

## Academic Reflections: December

### KEY:

A: Anne Marie  
M: Marina  
DMC: David McCann

AM: Welcome, Everybody, to the third of our online talks and our last for the momentous year that has been 2020. Today, we're delighted to welcome as today's guest speaker, David McCann and David will be known to you as a commentator on local radio, local TV, current affairs programs. David holds a Ph.D. in North-South relations from Ulster University. He's delivered several lectures himself at university, and he's deputy editor of online news site Slugger O'Toole. So we're delighted to have David here today.

I'm going to hand over to my colleague Marina, who will talk us through the format, just remind us of how the session is going to run. So over to you Marina.

M: Hello, everyone, and I'm delighted to be here today and what will happen now is that David will give us a presentation. Anne Marie and I will disappear and David will show his presentation. He will talk for a while and then we will ask him some questions at the end. We'd like to thank schools for submitting questions today. So we have questions from St. Louise Grammar, we have questions from Magherafelt High School, from Carrickfergus Grammar and from Rathmore Grammar as well. So thanks very much for those questions and we look forward to asking them. So without further ado I hand over to you, David.

DMC: Thank you very much. Just get the presentation ready here. Can you all see my presentation? Yep. Perfect. Thank you. Well, thanks, guys, for the invite to come along and talk to you today. And thanks to all the schools for submitting questions, there are a number of them. So we're looking forward to getting to those a bit later. So thanks again. So today I'm going to look at the effectiveness of the Executive and the Assembly, OK? And this can always be a wee bit a wee bit tense because most people, when they think of governments, do tend to have a low rating of them, particularly when you're in economic tough times or when you are in a bit of a crisis. And Northern Ireland has been there before. I remember a Lucid Talk poll from 2013 in the Belfast Telegraph that had bad news for Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness when it found that just 9% of voters actually approved of the performance of the Stormont Executive at that time.

And just to put that approval rating in context, that was lower than the Irish government's approval rating at the time of their IMF bailout, the incoming government had an approval rating of 14%. It was also lower than the approval rating of the Greek government, who was at 13% during the time of their IMF bailout as well.

So we have in the past had very low approval ratings for our Executive and our Assembly. And you can see why this has happened before. I did a bit of an analysis, bit of a shameless plug here for Slugger O'Toole back in late 2015. So five years ago, when we were coming up towards the end of the mandate of the 2011 to 2016 Assembly and I did a bit of a survey about how

many bills had been passed during that mandate. And I find out just 34 Bills in four and a half years had been passed by the Assembly in comparison to their devolved partners.

Scotland had passed 64 Bills in the same period. And even if you go back to the previous Assembly mandate, which was 2007 to 2011, there were 69 Bills passed during that mandate. So less than half, so roughly about half the rate of Bills were being passed. And when you looked into what was being debated, what was being approved by Stormont back then, once you took out the housekeeping stuff, things like budget bills and things like, pieces of legislation that just keep the lights on, there wasn't an awful lot to really write home about.

There was, of course, Jim Allister's private member's Bill, which prohibited the employment of people convicted of terrorist offences, as special advisers. But outside of that, there wasn't there wasn't huge amounts of legislation doing the rounds at Stormont. There was a proliferation of motions. And again, you can see why the public did have that disillusionment. So that's the context in which it's important to put in the debate around the Executive.

And of course, when we come back to where we are now, it's important to remember when did we get devolution back?

You may not have you may not have noticed, but we didn't have an executive or an Assembly for 3 years. So from the end of January 2017 to January, 2020, there was no devolved government in Northern Ireland. There was no there was no one essentially from an elected politician sense taking decisions here. Who was governing the place? Well mostly civil servants. It was the Permanent Secretaries, people whom none of us elect and most of whom we'd probably never know or recognise them if we saw them in the streets.

And you can see sorry, you can see how that can be problematic, because in a democracy, it should be elected politicians taking these decisions as well. So what led to the end of the 3 year impasse and again, going back before Covid, it's hard to believe there were political issues before Covid, but there were. If we go back to roughly around about this time last year, we were about to head to the polls. If you can remember, we were in the middle of a general election campaign, which was fantastic.

I love elections and lament the fact that we haven't had one this year and we probably won't be having one next year. So I'm looking forward to 2022. But in December 2019, the Westminster general election really was a huge disappointment for both the DUP and Sinn Féin. And why and why was that? Where did things go wrong for the for the main parties? Now for the DUP they had some really big upsets. So their deputy leader, Nigel Dodds, lost North Belfast, where I'm sitting right now to Sinn Féin.

Emma Pengelly lost South Belfast to Clare Hanna and also North Down. And don't forget, Lady Sylvia Herman wasn't running again and she was very much emblematic of the remain voting unionist. And Alex Easton, the DUP candidate missed out on North Down to Alliance's Stephen Farry. So it was a huge disappointment for them, because I think whilst most people thought that I think most people thought that they would lose South Belfast, they thought North Belfast would be more competitive than it was. And they also thought that North Down was almost a very winnable for them. So they missed out on those seats. And that was a big disappointment for the parties.

And then moving on from that, then you also have Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin, of course, were looking to hold, for example, were looking to hold their Foyle seat, which they lost to Coolum

Eastwood of the SDLP. And they were also looking to kind of strengthen their position. So, for example, they had swings away from them in 17 of 18 constituencies.

So that's an important thing to keep in mind. So it was a very disappointing result for the DUP and for Sinn Féin. So in January, 2020, this coincided. This bad election result also coincided with the fact that there was a nurse's strike which really brought issues around health care to the fore. And I don't know if anyone else noticed this, but if you wanted to, throughout 2019, if you were looking to get an appointment for a doctor, for example, or if you were looking to get some surgeries, for example, scheduled, you very much had a long wait.

And these stories were growing in importance. These stories were growing in stature, as you saw people like Marie Louise Connolly, Seanin Graham and other health correspondents report about waiting times going up and up and up. Some people, for example, were reporting. And I went back and looked through some of the old news reports. Some people were reporting between 4 to 5 weeks to just get a basic GP appointment at the time. And what really brought this on, give and give it a public face was the nurses strike.

The nurses strike, which was which was a strike by pay, which was a strike about conditions for nurses. So these things were really out there and to the fore and a fed back into the sense about who could take decisions. And the problem for civil servants who were in charge and who were running the place was that they were limited in the decisions that they could actually make. They, they weren't able to shift money. They were able to make decisions within existing confines.

They weren't able to reallocate money. They weren't able to kind of shift things and create, make new policies to deal with some of these issues. So the nurses strike and seeing nurses outside hospitals and seeing nurses ask for fair pay and governments, the British government very much saying that this was a decision for a devolved administration.

So, you know, who's going to argue, do you think, from a PR point of view, who's going to argue with nurses? Who's going to argue with people at doing that? And you can see a picture of it there. And this fed this narrative of get back to work. And don't forget to write 2019 parties who had a get back to work message did very, very well in the elections. So Alliance really took off. You saw the SDLP gain back strength, whereas the DUP and Sinn Féin really were punished, people were fed up as well.

And this fed in very nicely to Julian Smith, who was the then Secretary of State, and Simon Coveney who still is the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs. This fed into their to their attempts to get the government back up and running and once the Westminster election happened and the nurses combined with the nurses strike, it was a question of, if not when Stormont came back at that time.

So Simon Coveney and Julian Smith brought forward an agreement to the public. And this and this was a bit of a stroke of genius on their part. In terms of PR, what they did was that they hammered out an agreement with the parties and then they presented it to the public. They didn't bring it to the parties to get sign off. They brought it to the public. So on a very cold Thursday, January night, I remember it very, very well. They brought this agreement and put it out to the public, and they did that for the public to put pressure on the parties.

And one after another, they all quickly signed up. Arlene Foster was the first out of the traps. And then the following evening, Sinn Fein followed suit and said that they would sign up and

devolution would return. And the agreement was fantastic because it was a bit like a game show as well. You know, Julian Smith and Simon Coveney said, look at all these nice, lovely things you could win if you come back in.

And if we get this government back, my goodness, look at all these lovely things around investment and all these big decisions you can take. So, you know, you had all that there. So it was a bit of a stroke of genius. And it did work in breaking the impasse and getting and getting the government back.

And a very telling thing about the lack of confidence that the that the governments had, that they that they didn't want to leave it and they wanted to get Ministers back as quickly as possible, was the government was reformed on a Saturday. So the agreement was announced on the Thursday night, Sinn Fein and the DUP throughout Friday and the other parties announced their support for it. They didn't leave it until Monday and they didn't want to leave it until Monday for a very good reason.

They just wanted to get them back. They were worried that something would fall apart over the weekend and that if the deal was more properly scrutinised, that would be an issue. And we're going to see in a in a slides time. Why they would have been rushing to get them back. So on a Saturday, with no fanfare, if you go back and cast your mind back to 2007 and you looked at the fanfare with which devolution was restored, then if you go back to 1999 and look at the fanfare that existed then to, there was nothing like that.

People did not cheer. There were no parties. No one was thanking the parties for getting back in. And on Saturday, on a Saturday they, they reformed them. And I was up in the Great Hall and it was, it was, it was brilliant to watch because the huddle of officials from each department who were standing outside the chamber waiting for their Ministers to be appointed, and as soon as the Ministers were walked out, their Permanent Secretaries would take them away.

And they all had these binder books. And you could see at which Departments had the most problems because by the thickness of the files that they had. So you could obviously probably guess the Department of Health, they had they had many binder books waiting for Robin Swan. And this was all before we heard anything like Covid-19. But being a political commentator, I always like to think what might have been and it is always worth pondering what might have happened.

You can see all the Ministers sitting around the Executive table there. And one thing that's great about politics and covering it and talking about it is that there are always surprises that are thrown up. Remember, we were talking a lot about mental health and the crisis in the health care system in January 2019. So Health was going to be one of the last Departments that was going to be picked. Everyone expected that the DUP would take Health back.

That was being well briefed. All the other parties thought that, everyone expected none other than Mr Edwin Poots to come in as the Minister for Health. And that was what everyone expected. That was what we all thought. And the other parties who work the d'Hondt process thought that as well. And there was an audible gasp in the chamber when Steve Aiken, the Ulster Unionist leader stood up and announced that he would be picking Health and nominating Robin Swan for it.

And it's worth noting, and you can go back, YouTube is fantastic. The Assembly YouTube site has it up. Go look at the faces in the Chamber. You can see the audible gasp. You can actually hear the gasps from the other parties. When the UUP picked Health, everyone thought, everyone assumed and thought that that the UUP would pick Agriculture and Environment. And you can hear Arlene Foster, who makes the last pick, which was DAERA for Edwin Poots kind of stumbling over her words. That wasn't what she was expecting to nominate him for. She was expecting to make him Minister for Health. So the leader of our Covid response could have been none other than Edwin Poots. And so it's always it's always nice to speculate about what might have been in the in the Executive. And again, I'll leave that up to you about the rights and wrongs or whether we or whether we had a positive or a minus on that. So, that's what might have been.

So what were the issues facing the new executive? Well, it's the NHS, stupid. It was health care that was all we were talking about. That's all we talked about for the first two to three weeks. And again, all every journalist was talking about Robin Swan has the worst job in politics, now the Department of Health. It's generally the worst job in politics for any aspiring politicians out there.

If you're a student and you're thinking about getting into politics, if someone walks toward you with the Department of Health and asks you to take on that job, run very far in the opposite direction, it has been the graveyard of many a political career and it has so many pitfalls. Why is that the case? Because it's the most public facing public service we have. If you don't have a good time at a hospital or if you're waiting a long time, you feel that, you see it.

And if you're not having that experience yourself, chances are you'll know someone who's having that experience as well. So it was the NHS stupid, so Stormont knew they had to move quickly on health care. They had to show some progress. So one of the first things out of the gate, and this was agreed within a few days, was the pay deal for nurses. So Robin Swan stood up in the Assembly Chamber and was able to talk about and announce a pay deal for nurses.

I'll go through that in a wee in a wee bit of time. You also had waiting lists as well. And I went through earlier about how long some people were waiting for basic operations. And in comparison to the rest of the UK and the South, you can see you can see these issues as well. Then you have mental health as well. We had a real mental health crisis in January and mental health was getting a big outing. And there was talk about maybe appointing a junior minister solely for mental health as well.

So mental health was a big issue as well. And then also funding, New Decade, New Approach. Remember that agreement that I was telling you that that the Secretary of State and the Irish Foreign Minister were holding up saying, look, look what you could win if you sign up to this. That was funding some of the promises and that were a big issue as well. So those so those are the key issues facing the executive.

So you can see that it's mostly health care. That was what we were focusing on in January at that time and funding some of the priorities there for New Decade New Approach.

Now, successes.

There were some successes and there are some successes of devolution. I sometimes that can come across that people like me are very critical about devolution, but I will give credit where it's due and I will always applaud positive decisions and we would far rather have a devolved

government than not have one. So you can see here £30 million pay deal offered to settle the nurses dispute and an apology significantly. And this was the thing. If you talk to any nurses, this was the thing that they that they actually really appreciated was an apology from the Health Minister on the floor of the Assembly that it had to get to that point that nurses were forced to go out and strike and go out and make the case and make their case in that respect.

So, again, that was that you can see here. This was just a few days into the Assembly. You can see Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill and Robin Swann. One of the first things they did was they paid a trip to Ulster Hospital, which is just down the road from Stormont as one of the first things they did as a joint official. They listened and they talked away to nurses as well. So Robin Swan was able to get that sorted and they were able to get that off the table as well.

They also set up a working group on mental health. And this is still operating within the Executive. So this to bring together Departments. Because mental health isn't just the Department of Health. You've got the Department of Communities who look after things like social housing and issues like that as well. You've got environment as well because we know spending time outside is positive for your mental health as well, Infrastructure as well is part of that to Finance and the Economy as well.

All these things are all part of the mental health challenge. So it's really important that Departments work together on it. So the working group is a good coordinating body for that as well.

So those were some early successes from devolution, from the restoration of devolution, although there were some issues that existed. So funding the New Decade New Approach. So if you go and look at New Decade New Approach, there are lots of new programs and there are lots of talk about increasing spending. So things like, for example, the Magee Campus in Derry, the A5, Narrow water Bridge, you've got things like city deal expenditures. You've got new investments in different parts of society.

And of course, parties were looking for ways in which to fund this. So parties were looking for around £4 billion for this. That was the figure that was talked about across the parties in January of 2020. It was around about £4 billion extra that they were looking for. And when the when the agreement was when the agreement was signed and was put in place, the Northern Ireland Office come out a few days later with their figures about what they were willing to put forward, they announced a £2 billion package.

But when you factor into the existing spending, only £1 billion of that was new money. So for every £4 that they wanted extra, £3 of them were gone. So they only got £1 extra of extra spending that they were looking for. And that, of course, places strains on your priorities. The executive has to make decisions about what it will fund and what it will look for as well. And just to point out, this is a billion pounds, I think over two or three years.

So it only works out at a couple of hundred million pounds. Just to put that in context, the Northern Ireland budget is around about £12 billion every year. So it's not a huge increase year on year and when protests were made from the parties about this, Julian Smith, the Secretary of State, was pretty dismissive. He said the Executive needs to look at its own revenue, look at its own revenue raising measures, as well as coming to the UK Exchequer for cash.

So on Twitter, he was very dismissive of the complaints of the Northern Ireland parties. So, again, he wasn't very sympathetic to the to the narrative that they were putting forward. So he

said, look, this is this is all you're getting. You're going to have to deal with it. So a billion pounds extra when they thought four billion was forthcoming. So, again, you can see you can see some of the issues.

And this leads to debates, of course, about funding and about revenue raising as well.

And again, on week one, things start to kind of go off, go off the rails. And again, this led to the charge of New Decade Same Approach. On the Monday on The Nola Show, Edwin Poots, the new DAERA Minister, was on suggesting and he said, look, we may have to look at introducing water charges and we might have to just look at examining it. And Michele O'Neill, within about 20 minutes of those comments being uttered, tweeted out that the Executive will not be introducing water charges and has no plans to do so.

And she was ruling that very firmly out. So that was that was day 3. That was day, OK, by day 3, this is where things were going. Did it get any better? A bit later. I'm not really, a few days after that on Inside Politics, the new First Minister, Arlene Foster, was on talking about tuition fees and she said we may have to look again at tuition fees and we may have to look at that as a revenue raising issue.

And she was just saying that may be something that has to be examined. And again, within an hour of that, Sinn Féin put out a statement, you can see Caoimhe Archibald, the Economy spokesperson at the time for Sinn Féin. She was ruling out any rise in tuition fees. And don't forget, Northern Ireland tuition fees are about £6000 a year lower than exists over in England. So you can just see the divisions. And this was all within the first week to 10 days of the Executive being reformed.

OK, so you can see a New Decade, Same Approach and the joys of having a five party Executive mean that that these issues are all are all there as well.

So this was this was just in the month of January.

And, you know, if you look back, little did we know we were all kind of like and if you ever see like a tsunami, a video of a tsunami coming towards you, you know, if you ever wonder about the tourists who get hypnotised by the tide going out so far and they're not looking at the big wave coming toward them, that's kind of the way Northern Ireland was in late January and early February. We didn't know this thing called Covid-19 was coming toward us.

And how serious it was even though Covid-19 had been in China for weeks at that stage, it was very much over there. I remember meeting up with someone, one or two people who had to be very friendly with who work in the current Executive. And this would have been early February. And we were talking about the challenges. We were actually in a packed bar on a Saturday night sitting on top of each other. And the thing we were talking about was, well, what challenges are coming up?

And not one of us mentioned Covid-19. And that was and that was early February of this year, simpler times. Yet, as you can see from the slide here, by two weeks later, the game had changed and the 27 February, 2020, Covid-19 arrives in Northern Ireland. Our first Covid case is diagnosed. Now we had known how serious this had been, because at that time, Italy starts going, starts looking at lockdown's Spain, is starting to get out of control as well.

And again, everyone is rushing and trying to see how they deal with this as well. But the Executive begins preparing for Lockdown. Plans were put in place because they knew that this was going to happen once Covid-19 arrived here. It was just going to be a case of how long you could delay that and how long you could push it back. So from that period, the UK and Ireland were very much in a delay phase that was encouraging people to keep their distance, that was encouraging people to maybe not socialise as much.

But this was before any work at home order have been passed or schools had been closed down. So the Executive was using this time, as well as other governments to prepare for Lockdown.

But who to follow, who to follow, because Dublin was doing one thing and the British government were doing others. Don't forget this. At the start of the pandemic, the British government were sceptical about lockdown's. The Johnson government were very much about delaying this, holding off lockdowns for as long as possible, whereas the Irish government were a bit more forward, forward thinking and forward acting, so the Irish government were out front in closing schools, the Irish government right up front, cancelling St Patrick's Day celebrations and doing things around closing museums and public spaces. And this puts the Executive in a bind. You know, who do they talk to? Who do they listen to? You know, you've got Sinn Fein and the SDLP who would naturally look to Dublin if the DUP and the Ulster Unionists, who would naturally look more to London. So who to follow? Do you go with the government that's been a bit more proactive, or do you go with the government that's doing a bit more wait and see?

So there was this divide over that. If you remember the Executive, you know, doing these joint press conferences and then literally the messaging falling apart within a day. And the divide really centred around school closures and testing. So on the 16th March, very early in the morning in Washington, Leo Varadkar announces that all schools in Ireland will close that day and will not reopen. And this puts the Executive in a bind because, of course, the public health guidance coming from the UK government and the Chief Medical Officers, we don't need to close schools yet.

So the Executive, as you know, make a joint appearance and say they're going to keep schools open. However, that doesn't last very long. Michele O'Neill comes out then the day later and says the school should close immediately.

She backtracks on what was said the day before. On the other issue was testing. Michele O'Neill gives an interview on BBC Northern Ireland's The View to Mark Carruthers. And she's very critical of the Department of Health and the roll out of testing. And she says we need to be testing more that slogan test, test, test and again, the debate over that, because there is a dispute about whether more testing was helpful or not at the time.

So that's where the divide really centred on. And of course who have the bizarre narrative that on the 16th March, many schools in Northern Ireland act ahead of the Executive. We had a natural school holiday anyway. On the 17th and 18th March, many schools just announced, look, we won't be reopening after the 18th March. So schools were acting ahead of the Executive. Many businesses were acting ahead of the Executive bars started to close, shops started to close before the Executive passed any rules or regulations asking them to do it.

And part of the reason why we got through that first wave so well was actually businesses and people acting ahead. Many, many places of work, so, for example, any of the people I work

with that required office based required office based workforce were telling me a few days before, a few days before anything was announced from the Executive "Look we're going to work from home. So you need to get ready for that."

So again, business were acting ahead of the Executive. And then on the 20th March, once everything gets agreed and gets sorted, the Executive announces a full lockdown and that's when the full measures get passed and that's when non-essential retail closes. And that's when you see really the full legal effect of fines and Covid regulations coming in here and you see a unity of purpose around that. So the Executive do get it together at that point and do present a unified front.

And that's where you start seeing the joint press conferences between Michelle O'Neil and Arlene Foster. And you see and you see joint interviews, you see a very jovial relationship between the two of them actually, using each other's first names. They're working well together. The Executive Ministers are giving joint press conferences. They're using first names. They're working very well together. There seems to be a unity of purpose and a unity of message there as well.

And if you go back to my first slide, when I was telling you about the Executive only passing 34 Bills in four and a half years, the noteworthy thing was the speed of the decisions, decisions and new announcements were tumbling out of the Executive every day.

It was hard for journalists to keep up with the raft of decisions that were being made. So, for example, the Executive by the end of March were announcing a sweep of new decisions. New childcare arrangements were put in place for those people who needed it. So basically schools, for example, we've got a divided education system for the most part here, not any more. Schools were being used for childcare facilities. Didn't matter what side of the community you came from. New grant schemes for businesses that were forced to close.

Stormont gave most businesses impacted £10,000. They also gave them rates relief as well to help them get through Covid-19, new Nightingale hospitals were created and these were all done within weeks. Hospitals were cleared out and new Covid specific areas for treatment were put in place. A roll out of a new testing program for Coronavirus was put in place. New benefit changes around access to Universal Credit. So they made it easier for you to get access though as well as personal protective equipment.

Orders for more than £60 million were put in place. There were some issues around that, around a joint order with the Irish government. But the PPE did arrive and they were able to do that. The rulebook around procurement was ripped up to speed up decisions. We did things like free transport for public sector and for public health workers.

We did numerous things around the environment as well as around housing as well. For example, homeless people in Belfast got beds and got places to stay. And that was lauded around the world. Journalists from around the world actually studied Belfast for the decisions that were being made. So this raft of new decisions and by July 2020, £2 billion of extra funding had been secured and mostly spent in the fight against Covid-19. So again, going back to what I was telling you about earlier, the extra billion pounds that that the Executive was very disappointed to get. The money did come, but it came to fight Covid-19. So the Executive had an immense amount of decisions that were tumbling out of Stormont as well.

And it is important to note at this juncture, we've gone from an Executive with limited powers to more extensive ones. So the Executive has huge amounts of power. The Covid-19 Act that was passed gives the Executive a lot of power, gives the government a lot of power. But the Assembly, though, you notice I've talked all about the Executive here.

I've not mentioned very much about the Assembly because the Assembly has little role in really overseeing these regulations. It has debated them in the Chamber, but it has little role in actually overseeing them. The spending power for the Executive has dramatically increased. So when all is said and done, we're probably looking at around an extra £3 billion of extra expenditure in this year to fight the Covid-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland alone. So the spending part of the Executive has been greatly enhanced as well.

Five parties in the Executive leaves little space for scrutiny. So it doesn't really leave a lot of time for nuance. I mean, although MLAs do stand up and ask questions at Question Time, Ministers still go to Committees and things like that.

There it is blunted somewhat due to that as well.

And if you look at the things around, like for example, the Bobby Storey funeral, when the Assembly and parties were trying to hold, for example, Michelle O'Neill to account, there are limits on what you can do. And that's just the case generally as well in terms of what Ministers can do and don't forget holding ministers to account and accountability was a big part of New Decade New Approach. So, again, we have seen some issues around that as well.

And those issues of accountability are still very much there. And you can see that on a few on a few different issues in terms of how the Assembly can hold the Executive to account. But overall, the Executive deals with the first wave effectively and again it gets plaudits for how it has dealt with some things.

Now, the second wave happens as well.

So due to the fallout of the Bobby Storey funeral, there is no joint press conferences between Michelle O'Neil and Arlene Foster over the summer months of July and August and September press conferences don't happen. In the meantime, our track and trace system ramps up. So Northern Ireland is one of the first places in the UK to actually have its own Covid track and trace app. And it was argued that that our track and trace system was UK leading it was robust.

We heard this a lot as well. But as the economy reopens, cases begin to rise over the summer and it's not very long until the Executive has to start reimposing some more restrictions. So it starts off with Belfast and Ballymena. It prohibits household visits in Belfast and Ballymena.

Then Derry follows with even more restrictions and retail and hospitality has to close in Derry just a few weeks later, and there are arguments that the Executive is being too slow to act. There are arguments that the restrictions that they're putting in aren't going far enough. You see epidemiologists making this argument to them. And you see really that that there is this notion that our track and trace system may not be as good as we once thought.

So, for example, we heard lots of talk from the Executive about it being robust and strong, whereas an MLA in Stormont (the Assembly) in October made the comment that our track and trace system was about as useful as, "a chocolate fire-guard". So again, you're seeing that the

things that were thought to be a strong a strong response to the Covid crisis weren't really as strong as we as we once thought.

And another thing that happens during this time around, the Executive is the term circuit breaker was introduced into our lexicon as if we needed another to add to lockdown's and testing and Covid-19. The lockdown consensus ends. Four parties are still very much on board with this idea about lockdowns being a way in which we should deal with the rise in cases, the DUP depart from this model somewhat in October. So a four week circuit breaker lockdown is announced in October with schools closed for an extra week and all pubs and hospitality also closing too. Now, DUP are adamant that this will last for four weeks.

Arlene Foster makes that statement. Edwin Poots makes that statement as well. The other parties are leaving room for extensions so the other parties in the Executive do. But don't forget the wider context here. They were making this lockdown announcement when furlough and other UK government measures to tackle Covid-19 were set to end at the end of October. And this also provokes divisions within the Executive. You see a period of paralysis where, for example, they have to argue that out.

And literally, as this four week lockdown is coming to an end, people are arguing, businesses have no idea what's going on. And literally, you have on a Thursday night, late on Thursday night, you see you see a decision being made which doesn't really satisfy anybody and it doesn't really assuage anyone. And this leads to the bizarre situation of the place reopening for a week, essentially, and then it having to re-close down again for another two weeks as more measures are announced.

And you see that paralysis in the Executive as it struggles to kind of get control of a second wave. And again, the track and trace system comes under a lot of scrutiny as well. Enforcement as well. You see the PSNI coming and coming under more scrutiny. You see the Justice Minister coming under more scrutiny about enforcement of Covid regulations and enforcement of things like mask wearing and that's another thing you saw with the Executive, a slowness to really just go to the end destination.

So masks, for example, on public transport and in shops and retail, the Executive had a message of look we are asking you to do this, but we're not going to impose it, and then they end up having to get there anyway.

So that was very much a pattern with the with the Executive. But the lockdown consensus, you see more critical statements of lockdown. Edwin Poots, for example, sending an email speaking about why he doesn't agree with the lockdown restrictions as well. And he's a Minister in the Executive. So, again, you see that consensus kind of ending as well.

So where are we today? The Executive dominates the governmental process in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt about that. The Covid arrangements and powers given to the Executive leave little room for the Chamber other than one of debate. OK, that's not just new with Covid that that was the case as well over in previous times as well. Covid restrictions, important to note see less MLAs in the Chamber. And this also has an impact. So again, the people in there to ask questions as well.

And again, aside from just a few parties that sit in, quote unquote, "the naughty corner", all the other parties and in the Executive, which does blunt the ability to hold it to account as well, each party kind of takes a role of defending their own Ministers rather than holding the

Executive as a whole to account. And if you look at that during Question Times, you'll see that too.

Jim Allister's bill on improving scrutiny has been debated, but with limited success. So Jim Allister is making a go at trying to get more accountability in there. And you can debate the measures about that, particularly around special advisers. But this has had limited success.

So finally, and to conclude, what have we learned? There are indeed magic money trees at a time of crisis. It's weird for some deficit hawks. We've seen the UK government really put out the public purse open during this crisis and hundreds of billions of pounds have been spent in the response against Covid-19.

And reform can happen in a big way at some time. So, for example, we saw our health and education systems hugely reformed and refocused during the Covid-19 pandemic. That that was done within two to three weeks. Unprecedented. We saw huge refocus of government spending as well, and a huge rollout of big programs and big government supports at a devolved level as well. We saw the reshaping of lifestyles as well. I mean, how many of us would have ever thought lockdowns would be impossible in a Western democracy.

Decisions can be made in a power sharing government, but that's always going to be limited. But they are always going to fight, five parties in there and they're always going to fight. So you need to have that in mind. The Executive will at this stage have less economic firepower to tackle the recession. So the British government are unlikely to give the same amount of fiscal support to the devolved regions. As for the recession, as they did for the Covid-19 pandemic and the vaccination program, the vaccine which has arrived, the rollout of that will be key on the economic recovery of that will be key too.

Party discipline going forward? It was interesting. We did see some rebellions against Arlene Foster over the Executive Committee Functions Bill. We saw a number of DUP MLAs abstain on the bill over Ministers having decisions over their own Departments. Ministerial cohesion is going to be interesting to see how that holds up. Will the SDLP, Alliance and the UUP be preparing for opposition running up to the next election? The next election is set for 2022 - Hurray! And another one is set, the local elections for 2023 and the general election is set for 2024.

So 2021 will be the last year for a while without an election. So it'll be interesting to see how they use that full year without an election to get things going economically and to get a Covid vaccine program rolled out. So those are the key things I'll be looking at for in 2021. And with that I will hand it back here. And I'm looking forward to hearing some of your questions.

AM: OK, well, thank you very much for that trip over the last year.

I was just thinking, obviously, Covid has distorted my sense of time because there was so much you reminded me of, I have to say, that I had forgotten about. And Marina mentioned that we had a great haul of questions kind of grouped them into themes as far as possible. So I'm going to maybe start, David, with the first set of questions. And the theme here is mainly around the structure of the Executive and mandatory coalition.

So we've one school sending in a question "Due to the collapse of the executive for three years and recent divisions in the executive. Is that a time to think about a change as regards how the Executive is made up? " Another question is, "Is your view that voluntary coalition should be

thought about now, given that it wasn't always written in stone that we should have a mandatory coalition?" And then this one has an interesting angle on it as well. It says, given the different, the question, the person sending the question has a view that there's perceived ideological priorities among the two main parties, business versus health. And they think, "What do you think the impact of mandatory coalition has been in terms of how the Covid was dealt with? basically.

DMC: OK, so just in terms of, I'll take the last question first, in terms of how a mandatory coalition has impacted on dealing with Covid. Well, it's important to look to look around. So Wales and Scotland, have got well, Wales has got one Liberal Democrat in the Welsh Labour government, but other than that it's Welsh Labour, the SNP have got a single party majority, sorry, single party government. Their responses to Covid in many respects haven't been any better than ours.

So having different parties around the table hasn't, isn't a barometer of success. So, for example, look at the UK Conservative government. Having Tories and a majority government hasn't always been a route to success. What it does is it can make it it can make it slower to get a decision sometimes. So our system is just really messy ok. Our system and the problem with our system is that we see everything, that there are two things, you know, for all the West Wing fans out there. You know, Leo McGarry had that famous quote in there about two things you never want the public to see how you make them laws and sausages.

You know, the problem is, are parties and social media is the worst for this. They play it out online. So, for example, you had Edwin Poots going on the radio and saying, well, you know, in Nationalist areas Covid is a bit higher. And then you have other and then you get responses to that and it just polarises the entire debate. And you see things like, you know, Carál Ní Chuilín saying spectators shouldn't go to sporting arenas and then Arlene Foster tweeting out actually, actually, yes, they can. So it's just very messy. And that's what I would just say. Our system is messier and we air our agreements way too much in public. I always wonder if Twitter had existed, whether we would have even had a Good Friday Agreement in 1998. So it just makes it hard. Going back to, is a voluntary coalition maybe a better system to go.

Well...Not now. I just don't think we're there yet. We need to we need to deal with the realities as they are. And I think that I think the voluntary coalition is a long way, way off. And I think that, look, we are divided society. And I know there are ways in which you could do a weighted majority. I think we should look at these things. The interesting thing after the next Assembly election will be if Alliance do as well as they're doing and with the Greens and People Before Profit, there would probably be about between 16 to 20 MLAs in the United Community designation.

And of course, when it's a cross community vote, it's unionist, nationalist. The United Community designation is kind of side-lined, well they are side-lined. It'd be interesting to see if they've got around 20 MLAs, whether that'll be the case next time. So that'll be the next reform. I think that'll come before voluntary coalition.

AM: OK, David, thank you and thanks for those questions.

And moving on now, a bit to kind of the effectiveness of the Executive. And we've a question here. Somebody would like your view on what initiatives the Executive could implement to improve upon their own effectiveness. And then another question, David, which I think you'll have an interest in, given your background in education. Somebody would like you to comment

on how the Executive has dealt with university students accommodation, the pandemic and how it affected that.

And also, I know it's another department, but looking at education and the whole area of exams and somebody making the point, you know, that the Welsh, Scottish and English counterparts in Department of Education have come out with a line on that. And just really kind of your commentary on how the Executive has dealt with that.

DMC: OK, so education, particularly higher education, how have things being dealt with? Well, each university has kind of done their own thing. So UU has had an online presence, for example, whereas Queen's brought students back in. The first thing, I think they're all they're all online now. So I think it's varied from university to university. In terms of students in general. Look, I think it's a really hard time, whether you're in secondary school or whether you're in university.

There's been so much disruption. I was saying to a student the other day, like you guys are like the least impacted in terms of health. You know, if one of them got Covid chances, chances are they would be, you'd be OK. But yet, in terms of the disruption, they have been the most impacted. I think, I think in terms of their education and in terms of their lifestyle.

So like for I don't know, I can't speak for anyone else, but my time in university was great. I loved it. I had so much fun. Like I was out with my friends. I was enjoying it. Great education. I loved it, had a great time. So I feel sorry for people who are literally stuck in a hall or they can't go out or they can't.

I really do and I really have sympathy. So in terms of the disruption, I do think there needs to be more recognition of the sacrifice they're making. It is a real sacrifice. And I think quite often the way it comes across and I know politicians don't always mean it in this way, but the way it comes across is the kind of wagging their finger at students like whether it's in secondary schools or in universities, you're to blame for this virus being spread around.

And, you know, I don't think that's always totally fair. So I would actually be a bit more generous in terms of students. I would also look at ways as part of the recovery, how do we also reward students for what they've done? How do we reward students for the disruption that has been that has been there throughout their lives in the past year? So the Executive, I think, for 2021 does need to look at that. And whether that's, for example, a bit more support in student finance for people, you reward them in that way. Or maybe it's something else in that respect. You know, I think that should be looked at.

The other the other question that you had there was about in terms of the effectiveness of the Executive. So the the Executive, I think, has been effective in doling out money. OK, now I know that's an, it can be an easy thing for politicians to do because politicians love spending money. I think that the in terms of the effectiveness of the Executive, we will actually know the real effectiveness when that money disappears. So a lot of this is one off spending that has to be spent by April.

So if the Executive in April is doling back a couple of hundred million to the to the British government because they take it back, then the effectiveness of the Executive obviously isn't that effective if in a pandemic you can't figure out how to spend millions of pounds to support jobs in the economy. So that's a bit of a cop out to the first question. But you will know it so advice would be keep an eye on the January monitor and which is coming up.

That's when Conor Murphy will take money back from Departments if it hasn't been spent. And keep an eye on April when the Executive would have to return some money to the Westminster government if it isn't spent, so keep an eye on those two things.

AM: OK, David. And my final set of questions relate to Brexit. And I think it's important to say that we're doing this recording on the 9th of December and things are literally changing here by the second in terms of how negotiations are panning out.

But we have three questions here with a Brexit theme. So could you give a view on what the Executive's view is on an Internal Market Bill in reference to an Irish border? Do you think Brexit will impact, again, this word on the effectiveness of the Executive and how much and for how long is Brexit going to impact on the people of Northern Ireland? And do you think a Border poll is more likely to happen sooner rather than later?

DMC: Well, a lot of issues in there. In terms of there isn't an Executive position on the Internal Market Bill, there just isn't. And there isn't a joint Executive approach on Europe. You've got most of the parties in there wanting to remain and still want to remain in the European Union. You've got two parties that are settled on Brexit. So there is no joint thinking. Where they do agree on is that Northern Ireland should have the minimum amount of impact. And you can see that the DUP have already kind of conceded defeat on the realities of what is going on.

So the Internal Market Bill, at the minute, we're seeing there'll be a grace period for Northern Ireland supermarkets to bring food in from the rest of the UK with a Northern Ireland only label on it. So I think you'll see on your on your berries and on your on your steaks, you'll see this for sale in Northern Ireland only sticker on it for a few months. And then supermarkets have to reoriented towards Europe. That's going to see a change in what you're what you're seeing in your supermarket shelves as well.

So we may we you may be instead of worrying about chlorinated chickens and Argentinean beef, you might just see too much Pinot Grigio or, you know, you might just see a lot more French baguettes on your on your supermarket shelves. But Brexit, there is no agreed thing. But they are agreed on mitigating the impact on Northern Ireland. And leading into a border poll. I really don't see that happening in the next two to three years. I really don't. Be interesting to see in the next Assembly election, will there be a trigger for that? So Unionism lost their majority in 2017. Will Unionism position shrink further in terms of total number of seats combined? We'll be looking out for that. That could be something that might trigger it. Can Nationalists win over the Alliance party to a border poll? That's essentially what you need to do, you need win over the Alliance Party and the Green Party to vote for it and to back it in the Assembly to maybe call on the Secretary of State to do a border poll.

Your other question was on?

AM: Oh, yes. Do you think Brexit will impact on the effectiveness of the Executive?

DMC: Well, in some ways it'll actually give more power back to the Executive because the British government, now whether they follow through with this is another thing, a lot of the powers coming back from Europe around agriculture and things like that. They're meant to go to Stormont, so they're meant to be go back to Westminster and then come back to us. So they may actually end up having more power.

And we actually do have a lot of power, the Assembly votes on what regulations it wants to align with in Europe. So that's actually a good point about the Assembly and the effectiveness of the of the Executive. So it will actually have some more power around that. So the Executive will have much more control over charting our future with Europe and our relationship with Europe, whether that's a good thing or a bad thing.

I'll leave that. I'll leave that open for debate. But the Executive will have much more of a role in Europe, I would imagine we would see Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill take more flights to Brussels, which ironically, they would have to go through Dublin airport to do at this stage. I imagine you will see the Executive Ministers spending more time in Brussels than you've seen in the past. So, so, yeah, it's going to become much more important.

And it kind of makes you wonder what the last four and a half years were all about.

AM: David, great set of questions from our students and teachers. Thank you very much for your responses. And I'll hand over to Marina who has another set.

M: Yes, David you're not finished yet. Have a mouthful of coffee there, draw breath.

A couple of interesting questions there and also around some issues that really concern the people of Northern Ireland and questions around are the parties listening really to the people on those issues?

And also then maybe a final I suppose a summary again of how well we're doing in relation to the recent agreements and implementing those.

And also and, you know, the greatest the greatest achievements, the greatest hits and then the you know, what kind of stands out for you in terms of what could have been done better.

DMC: OK, so starting off with then and you know, overall then, how do you think the [dog barks]. Apologies there. How effectively do you think the Executive dealt with Covid? Would things have been significantly different if Stormont had not been restored? So that's one. And let me see what else we have on Covid. Do you think the Executive will make vaccines compulsory? And do you think the pandemic has brought the Executive closer in any way and has made them more effective?

OK, thank you very much for those questions. Do I think the Executive will make vaccines compulsory? Robin Swan is being clear in saying that no, they won't. What could be an issue there...

I mean, we've seen Qantas, for example, the national carrier of Australia, say that they will not take anyone who does not take the Covid vaccine. Many countries actually already have a policy of you need to have certain vaccines before you go into them anyway. So a lot of them have had this anyway. So what that might do for anyone not thinking about taking it may impact where you can go on holiday. And that's a country decision.

So it would be voluntary, but it may impact where you want to go on your holidays. So you may want to think about that as well. In terms of the Executive coming closer together. It did in the first wave, it did in the first wave. But in the second wave that all kind of just fell, fell apart. So you had the cross...a good, a good example and this goes back to some of the questions that Anne Marie was posed about, about mandatory coalitions.

You know, you saw the cross community veto being deployed over Covid regulations. So you had the DUP deploying across community mechanism to veto proposals from an Ulster Unionist Health Minister. So you can see, you can see where mechanisms like that have been used. It hasn't always brought them together. I mean, they go through peaks and troughs. One day if you're talking to people who are working, I'd be quite friendly with people in different parties, who sit on the Executive.

And you talk you talk to them one week and you're going, OK, that things are getting back on track. Don't worry, we're all OK. You talk to them the next week. They're just there head in their hands and they're just going trying to work in this environment. It's difficult. So with 5 parties like it's messy. You've also got big personalities around that table. Don't forget this. Like, imagine being in a boardroom with Naomi Long, big personality, Arlene Foster is a big personality. Michelle O'Neill, Edwin Poots, Conor Murphy. You know, they're big personalities you know, they're you know, you can imagine trying to get an agreement between that group of people. It is very, very difficult. And Carál Ní Chuilín as well. Big personality. So, again, trying to get a decision between those, between those personalities, too. So I think I think in terms of that there, it has brought, it didn't the first wave, but that has dissipated somewhat.

And it'll be interesting to see how they handled the recovery and the vaccine roll out. Actually, the vaccine rollout, you would imagine that would be pretty unanimous. You would imagine, anyway, we'll wait and see. There may be some consensus breaking down over that in the months to come, but hopefully not.

M: OK, and actually, you said that, you know, key to future success would be the handling of the rollout of the vaccine, but also how economic recovery, would be managed. What is your view on what the financial consequences for Northern Ireland will be after this pandemic? And just final one linked and it's kind of about the Ulster Unionist Party. And do you envisage any reward for the UUP, for taking on Health, which you referred to and also for Robin Swans performance as Minister?

DMC: OK, so I'll take on the UUP first. Health is a weird department. This is the reason why I tell any aspiring politicians don't go near it. A former Irish Health Minister famously dubbed their Department of Health as Angola after he after his time in it. And it's just the worst Department. Why? Because the Ulster Unionists are not set it looks at the minute to get any reward from it. If you take a look at a recent poll that was done, there doesn't seem to be very much reward coming for them.

The Ulster Unionists, if I was putting my betting hat on, will be set to probably lose a seat or two at the next Assembly election. So Robin Swan, I think, has a lot of personal regard, but that's great. Robin Swan, if he was on the ballot in 18 constituencies, that would be fantastic. But he's not, he's only on the ballot on one. So he'll probably get a reward in North Antrim because he's seen as a very decent, straightforward guy.

But however, if the vaccine gets rolled out and this is the other thing about voters, we've got short memories. We tend to vote on the there and the then and the things that are going wrong. So if Covid and the vaccine has been rolled out and we vote in May 2021, you're probably going to be voting more likely on the health waiting list, which due to Covid are going to be worse. They are worse now. They're dramatically worse now.

So that operations, I don't know if anything, I've had one or two family members who've had their operations delayed three or four times. We're in a pandemic. So you have to understand that. But those people are going to be voting on whether they got those operations. Those people are going to be voting on your GP appointment. They're going to be voting on those things. So Robin will probably get tagged and probably get a lot of criticism for that as well.

His performance as Health Minister. Look, Robin's a very nice guy. He's a very nice man. And he's very he's a very straightforward guy. He's very hard not to like, you know, he's very, very hard not to like, which is great for a Health Minister. And during the early days of the pandemic, he almost had that North Antrim sturdiness, like this, this tsunami coming toward him. He was so calm and so I think and that's what you want in a crisis.

But whether the UUP are preparing for opposition at that point, because don't forget, the parties are going to be asked questions like will you rejoin an Executive by the next election. That, it will be a key thing. So, again, Robin may be either leading the charge out of the Executive or trying to defend his recording it. And the other one is about the financial consequences. While, I was saying during the thing that the price tag for Northern Ireland is probably going to come to £3 billion.

The interesting thing is we've got the furlough scheme. We've got all these we've got all these government schemes that are propping up loads of jobs. Those will come to an end at some point, and that's when the rubber will hit the road. In terms of unemployment, that's when the rubber will hit the road in terms of businesses, when those grants and the things are taken away, once the vaccine is rolled out, the government are going to start doing that.

They're not going to keep furlough in forever. And that'll be the key thing. And how the Northern Ireland Executive deals with that will be important. Whilst don't forget this, the Northern Ireland Executive, will be doing that whilst re-orientating Northern Ireland's economy from where it is at the minute towards the new regulations that it will have with the European Union. So the Executive has got a big balancing act as well there to do so. Northern Ireland has got two things.

So we've actually got double the problems of any other region. So whether that's a whether that's a good thing or a bad thing.

M: OK, thank you, David.

And the issue, raised really by one of the schools is mental health. And the school has said that it appeared to be a priority for all parties during the last election campaign. And yet there appears to be no substantive action proposed to deal with the crisis. Now, you did mention, of course, the working group on mental health, but you also said that there was talk of a Junior Minister with responsibility for mental health, which hasn't happened. And the school wants to know, what do you think we can do to ensure that our politicians do listen on these issues, which these important issues which impact us all really?

DMC: OK, I was actually talking about this with a with a couple of schools fairly recently, actually, about mental health. It is a huge issue and we shouldn't underestimate the impact that Covid has had on that as well. The disruption. The change in lifestyle, not just for people, but for everyone, I think everyone, if they're being honest with themselves, had a testing time in the past seven to eight months. I certainly have, you know, it's tough, but, you know, how to keep that on the agenda is very simple. You know, I've seen loads of loads of bodies being set up, so

I know there's SSUNI, which is a secondary school students union, which is fantastic. I know there's a new charity called Pure Mental, for example, which is being set up. So doing things like that and just keep lobbying the Executive.

The great thing now is that they've got an Education minister, they've got a Health minister, they've got a Communities Minister they can actually go and lobby. So my advice would be just to keep just to keep doing that and just keep raising it as well. You know, people in that age cohort are great on social media. I would just I would I would do that. But I would also make it about changing the conversation on mental health.

I often think our mental health systems back to front. Our mental health system will intervene when you hit, when you have the problem.

But for me, I think it's about stopping the problem from occurring in the first place. And there are loads of countries that do that very, very well. And that goes back to better jobs or sense of well-being, better adjusted kind of environments as well. So I think there are a lot of other things around that we can do a bit better. But my advice to them is, and not just with mental health, it's with any issue, you want, just keep lobbying them and e-mail them, tweet them, you know.

Write to them, just keep at them. Just keep banging on their door down. You know, if, look, if I didn't bang down politician's doors Slugger would never publish an article, let's put it that way. You know, politicians, you need to keep at them. Just keep at them, keep going with it and don't get too disheartened.

M: So, OK. And we're well into extra time here. But this is definitely the last area.

And it's it again goes back to something that you have covered at length, which is kind of a progress report on the Executive's implementation of Stormont House agreements, the original and the Fresh Start agreement and New Decade, New Approach agreement.

And so what's your I suppose your summary assessment of that and also what, in your view, David, have been the Executive and Assembly's main successes and failings?

DMC: OK, so the, the agreements.

So let's deal with Stormont House and Fresh Start. So we saw recently on legacy, we are no further advanced than we were then. And I remember when I was there when Stormont House was announced. I was at the press conference and I remember this was being heralded along with Fresh Start which came, which came. They were a few months apart. And I remember these being heralded as some great, great leaps forward and very little has actually happened on them, particularly on legacy.

We're still no further forward. That's not entirely the Northern Ireland party's fault. By the way. The British government's got a roll in that, the Irish government's got a role in that. So in fairness to them, it's not entirely their fault. So in terms of New Decade, New Approach.

Well, I mean, politicians will tell you, well, look, we had a pandemic like six weeks in, which is fair enough, OK, I'll give them that.

So we're not hugely far along on New decade New approach. Now whether a lot of this gets mothballed, it'll be interesting to see if it's, if it's like any of the other agreements, then, yeah, a lot of Stormont House won't see the light of day. I'm sorry, a lot of a New Decade New Approach won't see the light of day. I know next year we're getting the identity body set up and I know that that's being confirmed.

Michele O'Neill confirmed that in Question Time last week. So I know things like that are being done on that language provisions all come in to so so I know that. So in terms of aspects of the agreements around legacy I don't think we're any further advanced. In terms of an overall Executive kind of performance. 11 months in to it, I would I would halve the year and say first wave first bit, I would give them a B plus.

They weren't perfect at the start, there were jitters so they would have got an A so I'll give them a B plus. The second wave, oh jeepers, I'll give them a C minus. But to be honest with businesses having to log on to Twitter to find out what was going on, I'm like having to resort to tweeting Ministers. I just thought think is a ridiculous situation to be in. And so communication I think is a big thing. So that's so that's something that I think they need to get better.

M: OK, thank you very much, David, for answering all of those questions and for giving us such an interesting insight. And you've packed so much into that presentation. I don't know about you, Anne Marie. I can't wait to get it out there on the website for teachers and students and anyone to see and to absorb. And you know, either the good news or bad news for you is you'll definitely be invited back.

DMC: We'll great to see you. Had a blast it was a great, great way to spend the morning.

M: That was fantastic. Anne Marie handover to you.

AM: Brilliant. Thanks. Thanks a million Marina. And totally David I echo Marina's words really it will be so valuable. And it was great for me to listen to and get all the reminders, actually. And yeah, I know anyway that you're at your happiest when you're observing elections. So I wasn't surprised to hear all the references to past and even future election predictions.

So definitely very brave. And David would like to end on a note. You've been on the two sides of a desk in education, and I would like to give the final word to you. Our audience out there will mainly be teachers and students. And what would you what would your advice to them be in terms of, you know, things to watch out for or websites to go to or podcasts or whatever? Just to end off.

DMC: OK, so great online resources, if you're going to spend your Christmas break looking it up, of course, I would just say this is the shameless plug. I would say sluggerotoole.com, of course, is the best one to go. But outside of that, there are others in terms of good in terms of good things to go to. I think we've got fantastic websites. For example, the newspaper websites in Northern, I think are very, very good.

It is well worth your while getting a subscription for Christmas and getting a great Christmas present for all your nerds out there. Get your Mum or Dad or something to get you a subscription to a newspaper, whether it's Belfast Telegraph, the Newsletter or the Irish News. Again, if we don't, if we don't pay for our journalists, we're going to end up losing them. We've

got some fantastic journalists in Northern Ireland. So I would get a I would get a newspaper subscription for Christmas.

I think that in terms of a good, good resource, I would just there's so many great podcasts online. It's hard to actually name many of them, but know there's there are so many great things on YouTube for American politics. The Washington Post has a great has a great podcast on called Presidential, for example. It takes every president in turn and goes through their legacy. That's free on YouTube. There's so many great podcasts about like For The Many, which is on LBC presented by Ian Deal and former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith about British Politics. So there are so many great things out there.

So I would advise lots of podcasts. I'd get on to Spotify type in British politics, Irish politics or Northern Ireland politics and get listening to those.

I would just look at all the great online resources and taking out a newspaper subscription would be the other thing. And the other thing is I would just end on this note as well in terms of online resource and in terms of getting through the muddy waters of education in the next few months is just be patient with yourselves and be patient with your teachers and just know, thankfully, that this is we're in the homestretch of this and that this is all going to come to an end very soon.

So just be patient for the next few months and just know look, hopefully we'll have a great summer. And hopefully by the time you either start university in September or you or you're getting back into your new school year next September, hopefully we'll be back to some form of normality. So this won't last forever.

AM: David, nice optimistic note to end on. Thank you very much. On behalf of Marina, myself and the Education Service.

