what do you think Northern Ireland can do to improve this?

Is that a question of more money or investment or more GPs, education all of us in Northern Ireland what to do in a medical situation?

C: It's a great question.

I'm not a health expert or a social policy expert. So there's definitely more expertise out there in terms of the modalities around education, in certain health or other situations that people might go to A&E for or to GPs for where they could redirect elsewhere, for example.

Certainly, you know, money is a big factor. You know, if the funding was there for the health service more generally, certainly that's one of the elements that the health care workers have been screaming about well before the pandemic. But particularly so since then around funding, ensuring that there's adequate equipment ensuring, there's enough staff, ensuring staff retention as well, which is a huge issue, you know, with a lot of nurses, doctors, all the health care workers who came through the pandemic, absolutely exhausted, broken by what they had been through, have left the system now. And there's not the same number of people coming back to replace them.

So there's a whole issue there around not just getting staff and also retention of staff within the system as well. So it is partly that more practical elements of what's going on there. But again, it helps if you've got somebody at the top of the chain who's able to coordinate all of these, who's able to take the decisions, who's able to liaise with Westminster and all the various other stakeholders within Northern Ireland in order to try and find ways through these issues. And we don't have that without an Executive there.

So the health issue, the health service waiting list issue is a massive, massive one. I mean, the waiting lists are the longest in the UK, I believe they're some of the longest in Western Europe, let alone just the UK.

So there's there is a massive issue there that needs to be dealt with little bit like This Executive.

It's not going to be solved overnight. You know, there's just so much therein terms of backlog that needs to be addressed with it. But certainly it would make a big dent in getting started and doing that if we had a Minister for Health in place in that regard.

So as I say, probably health and social care policy people would be able to give a more fulsome answer in terms of the modalities of that. But certainly from a more social scientist, political scientist perspective, there's plenty there that can be done that isn't being done currently.

But if I can finish on this point, I think ultimately any changes as is the case in most scenarios needs to come from the ground up in terms of listening to the people that are actually on the ground in the hospitals, dealing with the day to day issues that needs to very much feed up and inform what is happening at the top of the chain in order for change to actually be effective on the ground without that, it's just going to be a series of administrative rejigs and reshuffles.

That's not really going to change what's happening for staff at the ground. You know, nurses have voted to go on strike in the last couple of weeks. So that's going to be another issue. That we would need an Executive to deal with that isn't there to deal with it. So yeah, it's a bit of an open ended answer and I apologise for that. But certainly it is something that needs to be top

of the agenda. And currently the question is what agenda and where when we don't have an Executive

A: Thank you very much for tackling those great questions submitted by Carrickfergus Grammar, Lismore Comprehensive and Karen. Thanks for your great presentation.

It's given us a lot of food for thought as always. And Marina maybe you'd like to come in here and say a few words also.

M: Thank-you Clare.

It's great for our teachers and pupils and others interested in a, you know, an academic analysis of what happens in relation to politics and the Assembly and the Executive.

It's something that as an Education Service, you know, we kind of give out information and facts about the Assembly and how it's working, etc... But, you know, I know that this analysis will be very useful to our schools and our pupils especially.

So thank you very much for taking the time to join us and talk about it.

C: Thank-you very much.