

The Assembly & Executive

KEY:

N: Narrator

N: Northern Ireland's power-sharing government institutions are the Assembly and the Executive. Each plays a different role.

The Assembly is the legislature for Northern Ireland, elected by its people to represent their views and make laws on their behalf. It's made up of MLAs, or 'Members of the Legislative Assembly', and meets in Parliament Buildings.

Following an election, the Assembly appoints the Executive – the Ministers who lead Northern Ireland's nine Government Departments. This is a power-sharing coalition government of different political parties, and it meets in Stormont Castle. The more MLAs a party has, the more Ministers it will have in the Executive.

First, let's look at the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The largest party from the largest designation in the Assembly ('unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other') nominates the First Minister, and the largest party from the second largest designation nominates the deputy First Minister. However, if the largest party from the largest designation is not the largest party in the Assembly, then the position of First Minister goes to the largest party in the Assembly. The First Minister and deputy First Minister jointly manage the work of the Executive and have equal powers. Their Department is called The Executive Office.

The Justice Minister is elected by the Assembly, and this decision must have cross-community support from unionists and nationalists.

But how does the Assembly decide who gets the other seven ministerial roles? That's where Belgian mathematician Victor D'Hondt comes in. He came up with a mathematical formula for appointing Government Ministers according to how many seats each party has won in the election.

Before we start, we need to take into account that the party the Justice Minister belongs to already has a Government Department. We take that party's total number of seats, and we divide it by one, plus the number of Ministers that party now has.

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We look at the figures, to see which is the largest party now – and that party gets to choose a Department and name one of its MLAs to be the Minister in charge. Again, the party's total number of seats gets divided by one, plus the number of Ministers it has.

At each stage, we invite the largest party to choose the next Department, and we run the D'Hondt formula.

If the largest party now has two Ministers, we'll divide its original number of seats by ... one, plus two, equals ... three.

We keep going until all the Departments have a Minister in charge.

Ministers have the power to make decisions in their own Departments and are responsible for delivering the services that we all need, such as hospitals, schools, roads and public transport. The Executive develops an action plan – called a Programme for Government – and the Budget, which states how much money each Department should get per year. It also agrees on proposals for new laws, called Bills. This work must all be passed by the Assembly before it can take effect, and the Assembly may make some changes along the way.

For every Minister, there is an Assembly Committee of MLAs to scrutinise the work of that Minister and their Department. In the Chamber, MLAs question Ministers during Question Time and highlight issues in debates that they think Ministers need to consider. MLAs may also ask Ministers up to five written questions per day.

An official opposition may be formed by one or more parties, with extra resources and rights, including setting the agenda for debate on 10 plenary days per year.

These are all ways in which the Assembly holds the Executive to account for how it governs Northern Ireland. And who holds MLAs to account? We do. The voters at the next election.