

Is Devolution Working? - Academic Reflections 2014

KEY:

CGH: Dr Cathy Gormley-Heenan

RW: Professor Rick Wilford

(MUSIC)

CGH: Well it depends on what people saw the purpose of devolution in the first place, what they expected to devolution to do. If Devolution was about the absence of violence, then it has been successful. If it was about the absence violence and a fully functioning Executive and Assembly pretty much everything that we've said today shows that it's working. You know we've had no suspensions, we've had legislation that's passed, that's working. If it's about the absence of violence, a fully functioning Executive and Assembly and policy decisions on controversial issues being made, such as for flags, parades, dealing with the past it's not working because the most controversial issues we've either abdicated responsibility for them or sought outside help to try to find a way through, to find a consensus.

The obvious example of that is in the recent Haass talks because the political parties couldn't agree on flags, parades and dealing with the past and they sought the help and advice of Doctor Richard Haass and Professor Meghan O'Sullivan from Harvard to help them through that impasse, albeit unsuccessfully, and most recently Peter Robinson has talked about bringing in an arbitrator to try to arbitrate between the DUP and Sinn Féin on the issue of welfare reform. Now the problem overall is, is a very simple one: the two largest parties - the DUP and Sinn Féin either have a mutual veto when things are going not the way that they like. In terms of welfare reform - the veto that effectively Sinn Féin has put on the DUP.

Or, that if actually they do agree on something and the other parties don't, that they also can railroad through initiatives that just the two largest parties are interested in at the expense of those other parties that are also members of the mandatory coalition and an example of that is, the introduction of the T:BUC strategy, the community relations strategy that was brought out at the middle of last year.

The two largest parties had agreed the strategy and launched it but had not showed it to their ministerial colleagues so there was no sense of collective responsibility amongst the ministerial colleagues and the issue of community relations extends far beyond OFMDFM. Every government department will be expected to play its part in promoting good relations and stronger community relations and yet they had no sight of the documentation. So I suppose the answer to the question of whether devolution is working or not is what one expected it to do in the first place and some people had different expectations for what the "Hill" was supposed to be about.

RW: I agree that it depends what you use as your yardstick, or yardsticks perhaps. I think some people would, sort of shrug their shoulders and say well isn't it getting a bit long in the tooth. You know the idea that it hasn't collapsed for the last seven years, isn't that kind of terrific?

Well it's encouraging, for sure that, but there have been moments and not least fairly recently when it looked as if the whole house could be pulled down, as it were, within, a relatively short space of time but the fact that I know that, there are some who would say

that our local politicians are amongst the most over indulged in the world really, because looking for external support, advice, guidance. For example Peter Robinson has asked for some kind of mediator to come in to try and resolve the impasse over welfare reform. You could say well that's another failure.

On the other hand you could interpret that rather differently. Here is, a leading politician, looking, admitting, acknowledging the fact that look, we can't resolve this. Let's try and fix it by bringing some impartial person in and he demonstrates, if you like, a commitment to trying to get the system to work. It works occasionally, incredibly clunkily, three wheels on the wagon instead of four, if you like. Periodically. Track very bumpy. Very difficult issues still ahead, not the least of which is the fact that because we are so heavily reliant in Northern Ireland on the public sector to produce employment here, rebalancing our economy in the context of worst, or even worse public spending cuts which are on the horizon.

You, know we've only so far, I think, seen implemented about 40% of the total of public spending cuts in the current parliament being effected. Are our politicians up to the task of managing what is going to become an even more austere public expenditure picture in the very, very near future? Can we, can we work our way our way through that? And I think the level of maturity of our politics will be measured perhaps more by the extent to which they manage that set of issues which are really challenging. Then maybe the issue of whether they can deal with flags, or parades, or, or the past, of course. I think they made, certainly a lot more ground than I ever anticipated prior to the Haass talks. I mean that really took me by surprise. That they made so much, there was so much common agreement on that particular issue. I think to come to a total judgement about whether or it's working is one can say it's a bit like a curate's egg, it's good in parts, there are areas where it's failed and it's still failing, or where it's perhaps difficult to secure agreement. But the fact of the matter is they're still trying to secure agreement.

Now we know that at moments it's teetering and it looks as if it might falter, as it did on 2002 but consider the alternative. In 2002 because of the 2000 Act, Westminster could have imposed Direct Rule, immediately via the Suspension Act which has now, as a consequence of St Andrews, been repealed. So if we get Direct Rule it'll mean very hastily constructed legislation going through Westminster because the Suspension Act has gone.

It also means that we don't know what Direct Rule Mark 2, 3, 4, whatever it is will look like. If people recall pre St Andrew's, Blair and Ahern were talking about joint stewardship. So Direct Rule isn't going to be I suspect, as it was pre 1998 or between 2002 and 2007. I think it'll be a different model of Direct Rule, so I guess, you know, as somebody once said "consider the alternatives". You know, it's imperfect. It's not perfectly formed. It functions fitfully. Legislatively slow out of the blocks perhaps. A failure on the part of MLAs to fully internalise the parliamentarian role, but the alternatives, probably are, for some, for many maybe, too awful to contemplate.

(MUSIC)